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POWELL AND PRESSBURGER'S ISLAND STORIES

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In this series, I've been looking at the Powell-Pressburger partnership that started just before the outbreak of World War Two and reached its climax during and immediately after the war. But my theme is also the 'worlds' their films create, which are surely a major reason for their continued appeal, long after the historic situations they were responding to. I don't just mean the literal settings for the films, like Canada in *49th Parallel* or Kent in *A Canterbury Tale*; or even imagined settings, such as the occupied Netherlands of *One of Our Aircraft Is Missing*, or – more famously – the entirely studio-built Himalayas of *Black Narcissus*. No, I mean the 'other worlds' that are a distinctive feature of the Archers' films – starting with 'in-between' states such as Clive Candy's 'return' to 1902 as he plunges into the Royal Bathers' Club pool, or the evocation of Chaucer's pilgrims that opens *A Canterbury Tale*. These limbo worlds take on much greater importance and scale in post-war films: think of the celestial waiting room and amphitheatre of *A Matter of Life and Death* (*AMOLAD*); or the fantastic world that Vicky dances into in *The Red Shoes*.

Emeric Pressburger, who was certainly not given to theorising his work as a screenwriter, once spoke of trying to create 'traps which might catch some magic', which I think we can take as a hint that he knew very well how films can sometimes take flight from the prosaic 'scaffolding' structure of the narrative. Michael Powell was more willing to discuss his work as 'the master of the mysteries'. I remember very vividly the first time I met him, in 1972, trying tentatively to encourage him to talk about the fantastic dimension of his work – from *Tales of Hoffmann* to *Peeping Tom*, and being surprised when he referred me back to the sense of eeriness that's present in many Kipling stories. The example he gave was the ghostly story 'They', which he would love to have filmed.

So what I want to explore in this lecture is how Powell and Pressburger managed to create complex, multi-layered worlds, often without apparently resorting to elaborate artifice or even fantasy. And to do this I am following the theme of islands that runs through the work, all the way from *Spy in Black* to their last Archers film *Ill Met By Moonlight*.

Powell had been fascinated by the Scottish islands from early in his career, as he explained in a special introduction to the film he regarded as his first truly personal work, *The Edge of the World*. What had inspired him was the historic evacuation of the remote Hebridean island of St Kilda in 1930, but when he managed to make his film in 1936, the dramatic cliffs of Foula in the Shetlands gave it an elemental dimension (see Powell's bracketing *Return to Edge of the World*, made in 1978)

Powell's deep feeling for the Scottish landscape and the way of life it created comes through vividly in his personal films taken during long hikes; and in this extract, his widow Thelma Schoonmaker explained what exploring Scotland meant to Powell [included as an extra on the Criterion DVD of *I Know Where I'm Going!*]

In 1945, Powell's love of Scotland would come together with Pressburger's filmic imagination in what is probably the most unexpected film of their entire collaboration. *I Know Where I'm Going!* (*IKWIG*) wasn't made to fit any propagandist goal, unlike the films they made immediately before and after it. In fact, it came about to fill a gap in the production routine they had established with Arthur Rank's Independent Producers consortium. Since Technicolor was needed for *AMOLAD*, but not available as the war ended in the Spring of 1945, an 'emergency subject' was needed. We know that the idea for *IKWIG* was spontaneous for Pressburger: 'it just burst out, you couldn't hold it back'. His daughter Angela had just been born, and so thinking about the future of a young woman was probably very much in Pressburger's mind. We also have his first idea for the film,



provisionally titled 'The Misty Island': a girl wants to get to an island, but is prevented by a storm, and when it becomes possible, she no longer wants to go.

In other terms, this could be described as a dream image, and indeed Pam Cook has linked it with Murnau's 1927 film *Sunrise*, built around the image of a countryman bewitched by a woman from the city, who plans to murder his wife, before relenting, only to be tortured by believing she has been drowned in a storm. In fact, the script of that film had been written by the great German scenarist Carl Mayer, a friend of Pressburger's who had become a refugee in wartime Britain. And indeed, Pressburger's first sketch of 'The Misty Island' recalls the silent era, when films could have simpler storylines, allowing their images to communicate more directly with audiences.

But in 1945 'The Misty Island' needed a story, which Pressburger started to develop:

One foggy night a man and a woman meet in the only hotel of a small port. He is a naval commander she a young architect. He has come to spend a week's leave on the island. She has come to marry a famous architect who rents the island.

Next he started to sketch a plot: 'someone has lost his way in the fog and is calling for help...the two meet... the lost man is the best man'.

We don't know when the setting was decided as the Isle of Mull, but this was almost certainly where Powell would have started to react to Pressburger's initial premiss, introducing another imaginary Scottish island, Kiloran, and providing a back-story for young Joan's journey to the island to marry a rick industrialist. Her doubts about this venture take the form of an ironic dream, which mocks both her marriage plans – is she marrying a company or a man? – and her image of Scotland, represented by a kitsch tartan landscape through which a toy train travels.

I can't discuss the film in any detail here, but what I want to affirm is how well it serves both Pressburger's initial idea of the girl who discovers what she really wants, rather than what she thinks she wants; and also Powell's vision of 'the fabled Hebrides', with its powerful legends, and here the romantic flanking figures of Catriona, the independent woman who shelters Joan, and the eccentric eagle-trainer Captain Barnstaple. Like the heroine of a romance, the materialistic Joan falls under the spell of an island, where money has little meaning, and discovers her true destiny with Torquil, releasing him from an ancestral curse.

After the war, Powell and Pressburger would venture further into this new landscape of Neo-Romanticism, with the supernatural love story of *AMOLAD*, and such films of tragic desire as *Black Narcissus*, *The Red Shoes* and *Gone to Earth*. But I want to end by discussing briefly one of their films that was long underestimated, but increasingly seems quite central to understanding what we might call their philosophy of art. This is *The Tales of Hoffmann*, a lively screen version of Offenbach's last opera, based on the stories by the German writer E. T. A. Hoffmann.

Although this contains some very popular music, it's quite a complex work. The three acts are each based on one of Hoffmann's fantastic tales, connected by the conceit that the poet Hoffmann is recounting his lost loves. These include Giulietta, a Venetian courtesan; Olympia, who is revealed to be a life-like mechanical doll; and an opera singer, Antonia, who is suffering from a mysterious illness and forbidden to sing. In many ways, *Tales of Hoffmann* is a continuation of what had been begun in the ballet of *The Red Shoes*, creating a completely artificial, highly coloured world, in which the characters are mainly played by dancers, with the singing pre-recorded.

Perhaps surprisingly, it has been an influential film, and in unexpected ways. Martin Scorsese credits seeing it on television as a child with helping inspire him to become a filmmaker. So too did George Romero, best known for such horror classics as *Night of the Living Dead*, *Dawn of the Dead* and other gruesomely popular zombie movies. The overarching theme of the opera, and of the film, is what might be called arch-romantic: all the



poet's loves are doomed to disillusion or disappointment. Indeed, they're all aspects of his single unrequited passion.

Just one aspect of this is relevant to my theme. What forms the third act of the Archers' film, 'The tale of Antonia', opens with an image based on Arnold Böcklin's famous Symbolist picture *The Isle of the Dead*. By the end of the 19th century this had become enormously popular in reproductions: Vladimir Nabokov claimed that one could be found in every Berlin home. But what does it signify here? Much of the picture's fascination is its mystery. Does it represent the oarsman who ferried souls to the underworld in Greek mythology? Or some later mystery? Böcklin never revealed his inspiration but referred to it as a 'dream picture', which is what it has become for an extraordinary range of artists in different media. It would almost certainly have been the production designer of the Archers' later work, the painter Hein Heckroth, who was responsible for this highly evocative image, not previously associated with the opera. But I think we can imagine Powell and Pressburger seeing it as an ideal setting for the eerily tragic story of Antonia refusing to stay silent and bringing about her death by singing – although in the film, the act ends with a trio of Antonia, the ghost of her mother and the evil Dr Miracle. In the phrase that Powell used half-jokingly about *The Red Shoes*, this too is about 'dying for art'. And where more appropriate to do so than on the Isle of the Dead?

What I've tried to do in this lecture is trace a path through Powell and Pressburger's work, not in relation to production history or the contextual history of the 1940s, but following the motif of islands, which of course have their own legacy of associations in psychoanalytic literature and cultural geography. We've seen how important islands, especially Scottish ones, were for Powell; and how the dream-like image of a woman trying to reach an island was the starting point for one of their most romantically charged works, *I Know Where I'm Going!* We need to remember that films are not only stories about characters; they're moving pictures that also create *places*, which can seem more real, more familiar, than actual places we inhabit. The Mull we see in *I Know Where I'm Going* is a completely filmic creation, making full use of elaborate filmic devices; yet it has become emblematic of the island, drawing countless visitors to compare what they find in reality with what Powell and Pressburger and all their collaborators created. Heckroth, the artist responsible for so many of their fantastic worlds, referred to film as 'the folklore of the twentieth century'. Yes, but also the art-form of the century, weaving together high and low, to create a new culture of immediacy and community, which continues to resonate for successive generations.

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