

THIS ANALYSIS OF THE POWELL/PRESSBURGER FILM 'A MATTER OF LIFE AND DEATH' ORIGINALLY APPEARED IN 1978 IN THE BFI PUBLICATION 'POWELL, PRESSBURGER AND OTHERS', EDITED BY IAN CHRISTIE.

THIS SMALL BOOK HAS LONG BEEN OUT OF PRINT, AND THE ANALYSIS, THOUGH REFERENCED BY SOME SCHOLARS, HAS NEVER BEEN REPRINTED. GIVEN ITS FORM AND LEVEL OF DETAIL, THIS IS LIKELY TO REMAIN THE CASE. IT IS REPRODUCED HERE AS A SERVICE TO SCHOLARS STUDYING THE BRITISH FILM INDUSTRY.

**JOHN ELLIS
FEBRUARY 2007**

The opinions expressed in this book are those of the author and are not necessarily those of the British Film Institute. Neither do they represent official BFI policy.

POWELL PRESSBURGER AND OTHERS

Edited by Ian Christie

1978



Published by/British Film Institute/127 Charing Cross Road, London WC2H 0EA

3 Watching Death at Work

An Analysis of *A Matter of Life and Death*

John Ellis

What a vanity is painting which excites our admiration by its resemblance to things, the originals of which do not admire at all.

Picasso quoting Pascal, reported in G Seldes,
Movies for the Millions (1937)

Highly organised hallucinations comparable to an experience in real life, a combination of vision, hearing and of ideas.

Dr Reeves in *A Matter of Life and Death*

I have several reasons for choosing to analyse this film. I make no apology for subjecting such a pleasurable film to so serious an analysis: first, because it seems to me that any writing which proposes in some way to duplicate the pleasure possible in a film is an enterprise doomed to futility; second, because the particular pleasures gained from this film seem rather disturbing: people want to name them, understand them. This then is the first reason. The film has a strong narrative yet nevertheless succeeds in disturbing the habitual assumptions of narrative films. Further, it seems to begin to criticise the whole equation between cinema and reality that is a central tenet of so much British film-making and criticism alike. Certainly the critics at the time recognised this when the film was selected for the first ever Royal Command Performance. Most of them did not care for the experience very much. This is a second reason: the film has an exemplary place in British cinema, marking the definitive point where the quality critics, engaged in defining a 'native British realism' became disenchanted with the very different work of Powell and Pressburger.

A third reason is more pragmatic. A good 16mm print of the film is in circulation (at least Rank still make it available), a print that is in some ways better than the 35mm nitrate print in the Archive. It has the

important feature of having been produced by the original Technicolor method, with a distinctive and brilliant colour quality.*

This analysis is not offered as complete, as reading it will make clear. It falls into four sections: the first describes the film to some extent; the second considers the difficulties that it presented for contemporary film reviewing and criticism; the third tries to explain some of the terms used in the analysis; the fourth is the analysis of the film itself.

1 Descriptions

Two descriptions of *A Matter of Life and Death* follow. One is the plot synopsis released by the publicity machine for the film at the time of its release. The second is a description established from the National Film Archive print, breaking the film down informally into sequences, and emphasising certain moments: those of transition between colour and monochrome, and those of particular interest for the ensuing analysis. The differences between the two reveal a certain amount about how the film was regarded in 1946.

A. THE OFFICIAL PLOT SYNOPSIS

Squadron Leader Peter Carter is returning from his 67th bombing operation. His plane is flying on one engine and a bit, his controls have been shot away, his parachute destroyed and his undercarriage gone. But for the body of his wireless operator he is alone in the plane, and the rest of the crew have baled out. It is beyond belief that he can continue to live after his plane has crashed or he himself has baled out — without a parachute. During what he feels to be the last minute of his life he talks to an American WAC through the wireless transmitter. Because he is a poet and because she is young and lovely and alive, he talks to her of love and poetry — then he jumps. In the Other World the law of order and accuracy has become unbalanced. The French Conductor who has been on duty since the French Revolution has lost his head again and failed to collect Peter Carter at the time he was due to check in. In this world, Peter has met June, the WAC he has already spoken to on the radio. They fall in love but their happiness is threatened by a series of visits which Peter receives from the French Conductor who tries to persuade him to take his rightful place in the Other World. June introduces Peter to an English doctor who lives in a village close to the air station. Although Dr Reeves works as a country practitioner, he has won some recognition in medical circles for his studies of mental diseases. He believes that the visits Peter receives from the Other World are the hallucinations of a sick man whose mind is being affected

* The film was produced in 1946 by the Technicolor three-strip dye transfer process. This mechanically based, labour intensive process is now being phased out by Technicolor, its use recently has been limited to the manufacture of high quality release prints for certain discerning producers and directors. Soon, it will be available only in the People's Republic of China, where Technicolor have just sold a dye-transfer plant. In the 1950's the process was supplanted for shooting (and, increasingly, release print) purposes by cheaper colour-sensitive chemical stocks. The advantages of the dye-transfer process are that it gives the possibility of more subtle colour manipulation in print production, a generally higher colour saturation, and has none of the problems of deterioration to which chemically-based colour stocks are prone as they age.

almost to the point of death. But Peter wants to live. His love for June gives him the strength to parry the diplomat who tries so constantly to win him over to the Other World. Finally, his visitor tells him that he is to be allowed to appeal in the High Court. He is to appeal on the grounds that, through the inefficiency of the Conductor, he was allowed 'borrowed' time in this world during which he found himself with a new earthly responsibility — he fell in love.

As Counsel for Defence in the Other World, Peter has the choice of the great minds of all nations, from Plato to Pitt, from Caesar to Richelieu. But he cannot believe that any of them could ably defend him on the simple evidence of being in love. Also he knows that the Prosecuting Counsel is an American with a strict anti-English bias — Abraham Farlan, the first American to die of an English bullet during the War of Independence. Meanwhile, Dr Reeves' research proves that complications arising from a slight concussion are affecting Peter's brain and only a highly skilled operation can save him. A weakening in Peter's condition as the time for his Trial draws nearer, causes the doctor to set off for an ambulance during a heavy storm. As he rushed through the night on his motorcycle he collides with the ambulance and is killed.

Arriving in the Other World, the doctor is told that Peter has chosen him as his Counsel for the Defence. So while the finest surgeons available are fighting to save Peter's life in this world, the doctor is fighting for him in the Other. The huge amphitheatre of the High Court is filled with every nationality of every historical age. With their ancestors who fought great wars against us, sit the soldiers, sailors and airmen who fought with us. Among them are Americans, including Abraham Farlan who brings as evidence against an Englishman, who wishes to marry an American girl, his English heritage. A heritage which an American of the War of Independence scorns. Farlan introduces the jury to the doctor — a jury composed of Russian, French, Chinese, Dutch, Irish — and challenges the doctor to find any member of it that has not cause for prejudice against England. He swears that any jury the doctor chooses to call will bear the same prejudice. America is the only country in which individual rights are inalienable. Doctor Reeves calls for an American jury. They file in one by one but are still seen to be composed of mixed nationalities — but they are all American citizens. Further, Dr Reeves discovers that Farlan's own grandfather was an Englishman.

With historical prejudice swept away it only remains to prove that Peter and June are truly in love. The High Court visits the theatre in which the operation is being performed on Peter, and where June is sleeping exhaustedly. While the surgeon is still at work Peter moves away from his body to be questioned by Farlan. Farlan grants that he is in love. Now June is called upon to prove her love.

Her love for Peter is so strong that she agrees to take his place in the Other world. In spite of Peter's protests, she steps on the great escalator that is to take her there. She moves higher and higher, further away from Peter. The doctor watches anxiously. But suddenly the escalator stops — the mechanism is not strong enough to tear the two lovers from each other. Although in the Universe nothing is stronger than Law, in this world nothing is stronger than love.

In a private ward of the hospital, Peter returns to consciousness. The operation has been successful. He has won his case. He lives.

B. BRIEF SEQUENCE ANALYSIS (BASED ON NFA 35mm NITRATE PRINT)

| Length in ft. | Reel 1 |
|------------------|---|
| 0 | Seq 1 BBFC 'A' Cert/b&w Rank Organisation Presents/The Archers' trademark (target) b&w fading to colour as arrow hits target/Titles (white on plain blue): <i>David Niven/Roger Livesey/Raymond Massey/A Matter of Life and Death/Kim Hunter/Marius Goring/Written. Produced and Directed by Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger.</i> |
| 191 | Rolling caption: <i>This is the story of two worlds, the one we know and another which exists only in the mind of a young airman whose life and imagination have been violently shaped by war.</i> (in italics) <i>Any resemb-</i> |

- lance to any other world, known or unknown, is purely coincidental.
- 230 2 Panning shot across the universe, voice-over pointing out significant features: stars, gas, an exploding solar system, a globular cluster, etc. 'Nearer home' — the moon, earth — 'part of the universe, reassuring isn't it?' v/o becomes urgent to describe night over Europe after a bombing raid. A burning German city, fog, noises mixed below which become dominant (radio, foghorns, etc; one message comes out of the cacophony, followed by sudden cut to
- 350 3 Brief shot of plane with one wing in flames; pan across wrecked to Bob's corpse and Peter shouting into radio. Conversation follows, intercutting Peter with June in control tower, both in MS and CU variously.
- 990 Peter jumps without parachute, camera follows through hatch until screen is filled with grey fog; sound: rushing wind and, increasingly confused, Peter's last words to Bob, 'prop or wings', repeated over and over. Cut
- 1106 4 Cut to sea breaking gently on shore, seen from plane, fade to rows of angelic wings in b&w Bob waiting for Peter at aircrew check-in for the other world; several airmen arrive, including a group of Americans; Bob increasingly worried, but assured mistakes are virtually impossible.
- Reel 2
- 0 Bob reluctantly signs entry register. Ticking of clock fades to similar music as image cuts to
- 85 5 Seashore at dawn. Peter awakes, casts off excess clothing, meets dog and naked shepherd boy playing flute; realises he is still on earth. Sees girl on bike and pursues; meets June; her recognition of him as the pilot, cut to
- 523 6 CU of the other world's register, with deficit of one, colour fades to b&w. A female administrator is sorting out the muddle after Peter's 19 hr 50 min absence. Conductor 71 (Marius Goring, a French aristocrat executed in 1791) lost him in the fog; now sent to bring him back by explaining the situation; Bob sends a message — dolly into rose on 71's lapel: it 'becomes' coloured pink by dissolves.
- 760 7 Dolly out to 71 amongst rhododendrons. He finds Peter and June, and 'stops time' as Peter offers her a drink — he is still conscious, she is not. Conversation between Peter and 71: Peter appeals to reason, on which laws are based, refuses to come. 71 admires June, but defeated, fades out: halfway through the fade, returns with an afterthought about chess, then disappears. June refuses drink. Peter disorientated; June's doubt about what he tells her; Peter headache.
- 1350 Subjective shot from Peter's POV — June obscured by haze towards left
- 1530 of screen. Peter: 'I thought I'd lost you', as he holds her.
- 1550
- Reel 3
- 0 8 Phone at Dr Reeves' answered by cleaner, who tells caller (June) that he is in his 'thing, you know, camera obscura'. Cut to bored dogs listening to Reeves' (Roger Livesey) remarks about the village. General shot of Reeves operating camera obscura and 'panning' image of village street shot through camera obscura showing lens, gearing and table beneath, cut to image filling screen: June arriving. Doctor opens shutters, dolly over table to frame door; June comes up, operates camera obscura (general shot as before); conversation about Peter. Reeves has already arranged to take up the case; casts humorous doubt on reality of June's love for Peter. 'I'll be over about tea-time.'
- 367 9 Dissolve to chickens scattered by motorcycle; Reeves races with Americans in jeep and wins by risky cornering.
- 454 10 Dissolve sound then image to Mendelssohn's *Midsummer Night's Dream* over scenes of activity preparing for a performance at the US airbase. A

- poster, portrait; vicar rehearsing American cast. Bottom: 'Some man or other must present Wall; and let him have some plaster, or some loam, or some rough-cast about him, to signify wall; and let him hold his fingers thus, and through that cranny shall Pyramus and Thisbe whisper. (III, i, 72-6), with business that allows private to hit his officer; CU/ record ending; CU/hands on piano, ominous minor-key music; Peter looking distracted from chess game with June (first general shot of hall, all previous activities in scene found to be dispersed in this same space), ambient sounds mixed down until June disturbs his reverie. Reeves appears, mentions Peter's poetry, which he admires, questions Peter about his life and his hallucinations. Tests his visual perception: stands behind Peter, tells him to concentrate on a girl (cut to general shot from Peter's POV: girl in centre frame), then describe what is to extreme right and left. As he does so, shot held of Peter and Reeves, after Peter describes curtains to the extreme left, cut to general shot shifted to left: banks of roses clearly visible in front of curtains), June's remark, 'When you two have quite finished looking at that girl's legs'; cut to MCU/ Peter answering, then checking his guess about the curtains and looking disconcerted. Conversation continues, exchange about death and survival of the human personality; Reeves complains about lateness of tea; will take Peter to his house; tea arrives, Vicar: 'We're shaping'. Fade out to black.
- 670
- 11 Fade to Peter asleep amongst books, 90° dolly reveals source of sounds of table-tennis: Reeves and June playing on the covered veranda outside the window, Reeves at far end of table. Reverse angle behind Reeves; shot framing Reeves and one side of table from open side of veranda, pans rapidly following his service to June, and continues to pan from side to side following the ball five more times. June asks about Peter's drugged state, challenges Reeves' knowledge of Peter. She lets the game end, they go into the study, stand in front of Peter discussing his state, Reeves: 'He is having highly organised hallucinations comparable to an experience in real life, a combination of vision, hearing and of idea'. They conspire to invent a lie about how he survived if his state worsens, and return to the game, this time a long shot framing both players from the open side of the veranda, with one more play than the last service. Another service and the image is frozen with the ball in mid-flight; Peter awakes, sees 71, rings bell to warn the others, but it is silent, runs, knocking over a pile of books without sound; shouts but finds June and Reeves frozen.
- 1195
- 1490
- 1588
- Reel 4
- 0 71 picks up a book on chess, replaces the table (reverse motion); conversation in two-shot reframing as 71 moves to and fro: 71 displays his powers, 'What is time? . . . a mere tyranny'. Peter allowed to appeal but Abraham Farlan is prosecuting counsel; 71 disappears behind Peter; cut to table tennis game resumed (2 fast pans), then bell heard. Reeves and June rush in, Peter reports his meeting, Reeves tests his reflexes; June asks to stay, Peter wants to sleep in study; housekeeper busies herself with the arrangements. Peter worried about chess book that 71 has borrowed, and about who to choose to defend him: Reeves: 'Here on earth I'm your defending counsel'.
- 495
- 12 Dissolve to Army Hospital sign, dolly follows Reeves to washroom to consult with Dr McEwan; insists operation must be that night because of Peter's trial, explains the hallucinations: 'incredibly detailed . . . nothing is entirely fantastic. It is invention, but logical invention'. Pan to white wall with shadow of venetian blinds.
- 740
- 13 Dissolve to b&w vast escalator with Peter and 71 sitting on steps as it.

ascends, trying to select his defence counsel from the statues of famous men arrayed along the way. Peter decides on 'an ordinary Englishman', realises the escalator is carrying him to the Other World, runs back down; 71's 'Peter come back' fades into June's voice as CU of Peter distraught dissolves to colour.

1020 14 The ambulance is late; the phone is dead; Reeves goes on his motorbike to fetch it.

1380 15 He meets the ambulance on a bend, swerves to avoid it and is killed by the explosion of the fuel tank.

1398 16 CU Peter in ambulance.

Reel 5

0 Conversation in ambulance: Peter asks about Reeves, June eventually tells, Peter turns his head away. Peter is taken out of the ambulance. Peter's POV shot of corridor roof in hospital; CU Peter, eyes open; Peter's POV of June, more roof, nurses discussing his case, greeting him, fade to CU Peter's head bandaged. Peter's POV of light for operation; long shot whole operating theatre with June looking through glass doors; CU June; medium shot Peter and nurses surrounding him, dolly/pan in so that camera takes up Peter's POV as mask is lowered over his face; CU Peter looking; shot from within Peter's eye as it closes, pan down/dissolve to swirling lights and patterns becoming progressively more blue until dissolve to

320 17 stadium in Other World, crowds entering in very long shot. 71 is waiting for Reeves who arrives with his conductor, John Bunyan. Reeves is to defend Peter, and asks to see his client, taking Bob as witness; Bob dissolves into colour whilst background figures remain monochrome; cut to

511 18 operating Theatre, characters frozen; Peter pops up from under sheets, walks through glass door with 71 to where June is standing. They cluster around her, discussing the case and their lack of evidence; Peter asks to kiss her, even though she won't feel anything; a tear appears on her cheek; 746* 71 catches it on a rose to take it with them; CU rose it fades to monochrome . . .

810 19 pull out from rose as it is put onto perspex table; establishing shots of court arena, and of audience, grouped according to occupation: US airmen; WAAF's; nurses; Bob and the admissions clerk among these groups; Sikh soldiers; A British regiment from the American War of Independence; French Revolutionaries; British gentlemen of the 18th century; Quakers. All stand (each group in turn) as Bob turns to speak to the admissions clerk. The judge gives a preamble. Farlan opens the case for the prosecution, a long argument follows, concentrating on Farlan and Reeves, with intercut reactions to certain remarks by various groups. Farlan's argument stresses the nationalities of Peter and June, calling wartime romance the passion of the moment, saying USA came to the aid of Britain, not to become its prisoners: 'We are all as God made us, but our grandparents had a deal to do in the shaping of us.' Reeves agrees; Farlan's grandfather left Britain because he didn't like it, and he would like it even less now: evidence, a radio broadcast of a cricket match, the voice of England 1945. 71 disappears from behind Reeves.

1600 Reel 6

0 71 reappears with a radio which plays the voice of America 1945: jazz.

* 50 feet concerning the tear appear with French subtitles in the Archive print. (746-801). This reel also has a few short pieces missing towards the end.

Farlan disconcerted. Reeves says he does not understand it either. Reeves calls great English poets as his witnesses, saying Peter will be one of them, given time. Fade to

104 20 oxygen valve for operation, surgeon drilling, June waiting, breathing suddenly accelerates, concern, it subsides. Cut to

180 21 Farlan's summary: a diatribe against England for its discomfort, slowness etc. To Reeves' challenge that Peter, not Britain, is on trial, he repeats that character is formed by a chain of circumstance, quoting Ben Franklin. Reeves counters with a quote from Washington on the supreme value of conscience (Washington being born English), and accuses Farlan of trying to prejudice the jury. Farlan claims that a jury drawn from any nation would be anti-British, and demonstrates; a Frenchman (wars every century); a Boer; a Russian (the Crimean war); a Chinese (the 1837 occupation of an unprotected Peking); a Punjabi ('think of India, Dr Reeves', cut-in of group of Sikh soldiers); an Irishman. Reeves wants to change the jury. Farlan agrees with the proviso it should not include English people. A discussion on respect for the rights of the individual follows, Reeves emphasising the practical liberties of the English, Farlan giving a rousing speech about the high ideals of the Americans. Reeves rises to the challenge and requests a jury of Americans, as they will defend the rights of the individual against the law. Farlan emphasises that nothing in the Universe is stronger than the Law. Reeves counterposes this with Justice. The jury is changed by a series of dissolves to American citizens with foreign names and accents: a chef (French); a soldier (Dutch); a cab driver (Russian); a smart young man holding a MOMA catalogue (Chinese); a soldier (black); a cop (Irish). Reeves pleads true love, offering the tear as evidence. The jury asks to see the defendant for themselves; camera pulls out from the stadium until it becomes the Milky Way; a shaft of light appears, the escalator with the jury, judge etc. on it. Cut to

22 operating theatre with escalator behind the frozen group of surgeons and nurses. Peter appears in RAF flying gear, Farlan questions about the reality of his love. June is brought as a witness; she offers to go to the Other World instead of Peter; he refuses to let her, proving his love to Farlan; Reeves says it is the only way to prove the strength of their love, Farlan warns that nothing is stronger than the Law. June mounts the escalator which begins to move; suddenly stops, showing that, although nothing is stronger than the Law in the universe, there is nothing stronger than love on earth. The judge sums up with 'as Sir Walter Scott is always saying', several lines ending 'Love is Heaven and Heaven is Love'. The verdict is for the defendant, and Peter is given a new date of arrival in the other world, 'the rights of the uncommon man must always be respected'. Fade to

23 operating theatre. The surgeon takes off his mask: it is the Judge. Peter with a dressing on his head. 71 on the escalator which is fading away throws the 'lost' chess book back; the book spirals down over a wipe that progressively reveals a holdall being unzipped: June finds the book in Peter's jacket pocket; Peter asks for Reeves in his sleep, awakes as the nurse opens the curtains and says to June 'We won, darling.' 'Yes I know'.

1650 24 End titles

2 Press Reception

Quoting contemporary reviews is often a futile process: they are taken as 'evidence' for what concrete audience reaction(s) would have been to the film. This ignores the nature of the institution of journalism, and the

function of film reviewing within the industry. What reviews can reveal is a certain relationship: that between a film, and a privileged group who operate with remarkably similar aesthetic presumptions. In this case, the reviews of *A Matter of Life and Death* indicate that it is in tension with the critics' prevailing assumptions, even though they grudgingly admit having gained a certain amount of pleasures. It even incites two or three prestige critics into a definition of their preferred aesthetic: realism.

The terms of praise of the film are virtually all in the form of a 'yes, but . . .'. The warmest defender marks a double distance (from Powell and Pressburger, from the 'anti-British' slant): 'Other people have thought more highly of some of the Powell-Pressburger films than I. It is with all the more pleasure that I recommend *A Matter* as one of the most original stimulating and entertaining films ever made in England . . . This is by no means to say that I think the film faultless'. (*Daily Telegraph*, 1.11.46). Others are more measured: 'In a way, indeed, this a technician's film, depending for many of its effects on the trick shot . . . Visual narrative, cinematic sense: there is no denying the quality of the film in excitement, tension, pictorial shock. The quality of its imagination is another matter.' (Dilys Powell, *Sunday Times*, 3.11.46); 'charm and extreme technical efficiency' (*Motion Picture Herald*, 16.11.46); 'a remarkable film the story of which does not bear too rigorous an examination, though it is undoubtedly an imaginative technical feat of great interest'. (Roger Manvell, *BFI 'Records of the Film' series*). Praise for the technical, for cinematic sense, but always reservations.

Reservations express themselves across several ideas: the value or sensitivity of its central premises; the way in which attention wandered; inability to decide how the film was 'intended'. 'From the beginning the situation is melodramatic rather than dramatic or poetic; the characters . . . are the characters of journalism and the novelette. And the central problem emerges as trivial . . . The lovers here are cinema lovers, without depth as they are without virtue or sin; they meet, speak, vow by the rules of celluloid'. (Dilys Powell). 'Complete absence of one factor vital to the cinema: the dramatic link with real-life people and their problems'. (*Tribune*). 'It misses importance because it is not consistent, and exploits rather than examines its central theme and chief characters. It has vitality, ingenuity and wit, but not, unfortunately, a poet's feeling for the implications of the story' (Roger Manvell). 'It would seem, too, that the main point of the film is not that it has anything new or important or even comprehensible to tell us about life and death and psychology but that, with such a theme, there are abundant opportunities for cinematic tricks. It is as though Hitchcock's *Spellbound* were combined with all those familiar films about invisible men.' (*Times*). 'Was it then the main purpose of the film to preach international friendship? If so, the purpose was most worthy but the effect was pure bathos.' (*Times*). So, the first terms of criticism: disappointment in the psychology of the characters, uncertainty about its meaning.

The *Times* critic identifies this uncertainty with the abundance of technical 'tricks'. This theme is extended by other critics: 'leaves us in grave doubt whether it is intended to be serious or gay'. (C. A. Lejeune, *Observer*, 3.11.46); 'a grandiose anarchy' (*Times*); 'This could have been great if the directors believed in it. The trouble is they don't. Or not with their whole hearts. The result is less passion than whimsy' (*Sunday Graphic*, 3.11.46). Critics are uncertain about how they are being addressed by the film, whether they are 'meant' to take it as this kind of film or that, whether there is a fundamental belief expressed in the film's content. This uncertainty in the face of the film is taken further in two ways; either by condemning the film's inconsistency and bad taste, or by talking about wandering attention. Condemnation; 'One has met this kind of embarrassment before with Messrs Powell and Pressburger, so fluent and prodigal of style, so moodily inept in story. When will they tune their fantasy to their material? Everything is at odds, except the purely cinematic skill, in this latest gamble with worlds.' (*Time and Tide*, 9.11.46). Bad taste: 'Also on the debit side are the deplorably inapposite gags dragged in for a cheap laugh, referring to a Technicolor-less *Other World* and a recent British film. In a film of this importance, such sallies are in the worst possible taste and totally indefensible.' (*Today's Cinema*, 5.11.46). Wandering attention: 'The novel cosmic introduction and the initial shots of the hero's blazing bomber give the film an impressive start, but for the next 20 minutes or so it is somewhat difficult to get the gist of the joke, if any. Doubts are, however, rapidly dispelled immediately that it is clear that the fabulous 'not of this world' sequences are devised to illustrate the hero's hallucinations.' (*Kine Weekly*, 7.11.46). 'There were about 40 minutes in the first half of the film when I just couldn't decide whether it was a great achievement or not. It had given me a laugh or two, and made me goggle over some of the photography and effects. But I hadn't been moved. Here was a fine theme being seriously treated. Yet no crawling around the back of my hair, nothing to tense me or make me catch my breath. And then came a scene [where June's tear is caught on the rose (seq. 18)] — well, there was a sort of click inside me and I said to my wife: "Well, they've done it". (*Daily Express*, 2.11.46). All of these criticisms have one thing in common: they resent to some degree or other being held separate from the immediate emotional involvement that they expect from a narrative fiction film. In a serious film, of course, this acquires a moral force, and it is this moral force that is given the name 'realism.'

Two critics are driven by their dissatisfaction with the experience of the film to define their critical criteria: 'even further away from the essential realism and the true business of the British movie than their two recent films *I Know Where I'm Going* and *A Canterbury Tale*' (Richard Winnington, *News Chronicle*, 2.11.46); 'Asquith, Carol Reed, Launder & Gilliat, the Boultings, Thorold Dickinson and David Lean among others, are establishing a tradition of solid native skill to which the latest production of this better-known combination contributes almost nothing'. (Humphrey

Swingler, *Our Time*, Dec 1946). Both critics refer implicitly to a tradition of realism being developed in Britain. It is this developing tradition from which Powell and Pressburger are in the process of being excluded: they do not conform to its aesthetic*. American criticism, if the available documents are anything to judge by, did not (yet) perceive this as being the case: 'To be recommended to any audience on its orthodox ingredients of appeal. But it's one of these films in which Britain lately has specialised which will attract the discriminating who never normally frequent the motion picture.' (*Motion Picture Herald*, 16.11.46).

What, then, is the nature of this aesthetic, and how does *A Matter of Life and Death* go against it, creating this sense of unease and disappointment? The answer can only be found in a detailed analysis of the film using certain defined theoretical presuppositions.

3 Narrative and Realism

A short note is needed to clarify the analysis of *A Matter* that follows. Two terms in particular need to be explained, narrative and realism. Their interrelationship is the basis of a particularly tenacious ideological operation which *A Matter* seems to try to refuse.

A narrative has a beginning, middle and end: that much everyone knows. But the nature of this process is rather more tricky to define. The beginning of a narrative is more or less the moment of violation of a pre-existent harmony, a moment of dislocation, of troubling, of violence. The end of a narrative then becomes the moment at which this troubling or dislocation is overcome: a new balance and harmony is achieved. So narrative is a process ('the middle') by which first, a state of stasis, harmony, homogeneity is proposed; then, almost immediately, it is shattered: a new element is introduced ('the stranger comes to town'), an outburst of violence shatters the calm, an action that is inexplicable takes place. The various elements of character, place, action are put into turmoil; a troubling spreads from the initial dislocation to affect all the elements contained in the narrative's space. From an initial homogeneity, heterogeneity is produced. The narrative then works to restore a state of homogeneity, to reintegrate all the troubled elements into a new order.

This process of reintegration involves the redefinition of some elements, such as the migration of characteristics from one character to another. It takes place across a series of more or less sequential events, one leading on to another and another, across time. What these events represent is different states of arrangement between the elements, all of them to some extent unsatisfactory: e.g. antagonism between characters becomes enforced co-operation; then uneasy agreement; a testing of the uneasy agreement; and finally a fresh understanding. Such is a typical narrative progression from dislocation, through a string of events, to a final reintegration. This ordered flow of events ensures that the heterogeneity is always

* For a further examination of the aesthetic of such critics, see my 'Art, Culture and Quality: Terms for a Cinema in the Forties and Seventies', *Screen* v. 19 no 3 (Autumn 1978).

controlled, that the potential chaos is always kept within certain bounds. Thus, it is not possible (except by 'losing the thread') to concentrate on meanings that are designated as 'background' to the exclusion of the ostensible subjects of the narration. There is a certain hierarchy maintained within the heterogeneous 'middle' of a narrative that enables the narration of the trouble and its reintegration to take place at all. The trouble is not absolute, a pandemonium, but contained and relative.

There are numerous ways in which this containment is achieved, through the production of a rhythm across the narration, tying it together. The first of these is to produce a balance between meanings that are new to the audience and those which are familiar from the narration already. Too much of one or the other produces a certain sense of anxiety (which is often deliberately exploited). Hence devices of continuity, and the cueing of certain elements which only later reach their full realisation. An example in this film is the play between seq: 9 (reel 3) and seq. 15 (reel 4). There is no real need to show Reeves' journey to have tea with June and Peter at the airbase . . . except that it introduces Reeves' reckless motorcycle driving which in the second sequence, causes his death. The element of Reeves' bike is introduced in a prepared context (we know where he's travelling) so that it is already known when it is produced as a crucial event in the narration. Having fulfilled its function, it is exhausted, used up. This exhaustion of elements is also typical of the way in which a narration is a controlled balance of the new and the familiar: elements perform a useful function and then do not reappear. They are familiar, but do not presume upon their familiarity to the extent of preventing further innovation, further progress of the narration. The fundamental familiar elements across the narrative are not actions, locations, or even usually objects, but characters and the terms of the problem, the dislocation, in which the narrative has involved them. The same bodies move across the screen, accruing to themselves consistent as well as altering characteristics. A controlled play of novelty and familiarity takes place around these recognisable centres.

Another form of the containment of heterogeneity is the production of patterns of similarity and difference across the narration, by the use of such techniques as rhyming and doubling. Rhyming refers to the way in which certain forms of shot (often spectacular; crane shots etc.) are repeated at various points in the text, providing an effect of repetition, of similarity. This can equally be by the use of certain elements of decor, like the roses in *A Matter*, which recur across the film, providing a moment of purely figurative coherence. Doubling indicates the way in which some characteristics are marked, whereas others stay in the background. At its simplest, this means that a facial expression will become a signification 'to be noticed' only if it is in close-up, or lit to make it stand out from the other possible significations (setting, bodily movement, costume etc.). Very quickly, the means of doubling becomes a part of the rhythm of the narration because of this: its emphases do not remain haphazard and dependent on the immediate context alone, they are systematised, rhythmic.

It is important to emphasise that these processes of containment of the heterogeneous are never, at any point, within the progress of the narration, complete and balanced. There is always a sense of something lacking and something more that hovers over the narration, pushing it on. The patterns that work across the narration are always, during their working, incomplete and in a state of flux; rhymes hang in the air presupposing their mutual echoing without, for a moment, it actually existing; elements disappear, leaving behind a memory that disturbs any possible coherence until they reappear. All this means that although coherence and stasis are the aim of the process of narration, it is an aim that exists across an instability: there is a play between the containment that exists at any time within the narration, and the surplus that will inevitably disturb it.

This play between the heterogeneous, the chaotic, and its always-provisional reintegration, is intelligible only from a certain position. The film is not just coloured lights playing across a screen, nor is it a succession of shots that seem to behave as discreet units with no discernible connection between them. The organisation of a narrative film constructs a certain position of intelligibility for itself. It constructs a position for a subject that it addresses. This position emphasises coherence at the expense of the excess, of the heterogeneous, of the unconscious. The subject of the narration is a unified subject, that of a unified 'I', a position of knowledge and intelligibility for the narration. The heterogeneity of the subject (the network of associations that can be generated from any moment of any film, its light and sounds, its chance concatenations of elements) is contained; process and movement are given pattern and direction for the unification of a subject, the point of the organisation of the narration.

This subject position, the product of the operations of the text, should not be confused with the particular attitude of the spectator towards the realist text: an attitude of separation and involvement, a form of voyeurism. Although the two depend upon each other for their very existence, there is a crucial difference. The positioning of the subject is a question of the installation of a kind of rationality where such does not necessarily exist: the idea of subject position is concerned to emphasise the construction of a division conscious/unconscious, of a form of ordering and hierarchisation within the heterogeneous, in order to produce an intelligibility. The spectator's attitude finds its basis within this subject positioning, but it is rather an attitude towards the narration, towards cinematic narrative as a whole. It rests upon the play of subject position, always slightly different depending upon the containments operating within the narration, but is a rational attitude; the attitude of an already-constituted 'I'. The difference can be summed up: the subject is felt by the narration, the spectator feels.

The spectator, thinking and rational, is able to choose, to judge, to form opinions about the narration. The spectator is able to do this on the basis of the subject position, the position of intelligibility, produced by the film across its narration. Subject position is an effect of the narration, the

spectator's attitude is built upon this effect. The spectator is therefore in a position of separation and involvement at once: outside the narration ('where it makes sense'), and within the narrative (concerned for the characters and situation, taking the film as a playing-through of phantasies in a displaced way). The spectator's attitude involves a kind of voyeurism: watching, without being watched, characters who have agreed not to acknowledge that they are being watched. On the basis of the construction by the film of a coherent 'I' to which it is addressed, the spectator can become the 'eye' that is the final gaze (apart from that of a god) in the play of gazes (spectator-screen, camera-event, character-character).

It has to be said that this is broad generalisation about narrative. The effects of subject position and spectator attitude are not the same for all narratives: the particular forms of narrative process (the particular discursive form, or 'genre') place the subject in a slightly different relation of coherence, involving a different relation of containment, a different ordering of the heterogeneous. *A Matter of Life and Death* begins to disrupt the process of subject positioning by providing more than one point of intelligibility, by providing two regimes of coherence for the subject: that of a narrative love-story, and that of a more 'documentary' mode of exposition and explanation. This is one central aspect to the film: in providing differing and therefore conflicting modes of address, it begins to disrupt some features of the subject position of both modes.

The particular form of disruption that *A Matter of Life and Death* offers is one that questions the nature of cinematic realism. Realism in the cinema is an effect, an effect produced both by the construction by the text of a unitary subject position for its intelligibility across the processes of narration, and equally by the assumption by the spectator of an attitude of knowledge, of unproblematic observation upon this basis. The effect of this unitary subject position and unproblematic form of viewing, typical of almost all narrative film at the moment of its initial manufacture within the cinematic apparatus at least, is that the film presents to the spectator an effect of reality. It seems as though reality speaks rather than a particular highly developed system of signification with its attendant patterning of the heterogeneous. The spectator is unaware of the position into which he/she is put. It seems as though a dialogue takes place: reality speaks, the spectator attends; reality displays itself, the spectator admires. A whole process has effaced itself modestly behind this satisfying claim. The 'mechanics' of the enunciation of dislocations between elements (themselves the products of signification) across the construction of patterns of containment — all these rather arcane processes smooth themselves over by their very effectivity in placing the subject as a particular position of knowledge and coherence that the said spectator is only too willing to take up. The spectator sees reality; subject positioning remains unseen.

Reality speaks, an effect of realism is achieved. But it is not the same

effect of reality that is achieved in three films whose release coincided with that of *A Matter of Life and Death*, three films which demonstrate the effectivity at this time of the ideological operation that is known as realism (it is assuredly an effect of ideology to deny the troubling force of the unconscious by confirming the coherence of an 'I', and at the same time to present not discourse and signification but reality itself for the inspection of the eye of a spectator). The films in question are *The Best Years of Our Lives*, *My Darling Clementine* and *The Beast With Five Fingers*, (all released around Christmas 1946), all in their way exemplary films in achieving different effects of reality through narrative.

The realism of *The Best Years of Our Lives*, a fresh new quality, is described by contemporary critics in terms of morality and photography. It is moral in the sense that the subject is provided with a perfect position of unseen mastery, seeing clearly groups of people as they interact, unaware that they are watched. This position is never perceived as such, instead it enables the serious business of sympathy with characters and their complicated situations to flourish. Its morality is then founded upon the very effectivity of its subject-positioning, and the assumption by the spectator of a voyeurism with no awareness that a position is being taken up at all. This realism is photographic because it produces, through deep focus photography, the startling effect of 'not being a photograph'. The range of the visible is extended remarkably, enabling the spectator to have the impression of looking around within the frame rather than being directed to look at a particular fragment of an event. The effect of reality gained from this was considerable, as the image seems to go beyond anything that had been achieved in the conventional photographic image. It was as though photography and montage disappeared. This disappearance of the technical intensified the effect of reality produced by subject-positioning in relation to the narration.

My Darling Clementine operates within the norms which *The Best Years* exceeds. What it provides is a more classic narrative, that is, a system of balance between repetition and novelty within the narration that is balanced according to current conventions. Again, it provides a security for the spectator; and, rather than a 'moral' realism, it demonstrates a supreme confidence in the means of the realist narrative: one single shot is enough to provide all the terms of the conflict: Earps driving their cattle across the prairie, Clantons in their buckboard, watching in the foreground. It is this confidence in the institution of classic narrative cinema that can provide the basis for an illusionist horror film cycle of which Warners' *The Beast with Five Fingers* is a late representative. A disembodied hand haunts a timid secretary: the supernatural here depends on the natural, on the achievement of a classic narrative form that will produce virtually the same position for the subject as that of *Clementine*.

These three films represent the strength of the realist narrative in 1946. Nowadays such confidence no longer exists, at least in the cinema, and the

effect of reality is increasingly something that needs to be worked over afresh with each production. However, for a film of 1946 to undermine the conditions for the easy production of this effect was something that critics found disconcerting when they noticed it at all. As we have seen, the quality critics, partisans of the nascent British realism, expressed their profound reservations about *A Matter*. This was only to be expected, since, as we can now see, the film expresses a series of profound reservations about the realist aesthetic and realist filmmaking.

4 *A Matter of Life and Death*

The film poses an order very strongly at the outset, after the titles. The sequence (seq. 2) is disconcerting to say the least: it gives a colour documentary-style tour of the universe. The exposition of the universe demonstrates cataclysmic events that nevertheless have a place in a reassuring order to which we are the unmoved spectators (a cosmic explosion is explained by the comforting male voice-over: 'There goes another solar system; someone's been mucking about the uranium atom again. Don't worry, it's not ours'.). The mode of address is that of documentary, an exposition of facts for the intellectually curious given from a point of easy authority. It conveys (never states) the conception of an order to the universe which places even the most cataclysmic events, an order which finds its equivalent in the descriptive physics of the commentary. It is disconcerting enough as the beginning of a fiction film; the troubling of the coherence of classic narrative that it represents becomes a constituent part of the film's system.

As the leisurely pan across the stars rests on our moon and finally the earth itself, the commentary becomes more urgent, finally inviting us to listen to the voices in the night air. The transition from documentary exposition to fictional narrative is effected: the voice gains an emotional intensity (suddenly), and absents itself having invited the spectator to listen to sounds that belong to the fictional space, the diegesis of the fiction. A disruption of the easy homogeneity of the universe is beginning: it still has to be specified, however. The initial specifications are produced in sequence 3. Two central characters are introduced, 'the man and the girl' as Powell engagingly put it, 'old hat, but played this way, terribly exciting.' (Gough-Yates, 1971, p10). The emotional pull of the sequence is its impossibility: a doomed airman shouting out his last messages (poetry, telegram to mother, questions about the girl he's speaking to), and June bravely responding, though her voice falters and tears well up in her eyes. It is an intolerable event, precisely because it is so much within conventions (of the brave last message; of the first encounter between characters clearly destined to become lovers), and at the same time frustrating those conventions (the last message refuses to accept death,

affirming the exuberance of living; the love between them is doomed because of Peter's inevitable death, because they have never even seen each other). The pathos of the sequence is produced by the wild mixture of conventions which themselves are to some extent frustrated; refused their 'habitual' outcomes; and equally by the dislocation that works between them ('last message' v. 'beginning of love story').

Through the constant cutting to June's reaction shots, the patterning typical of a love story gradually gains strength through the sequence: what is being effected through the interchanges between the two characters is the initiation of a love-story, an attraction is posed both explicitly ('I like the sound of your voice'; 'I wish I could have met you') and implicitly (through the cutting between the characters *as though* this were a shot/reverse shot set-up: Peter in medium close-up looking off-screen right, and June in medium close-up looking off-screen left). It is a love-story that seems impossible. There is no doubt about the outcome of the story, there is no doubt about how it could proceed, in short there seems no possibility of a narrative. Peter will die, June and he will never have met. For the love-story itself, there is no problem to be resolved: it is pointless, predetermined.

Yet this frustrated love-story comes itself as a disruption, a disruption of the harmony of the universe, where all events make sense, and no events involve the spectator. There is, in other words, a radical disjunction of address generated between sequences 2 and 3. The documentary form of seq. 2 is expository, placing the spectator as separate from events which can be placed, comprehended, mastered. The initiation of the narrative produces a very different address: a violent conflict of fictional modes brings about a strong emotional response, willing the impossible, wishing for the consummation of the love affair even at the expense of plausibility itself. The initiation of a possible narrative 'chain' (a love affair) and the simultaneous withdrawal of the satisfactions possible within that 'chain' produces a situation of tension, of unrequited emotionality, that is very different from the position produced by the documentary mode of address. There is no possible point of unification of the discourses offered by the film at this point. Documentary and fictional narrative provide contradictory positions: harmony is posed in one, a harmony from a position of detached observation; frustration and disorder are posed in the other, these being produced by the refusal of the fiction's own initial premises to permit its resolution.

The architecture of the film is built from its attempt to resolve this contradiction between modes of address, between mastery and frustration. The film works to re-integrate these two modes, to produce a position of mastery with involvement, with pleasure. It is this contradiction between modes of address and their implication of the subject that motivates the opposition between the narrative real of the colour sequences (3, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 14, 15, 16, 18, 20, 22, 23) and the documentary real of the 'hallucination' sequences (4, 6, 13, 17, 19, 21.). This may seem a startling

claim, since the whole of the central section of the film (7-12) is entirely in colour, and several times the heavenly messenger, Conductor 71, appears in the colour sequences. Nevertheless, it still remains true that the specification of the film's dislocations, the troubling of the initial harmony that it worries over, is centred around the 'lack of fit' between the discursive form of documentary and the discursive form of the fictional love story. The narrative turns on the contradiction between them, it constantly returns to the points where they conflict.

Each discourse, fiction and documentary, has a different 'internal economy': each form of containment of the heterogeneous is arranged differently. This can be expressed in a schematic way as each having ideas that are centralised and others which are marginalised or denied any real place. It has to be noted that, first, this is schematic because it ignores the processes of signification that produce these 'ideas', and, second, that these remarks apply only to the particular balance within the documentary and narrative forms at the time that *A Matter of Life and Death* was made. They are not universally applicable remarks. At this time, it seems that fiction centralised sexuality, individual psychology, the particularity of a situation between characters; and documentary, (then a recognisable mode, diffused massively during the war), centralised generality, exposition, broad concepts relating to social order. Fiction on the contrary resists generalisation, the discourses of society, social rather than psychological explanation; and documentary at this time resists sexuality, the centrality of the individual, the construction of a psychology addressed to the audience. Each of these discursive forms produces an effect of reality within its systematisation a centralised or marginal conceptions. Documentary sequences in this film have the status of a 'reality' just as the fictional ones. This sense of reality is an effect produced by the discursive form. The discourse constructs a position of intelligibility, a point of unity for the subject. The effect for the spectator is that of being addressed by reality, rather than being implicated in a discursive system. In this film, two discursive forms are offered, each with its own rather different arrangements and therefore rather different subject positions.

The central term of the differentiation between these two discursive forms is sexuality. Nowadays, this would no longer be a possible textual strategy: documentary is no longer a unitary discursive practice, and sexuality (the family, sexology etc.) have entered definitively within the concerns of expository film-making. Within *A Matter of Life and Death*, the differentiation is very clear. The monochrome sequences deal with organisation, with the harmonious order of the Other World, with social individuals each having a chosen place in that order. Sexuality emerges only at the edge of this world, and is repressed, e.g. Bob's relationship with the Angel is only briefly hinted at, and his attempt at conversation with her at the beginning of the trial is cut short by the arrival of the Judge (19). Monochrome itself has at this time certain definite connotations: those of the everyday, of 'reality as it is lived' (connotations that continue even to

the Woodfall 'New Wave' films). Monochrome was the natural medium for serious subjects, for documentary: it was in no way considered inferior to colour. The colour sequences deal with very different ideas. Providing the bulk of the film's central sequences, the meanings they elaborate are more concerned with individuals, with psychology, with producing an awareness of complex inter-personal relations. Sexuality emerges as central, and the realisation of sexual significations takes place around the figure of June, through the film's concern to find an adequate position for her, though the constant emphasis on her gaze (her 'concern', her 'disbelief' etc.).

The centrality of sexuality to the difference between the monochrome and colour sequences is evident from the meanings that coalesce around the two characters who make a transition between the two worlds: Conductor 71 and Reeves. Reeves' sexual position is uncertain in the earlier sequences: he has an (unrequited) admiration for June (8); June senses the ambiguity of his attraction to Peter (10,11). His death removes this ambiguity, not only from the narrative but also from the character, as his role in the Other World is as uncomplicatedly patriarchal as the prosecutor Farlan's. Conductor 71 makes the opposite transition. He hardly appears in the Other World's social atmosphere (his longest monochrome appearance is alone with Peter on the escalator (13)), and his frivolity has a sexual edge, concerned with his image in a narcissistic way that is entirely untypical of the Other World's inhabitants. On earth, however, it makes sense: his admiration for June is undisguised, his dandyism complements an arbitrary display of his powers that is designed to intimidate Peter (11). He is more comfortable in the world (hence his famous remark: 'One is starved for Technicolor up there' (7)), his 'witty, decadent frivolity' (Durgnat) can exercise its sexual edge, display the refined sexual play that it is.

So the differentiation between the two forms that the film poses centres itself on sexuality. One discursive order resists the incursions of the sexual, the other gives them a centrality and devotes itself to the regulation and containment of sexuality where the other multiplies its expositions, its sense of order, its position of cool mastery in order to refuse sexuality. Initially, the film poses the documentary form as one of harmony, and then the fictional narrative form as the disruption. The love-story is all the more disruptive because it seems destined, by all the laws of narrative plausibility, to be unrequited. The film then settles into an elaboration of the conflicts between each mode by having them interrupt each other, make incursions into each other's equilibrium. If it weren't for Peter's case, the Other World would continue smoothly; if it weren't for the Other World's interventions, Peter and June's love affair would have no more than trivial problems. It is possible here to psychologise this difference of discursive modes, a difference centring on sexuality, and claim that it represents Peter's ambivalence towards a sexual involvement. The Other World then becomes Peter's own so-called 'unconscious', trying to draw

him back from the kind of involvement that June represents. Yet there are very good reasons why this psychologising should not take place: it ignores several fundamental features of the film's system: the way in which the Other World sequences are in no way placed as 'subjective', but are usually taken as having a reality separate from Peter's imaginings; the way in which the definition of sexuality involves Reeves and June rather than Peter. Firstly, the sexuality that June 'represents' is not certain or fixed, it is constantly worried over by the film. Sexuality has no precise form, no exact contours, and the attempt to give it definite characteristics, to contain it for the viewing subject, is one of the major tasks for virtually any narrative film. Secondly, despite the film's initiating caption (1), reviewers do not accord an absolute subjective status to the Other World sequences, indeed it is very difficult to do so whilst watching the film: the hold of their discursive mode over the view is too strong, they create an effect of reality. Both of these ideas need detailed elaboration as they are central to the film's working: the signification of sexuality; the different subject-positions involved in the documentary and narrative fiction modes.

The problem of definition of June's sexuality revolves around the question of whether she is the object or the subject of desires. Seq. 3 begins with mutual incomprehension and impatience: June 'can't understand' Peter; Peter is exasperated that she wants to know his position. With seq. 7, the suspension of time during Conductor 71, appearance freezes June into an object, an object for the admiration of the Conductor, a passive and unresponsive being for Peter. This is the first of two crucial moments where June is reduced to immobility, to pure objecthood, the other being seq. 18. This first freezing is followed by June doubting (close-up of puzzled expression) the truth of Peter's hallucination. She pays for this doubt: she is eradicated from both Peter's and our vision, when, in a subjective shot from Peter's position, she is obscured by a haze, and is only restored after a moment of panic on Peter's part. Thus one moment in the definition of June's position is that of pure objecthood, that of eradication from the image at the moment that she displays an independence from Peter's thinking.

This moment of objecthood is not the primary definition of June's sexuality. Peter's 'illness' means that he slides out of the sexual, his desire for June (once established as being the desire of 'I, Peter' for the object June) is taken for granted. During the rest of the film June makes a transition from being the object of desire to becoming an active, desiring subject. The second time that she is frozen by the intervention of Conductor 71 (seq. 18), her active desire produces a tear on her cheek, 'the only real evidence we have.' Although June's identity is still posed exclusively in terms of her sexuality, it is notable how it becomes increasingly active and desiring, and as a consequence, the film is led to refuse certain conceivable activities for her: she scarcely nurses Peter, for instance; this function devolves far more on Reeves. June's transition from being a passive object to participating actively in the play of desire (from Peter's 'my defence' to his 'we won') is

arrives on earth and announces: 'One is starved for Technicolor up there.' (seq. 70). Powell's comment is enough: 'Another thing I was pleased about, I was able to step outside the conventions . . . (it) is a pure inside joke. That was a plus for me to be able to do a thing like that in a big film and not a comedy' (Gough-Yates p.10).

(2) A more complex situation: in 5, Peter has just been washed ashore in the strange dawn light on a deserted beach. He finds first a 'Keep Out' notice, confirming for the audience that he has indeed stayed on earth as the Other World administration had suspected in the previous sequence. Peter does not know this, however. He comes upon an extraordinary sight: a naked young shepherd boy, playing a flute whilst his goats and dog surround him. The image, lit with the thin clear light of early morning, is bizarre enough, but where the audience take it as bizarre, Peter reads it as cliché: the Arcadian angel. He asks where he has to report, and the boy quite naturally directs him to the air station. Through the irony of the disparity between Peter's interpretation and the audience's (a reversal of the normal presentation of the bizarre: here it is 'natural' for the character, bizarre for the audience), the meaning of an image has been demonstrated to depend on interpretation.

(3) This is taken further in 10: use is made of the standard device for a fiction film to comment upon the nature of representation: the presentation of a stage-play. Here, it is a rehearsal of a comic scene from *Midsummer Night's Dream*, Bottom's lines about how 'Wall' is to be represented, taking realist conventions to their logical and absurd conclusion. These lines are presented twice (emphasis), the second time with a new dimension: the American private playing Bottom has the opportunity to use the business to hit his officer several times. Hence, not only representation involving pretence, conventions of depiction, but also the acting-out of fantasies, at least on the part of the performers.

The next three incidents are more directly concerned with modes of looking, of the peculiar forms of looking that cinema involves.

(4) In seq. 8, Reeves' camera obscura is demonstrated, through a series of shots which give details of its mechanism, its effects, and a conversation between Reeves and June about the mode of seeing that it involves. After an establishing shot (Reeves and the projection table), the camera obscura image occupies the screen: an effect very similar to a long panning crane shot is gained. This is followed by a shot through the projection system itself. The conversation about the device with June emphasises the power which this unobserved observation can give the doctor: June accuses him of surveying his kingdom; he says it often provides vital information for his diagnoses. He then describes its effect: 'You can see clearly and all at once, as in a poet's eye': it is a totalising vision, seeing everything unobserved, a kind of voyeurism.

(5) In seq. 11, a direct comparison is made between the vision of a moving camera and the vision of a moving eye. The game of table-tennis is

first shot with the camera panning wildly back and forth between the players, following the ball. The effect is shocking, disturbing as the pans are so fast. After June and Reeves have worked through their rivalry over Peter, the next game is shot more placidly and conventionally in long shot: the viewer's eye rather than the camera follows the ball from side to side across the screen. The difference is immediately apparent: the effect of a moving camera is radically different from the effect of an eye moving across an image. The play between the disturbing and the more reassuring shots runs across the rivalry between June and Reeves, each intensifying the other's effect across the scene: rivalry becomes division of interest as disturbing pans settle into a more habitual form of looking.

(6) Seqs 12 and 16 both contain a dolly shot through the army hospital's corridor. The purpose of the first is only to cue in, to provide a point of comparison and reference for the second. The second is subjective, that is shot from the point of view of Peter lying on a stretcher. Again a comparison. The subjective sequence goes further, by providing in the operating theatres a series of alternations between subjective and general (narrational) shots. Finally, a transition is provided: the camera executes a 90° pan and dolly shot so that it begins with Peter's profile and ends in the place of his head. The oxygen mask descends in front of the image, disappearing beneath it; a brief cutaway to Peter looking then provides the transition to the effect of the image being 'behind' one eye. The eyelids close, we are inside Peter's head. The audacity of this sequence is its literal-mindedness. It takes the notion of a subjective camera to its superb conclusion. It is the one possibility that Montgomery's *The Lady in the Lake* (made at virtually the same time) completely neglects: in that film when the camera-hero closes his eyes to be kissed, the screen merely goes dark.

Rather than isolated moments, these particular events are logical and coherent developments of the system of the film. They operate largely by comparison or by repetition-with-difference, and they emphasise the way in which the attitude of the spectator can be remarkably different within the space of one film, and, more, how these differing attitudes can conflict, yet are bound within a certain mode of representation (voyeurism, the playing of roles). A discussion of the nature of representation (not so unusual in films, e.g. *My Darling Clementine's* drunk Shakespearean.) is carried on not only within the conventional terms — a representation represented within the film — but also, more radically, addressing itself directly to the audience in the form of comparative exercises in 'how you see.'

Thus *A Matter of Life and Death* can be seen to work by exploiting the disjunction between two discursive modes which propose rather different positions of intelligibility. The film opens out, follows the repercussions of this initiation, by centring its difference on the problem of definition of sexuality, a term to which one of the discourses offers a marked resistance. In doing so, it is involved in the constant negotiation between the different subject-positions proffered by each discourse, and this work produces across the film a series of events which examine the nature of

representation, resolutely refusing any equation between camera and eye, between image and real.

This work continues, strictly speaking, until the last sequence, but the reintegration of the elements that are posited initially as being in contradiction is carried out in a rather different mode. An argument is presented between the proponents of each discursive mode: Reeves for the love-story, Farlan for the documentary of the Law and Order of the Other World. The argument has no arbiter deciding which point has been won or lost: it is addressed to the audience, for their arbitration. It is over the definition of the case of Peter Carter: the Law's representative arguing for the maximum number of social divisions, centring on the difference of nationality between Peter and June, a difference which it is claimed will make real love impossible. Reeves on the other hand has only the fact of real love to argue with, and attempts to demolish Farlan's divisions and distinctions as prejudice that love could overcome. The jury is demonstrated to be prejudiced against Britain because of the crimes of imperialism, and America is finally demonstrated to be the place where these old national antagonisms will be overcome: a nation composed of other nations. Thus the argument is effectively won at this point, as Reeves' contention about the power of love is demonstrated in the composition of the American 'nation.' Love and justice on the one side, order and the law on the other have found a synthesis, yet this synthesis, posed in the terms of an abstract argument, are not enough for the film. The effectivity of each term and the form of their synthesis has to be demonstrated for characters of the narrative. The documentary mode has reached its conclusion in the argument, but the fictional narrative demands a different form of resolution. Its terms are rather different: it is a matter of the rights of the individual against the law of the universe, 'The rights of the uncommon man must always be respected.' The resolution, finally, is uneasy. Law has to make concessions to love because, in some way, love is the basis of Heavenly law. However, the fact remains that the fictional narrative reaches its desired re-ordering. Peter is reunited with his chess-book (the last element is fitted into the new ordering), he and June have won, together. They have moved from being voices searching for each other across the night air, through being desiring male and desired female object, to being united: 'We', the film's culminating emphasis as daylight comes streaming through the window.

This analysis has demonstrated to some extent the terms in which *A Matter* works. That is to say, it has shown that the work of the film is one of producing a narrative from the dislocation between two discourses, a dislocation that takes place on the ground of sexuality, and produces across the film a series of examinations of the nature of cinema as a particular kind of event for a spectator who adopts a special relation to it.

It could be objected that this tells nothing about the film, its 'content', its 'message.' All of which is true, given that such an analysis conceives of the film outside these terms. 'Content' and 'message' become hopelessly

imprecise: according to the above analysis, the film is 'about' representation, the relation spectator/cinematic text, sexuality, law v. love, documentary v. narrative, realism, the nature of heaven and earth, discourses and subjects, table-tennis — any number of things. However, some claim a definite content and message for the film, as Raymond Durgnat demonstrates: '*A Matter of Life and Death* is generally taken as an extravaganza, a vague, eccentric, enjoyable contraption advocating closer ties with the USA. But the politics of this "Halfway Heaven" are far more precise. They express the perennial Tory criticisms of the Socialist Utopia — that is, the Welfare State . . . Critics of the time felt that Heaven must stand for Hitler's "New Order," his arbitrary totalitarian world. The Robsons drew many parallels, even down to the detail that Himmler means Heaven in German. But surely this heavenly city isn't bestial enough for Nazism. It isn't even malicious, merely coldly efficient. And the film's pre-occupation is not with Britain's survival in war, but with her survival in peace . . . This Heaven is a futurist Utopia. It's planned society. It's machine-like . . . Heaven's values are those of the collectivity (as opposed to the selfless individualism of romantic love). Planned, bureaucratic, idealistic, totalitarian, colourless, theoretic — all these are words Tories like to use of Socialism.' (Durgnat pp.29-30).

It should be clear from the analysis that it provides an exposition of how the film is capable of producing all these 'interpretations' of its 'content' and its ideological position. It claims that all these interpretations are produced through a mechanism (a film) which is more complex than any of these interpretations. The interpretations aim to fix the movement of the film, to tie it down and avoid its irritating iridescences.

Yet it is not enough to propose a simple relationship between this analysis and statements of supposed content (analysis: 'Here is the mechanism that produces various interpretations'). The analysis reveals something that the notion of 'content' represses: that the film is centrally concerned with the problems of representation, and with producing a scepticism about notions of realism. It produces two realities, realities that are the effects of differing discursive forms. It then intensifies the awareness of the discursive production of realities by working on the point of greatest disparity between them (the conception of sexuality), and by confronting the audience throughout with the discursive reality of the alleged 'real' that they are 'witnessing'. What the film does, then, is to question the very basis of the analysis of films in terms of 'content' that is, the effect of reality which is usually produced silently through the operation of one discursive form with one position of intelligibility and truth. Analysis of content, effect of reality: silent partners, conspirators in British narrative cinema and orthodox film criticism alike. A conspiracy that, over thirty years ago, Powell and Pressburger were concerned to criticise.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

A short list of the principal theoretical writing upon which this piece draws.

- Roland Barthes *S/Z*, (Paris, 1970).
Jean Collet *et al Lectures du Film* (Paris 1975).
Rosalind Coward, John Ellis *Language and Materialism*, (London 1977).
Stephen Heath *The Nouveau Roman*, (London 1972). 'Film and System: Terms of Analysis,'
Screen v. 16 nos. 1, 2. 'Narrative Space,' *Screen* v. 17 no. 3.
Colin MacCabe 'Principles of Realism and Pleasure,' *Screen* v. 17 no. 3.
Christian Metz 'The Imaginary Signifier,' *Screen* v. 16 no. 2.
Laura Mulvey 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,' *Screen* v. 16 no. 3.
Bill Nichols 'Documentary Theory and Practice,' *Screen* v. 17 no. 4.
Paul Willemen 'Voyeurism, the Look and Dwoskin', *Afterimage*, no. 6, Summer 1976.