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## 6. Modernism and Empire

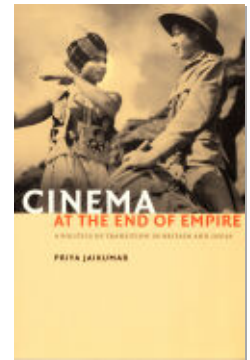
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[The modernists] were involved in an effort of memory that made the very lack of transparency of the past a conscious form of concern.

—Richard Terdiman, *Present Past*

Africa as a metaphysical battlefield devoid of all recognizable humanity, into which the wandering European enters at his own peril. Can nobody see the preposterous and perverse arrogance in thus reducing Africa to the role of props for the break-up of one petty European mind? But that is not even the point. The real question is the dehumanization of Africa and Africans which this age-long attitude has fostered and continues to foster in the world.

—Chinua Achebe, *Hopes and Impediments*

## six \* MODERNISM AND EMPIRE

European literature, art, and cinemas have experienced various internally contentious modernisms, but to focus briefly on their overlaps I pilfer from Eugene Lunn. Lunn identifies four significant directions in modernism's aesthetics and politics. First, he notes modernism's attention to form, and its refusal to consider art as transparent or representative but as possessing a density of its own; this formalism was used to different ends, as much to express subjective perceptions (in impressionism and expressionism) as to emphasize the potential of human labor (in constructivism or Bauhaus architecture).<sup>1</sup> Second, modernist art explored temporal and spatial simultaneity and juxtaposition via techniques like montage (with the cubists), the overlay of mythical narratives to reveal their recurrence in the quotidian (as in the writing of James Joyce), or experiments with psychological time (as with Marcel Proust or Virginia Woolf). Third, modernism was a response to the decline of religious and scientific certainties of the nineteenth century, embodied in the collapse of grand narratives of linear progression and attacks on the notion of objective truths. Finally, modernism investigated relative realities, enigmas, paradoxes, and ambiguities (as in the work of Franz Kafka

and Samuel Beckett), depicting a crisis in individuality, making character a playground for sensations rather than a unifying motif.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the explicitly “high culture” and high modernist bias of this definition, Lunn’s systemization offers a preliminary approach to Fredric Jameson’s and Edward Said’s arguments linking European aesthetic modernisms to decolonization, a key event in the crisis of Western identity and modes of representation.<sup>3</sup> Beyond the impact of tribal and primitivist motifs on modernist art, colonialism and its collapse may be read as a constitutive, subterranean impulse of European modernism.<sup>4</sup> Alongside the rise of fascism and the two world wars, decolonization provoked European modernism’s agitation around existing presumptions of wholeness, wherein progress, teleological history, state rationality, and the representability of reality were interrogated as fictions or illusions. The impossibility of experiencing moral horror at the genocide of the European Jewry without meditating on Europe’s colonial rampage rang out in the words of the black-diaspora intellectual and surrealist Aimé Césaire, who saw the world wars as an exposure of the culpable “Christian bourgeois of the twentieth century” harboring “a Hitler inside”: “What he cannot forgive Hitler for is not *the crime* in itself, *the crime against man*, it is not *the humiliation of man as such*, it is the crime against the white man . . . and the fact that he applied to Europe colonialist procedures which until then had been reserved exclusively for the Arabs of Algeria, the ‘coolies’ of India, and the ‘niggers’ of Africa.”<sup>5</sup> Concentrated within the anxieties of European modernism, exacerbated by accusations of vocal and violent colonial subjects, was the shock of self-awareness, the fear of history, the confusion over one’s capabilities, and the use of a disintegrating political present to confront a suddenly opaque past.

British imperial modernism exemplifies this self-reflexivity about the colonial experience, using form to interrogate the shock, horror, and loss attendant on the nation’s break with its imperial legacy. Michael Powell’s and Emeric Pressburger’s film *Black Narcissus*, based on a novel by Rumer Godden, appears at first glance to have little connection with the book because of its disconcerting modernist aesthetic that calls everything into question. Its unstable quality resides in an element identified by the novelist, albeit disapprovingly: she did not like the film because “Powell saw the book as a fairy tale, while for me it was utterly true. . . . There was not an atom of truth in the film.”<sup>6</sup> As a fairy tale, the film’s gorgeously seductive colors and unreal landscape convey an ambiguity lacking in the novel, allowing it an interiority that is missing in the book.

In *Black Narcissus* five white female missionaries travel to Mopu, a fictional village in the Himalayas, where they open a school, chapel, and dispensary for Mopu's inhabitants. The place arouses several dormant desires and memories in the sisters, who slowly plunge into despair and insanity. Though some responses to this film have focused on its psychosexual dynamics, the film's constructions of imperialism and sexuality are too deeply embedded in each other to be divided up neatly.<sup>7</sup> In their evaluation of imperial narratives, Ella Shohat and Robert Stam refer to *Black Narcissus* as a film that "rings curious variations" on the theme of the Western woman who is subordinated to the Western man but remains dominant over nonwestern peoples. According to the authors, the nuns are "privileged filters and centers of consciousness" as the narrative is focalized through them, even though the Englishman Mr. Dean (David Farrar) embodies "textual norms" to the extent that narrational authority is relayed through his prediction of the nuns' failure at Mopu.<sup>8</sup> I accept this evaluation of *Black Narcissus* as fitting uncomfortably within the colonial canon but disagree with the centrality it ascribes to the nuns or the Englishman. *Black Narcissus* allows us to make larger claims about the nature of British imperial narratives during decolonization when we locate it in the context of other commercial films with imperial themes, or consider it in relation to the potentially anti-imperial political and literary concerns of its time.

Understanding *Black Narcissus* as an imperial film allows us the insight that place is always an important part of the imperial narrative. An incident from the film serves as a good conceit for this. While requesting a transfer out of Mopu, Sister Philippa (Flora Robson) says to Sister Clodagh (Deborah Kerr), "I think there are only two ways of living in this place. Either one must live like Mr. Dean or . . . or like the Holy Man. Either ignore it or give yourself up to it." To this, Sister Clodagh replies, "Neither will do for us." Narratives that utilize colonies as an imaginary landscape onto which they map national affirmations, desires and fears have similar choices. To maintain their integrity they must ignore the place, because narrative coherence is predicated on the continuation of the colonial territory as an unproblematic backdrop. To acknowledge the place as an entity is to disrupt the narrative and to accept that no presumptions or projections are possible. The place would have to constitute the central crisis in representation; it would have to become the consuming preoccupation of the narrative.

*Black Narcissus*—and arguably all imperial fiction in the modernist mode—demonstrates a collapse of available imperial narratives in that neither of

these options are entirely available to the mode. The colonial place and people are not (cannot be) ignored, and yet they are not (cannot be) entirely embraced. Instead, the place is made central enough to impede the assumptions projected onto it. Simultaneously, a narcissistic preoccupation with the British experience is recuperated by vilifying the place or/and by aesthetically stylizing the narrative's collapse and rearticulated coherence. Discernible in literary texts such as Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) and *Lord Jim* (1900), or in E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924) prior to its emergence in cinematic texts, this modernist mode participates in a larger cultural production of neo-imperial narratives. Imperial cinema's modernist moments represent a cusp between the sensibilities of colonial and postcolonial discourses of empire.

### *Imperial Description and Colonial Place*

Like other films that construct their fiction around an imperial encounter, *Black Narcissus* begins with an excess of written text and visual images that identifies its "alien" place. But, as with everything else in this film, familiar motifs are spun in unexpected directions. In *Sanders of the River* intertitles that name the time and place of their fiction make claims about the actuality of representation. Their relationship to the images is one of control, as the intertitles deliver to British audiences an alien land that is imagined as categorizable. In the romance mode, as in *The Drum*, place is linked more explicitly to traditions of representation connoting fantasy and adventure, destabilizing the assumption of realism. Like realism, intertitles function to make the "otherness" of the place unthreatening, but audiences are engaged simultaneously in a hermeneutic of excitement promoted by the novelty of Technicolor and sweeping panoramic shots.

In both the realist and the romance modes, sequences identifying alien territories by such elements as maps or spinning globes function to mark and manage the difference of the colonial location. The opening sequence of *Black Narcissus* alters this relationship between written text and image, calling into question the level of trust we place upon the information provided to us about the represented place and its people. Our first introduction to Mopu (very different from introductions to Tokot in *The Drum* or to Sanders's residency in *Sanders*) is filtered through three people, all of whom are less than objective about the place and the nuns' mission. As viewers, our experience



17. Sister Clodagh accepts her mission. Courtesy USC Cinema-Television Library.

of the place is mediated by our knowledge of the emotional investments of the characters describing or imagining Mopu.

First, we behold Mopu as an illustration seen by Reverend Mother Dorothea (Nancy Roberts) as she wearily pores over her book at a convent in Calcutta. She summons Sister Clodagh, and as the sister stands across the table from the Reverend Mother we get a familiar image of hierarchy within an (often military, but here religious) order. The shot–reverse shot exchange that occurs as Sister Clodagh is entrusted with a mission to Mopu is also characteristic of imperial films, in which, typically, an assignment is given to an officer who is then bound by duty and honor to perform it. The potentially hubristic qualities of the sister’s ideals are established early, marked by the camera’s careful attention to Sister Clodagh’s reactions and to the Reverend Mother’s concern. Within other modes of imperial representation, hubris is not marked, because it constitutes, in many ways, the preferred viewing position. But part of the function of *Black Narcissus*’s narrative is to teach humility and to reveal the flawed romanticism of believing in a mission of salvation.

There is, however, an indulgence of this romanticism, vindicated in a measured way by the film's resolution as will be discussed further.

The second and longer visual sequence introducing the place accompanies Mr. Dean's inhospitable letter to the sisters. Mr. Dean is a cynical Englishman working as an agent to the old Indian general who owns the lands of Mopu. As Sister Clodagh reads Mr. Dean's letter (to a voice-over narration in Mr. Dean's voice), the shot dissolves from the letter to Mopu itself. This first experience of the land is initiated by Sister Clodagh's imagination, based on Mr. Dean's descriptions. Her barely contained sense of pride at her mission and Mr. Dean's indifference to it mingle in a representation of Mopu that holds some room for doubt because of our potentially unreliable narrators. Our experience is irregularly mediated through the subjective and internally disparate collective consciousness of Mr. Dean, the Reverend Mother, and Sister Clodagh. The distance between the viewer and the place, created by our sense of the three characters imagining Mopu and our knowledge of their relationships to the place and the mission, debilitates the containment of Mopu within any singular perspective. These narrative and cinematic techniques mark the film as a presenter of fragmented realities, breaking significantly from the strenuously singular presentations of place within other modes of imperial imagination.

This impression is enhanced by the manner in which the narrative is sequenced. Sister Clodagh begins reading the letter, rendered in Mr. Dean's voice. The letter dissolves to Mopu, and after a description of Angu Ayah, the voice-over falls silent. Angu Ayah is the caretaker of the palace who talks to birds and hears the winds summon her in the voices of women that once inhabited the palace's harem. Appropriately, this figure who bridges Mopu's past with its present and quite literally inhabits the past (or is inhabited by the ghosts of the past) also becomes our vehicle for transition through time and space, from the convent in Calcutta to the palace in Mopu.

We are now confronted with Mopu in the present tense. In Mopu, we witness an exchange between Angu Ayah, Mr. Dean, and the general (simultaneous, in terms of time, to the exchange between the two nuns in Calcutta) as the arrival of the missionaries inspires humor and irritability. We witness the general's strangely enlightened despotism and his plans to feed the nuns sausages because "Europeans eat sausages wherever they go." We hear Mr. Dean's impatience at the general for offering the natives a dispensary when "they don't mind having ringworms" and listen to Angu Ayah complain that nuns "won't be any fun."



18. Mopu is created from stylized sets and miniature models. Courtesy USC Cinema-Television Library.

As we dissolve back to the photographs of Mopu scattered on the Reverend Mother's table in Calcutta, we bring an awareness that Mopu's cast of characters are antithetical to the sisters in disposition, motivation, and just about everything else. We also have an uncomfortable feeling that the sketches and illustrations on the Reverend Mother's table don't begin to capture the spirit of the place. There is a sense that while we began the journey into Mopu through Sister Clodagh's vision and Mr. Dean's supercilious account, we have received a signal of the disparity between the actual place and its imaginings. The illustrations on the Reverend Mother's table make Mopu seem grand, while our vision of it has combined the indefinably large (the history of the place making itself felt through Angu Ayah, the fluttering curtains, the sensuality, the whispering spirit voices) with the ignominiously trivial (the peevish exchanges between the general, Mr. Dean, and Angu Ayah). Our encounter with the place is mediated by a combination of accounts given by the film's central characters and by incomplete glimpses provided by an anonymous entity (the camera, the narrative), leaving a presentiment that something about the place is not quite enclosed within the characters'



descriptions. Shots of the Mopu palace, of the Ayah (maid) who squawks unnaturally at her birds, combined with sounds of dead women and howling winds caught in empty hallways are all conveyed by the long shots of a camera working not at the behest of any one character's account but of its own volition. We are provided, then, with an early intimation of the primacy of the place and of its independence of will.

Several reviewers did not appreciate the film's diminution of characters through the stylized depiction of the place (entirely constructed on sets), and though it received Hollywood's Academy Awards for Color Cinematography and Set Decoration in 1948, the film's critical reception was mixed. A few critics agreed that "*Black Narcissus* was a disappointment, redeemed only in parts by its acting and its photography," an adaptation that "misses the mark."<sup>9</sup> The film was panned for its "atmosphere" and "shadowy values." "Here is a subject so tied up with profundities and intangibles that the best of filmmakers might well be cautious grappling with it."<sup>10</sup> When the film was released in the United States, *The New York Times Film Review* called the film a "coldly tinged intellectual morality drama."<sup>11</sup> Britain's *Kinematograph Weekly* advised that the film be booked for "better class halls" because, though the film was "sincere and artistic," it was "singularly lacking in warmth, power, purpose and lustre."<sup>12</sup> Critics predicted that popular audiences would "experience some difficulty in knowing what it was about."<sup>13</sup> Surface readings of the film interpreted the story as a literal depiction of helpless and degenerate nuns, which provoked the ire of the Catholic National Legion of Decency in the United States. The legion raised objections to the film as an "affront to religion and religious life," causing some American release prints to be censored. In particular, the film's flashback sequences, which depicted Sister Clodagh's love affair in Ireland, were cut.<sup>14</sup>

Observations about the film's "intangibles" and their connection to colonialism came more easily to critics writing in the 1980s. In 1986 a review in London's *Time Out* magazine observed, "It's not fanciful to see the film as Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger's comment on the British withdrawal from India," and *The Listener* noted, "in *Black Narcissus* everything is in retreat."<sup>15</sup> *The Village Voice* from the same year said, "Like *A Passage to India* and *Heat and Dust*, like *The Jewel in the Crown* and even Sir Richard Gandhi's award winning *Attenborough!* but far more openly, *Black Narcissus* is a film about the British. Next: India by the Indians."<sup>16</sup>

These later reviews were subsequent to a Powell-Pressburger revival in the United States effected by the efforts of filmmakers like Francis Ford Cop-

pola and Martin Scorsese. Director Michael Powell had often received an uncertain reception in Britain and *Peeping Tom* (Powell, 1960), a film that gives photographic voyeurism a new meaning, confirmed the feeling that he was a “dangerous and unsound” filmmaker.<sup>17</sup> By the 1980s, however, his style of filmmaking—excessive, passionate, bizarre, and horrific—seemed contemporary in its insanities. According to Ian Christie, *Black Narcissus* was unusual “for a British film from the emotionally frozen 40s,” but it “seems as if Powell and Pressburger survived the slings and barbs of contemporary critics to find their ideal audience in the 80s.”<sup>18</sup> *The Listener*’s review from 1986 also argues that the film is “a complex crossroads where colour, race, sex, tradition, and female Blimpishness collide,” in an “amazingly contemporary film.”<sup>19</sup> Another issue of the same magazine remarks that the film is unusual for its time because it showed that Powell and Pressburger felt “the war required not a grim buckling down in national effort but a more unfettered exercise of the imagination.”<sup>20</sup>

Apparently, while popular films like *Sanders of the River* and *The Drum* were experienced as anachronistic by the radical and progressive journals in their own time, *Black Narcissus* felt too modern and outrageous, too close to styles and concerns found in “high-class” forms of art such as the novel. Rather than posit some films as too advanced and others too outdated for a nation’s political sympathies, I’d argue that collectively they demonstrate the range of a cultural text’s possible relations to its history and context, particularly in a period of historical transition. While a focus on one or the other imperial film narrows our reading of dominant ideology, its variegated modes indicate internal fissures in empire fiction and connections across art forms, revealing more complex relationships between popular culture and prevalent aesthetic as well as political dispositions.

Nothing in the idealistic narratives about imperialism (such as the novels of Kipling, A. E. W. Mason, or Edgar Wallace, adapted in several empire films) provided for a conclusion of withdrawal and defeat. In the face of an eventuality greater than any acknowledged cause, a resolution in excess of avowed events, the modernist imperial mode responded with melodrama and irony. In both melodrama and irony, there is a disproportion between the signifier and the signified.<sup>21</sup> Melodrama, as Peter Brooks points out, postulates a signified in excess of the signifier, “which in turn produces an excessive signifier, making large and insubstantial claims on meaning.”<sup>22</sup> E. M. Forster’s *Marabar Caves*, Joseph Conrad’s *Congo River*, Rumer Godden’s *Mopu* are all places where things happen far in excess of explicable causes. The in-

commensurabilities between word, intention, and their meanings or consequences are attributed to a place that provokes the incomprehensible excess. The moral impact of these places on the imperial travelers is similar to the echoes in the Marabar Caves in *A Passage to India*, echoes that are “entirely devoid of distinction” but that still possess the ability to “undermine” a visiting European’s “hold on life.”<sup>23</sup> In modernist imperial narratives, white visitors to colonial lands may try to live by their principles, but irrespective of their intent they can exercise little control over a devaluation of themselves.

Irony, on the other hand, is opposed to melodrama in that its impact comes from understatement, from deflating the signifier and signified to respond to an inflated reality.<sup>24</sup> Mr. Dean, living some legacy of a Sanders gone horribly wrong, embodies this response in *Black Narcissus*. When asked which birds he shoots for the feathers on his hat, he says, “I don’t shoot birds. When you’ve shot everything, it palls, doesn’t it?” At Sister Clodagh’s exasperation with the Holy Man’s presence on chapel grounds (grounds that had belonged to the man before he became an ascetic), Dean remarks casually, “What would Christ have done?” The very title of the film is ironic, with its reference to an exoticized and bejeweled Indian prince’s perfume that turns out to have been purchased from the thrifty Army and Navy store in London.

Thomas Elsaesser argues that irony is embedded in melodrama as an expression of differential levels of awareness. Irony signals a discrepancy between a circumstance and a response, particularly when protagonists either underplay the intensity of their emotions or desperately struggle against a fate that they are incapable of entirely comprehending. Elsaesser develops the latter aspect in relation to Hollywood’s family melodramas, memorably calling their protagonists “pocket size tragic heroes and heroines” caught in a “tragedy that doesn’t quite come off: either because the characters think of themselves too self-consciously as tragic or because the predicament is too evidently fabricated at the level of plot and dramaturgy.”<sup>25</sup> In both instances, the irony gives spectators a special position of privilege: either by their knowledge of a protagonists’ dramatic self-restraint or by a superior awareness of the protagonists’ tragicomic inadequacy. The use of irony in *Black Narcissus*, repeatedly evoked in the context of the sisters’ incomprehension of Mopu and its people, initially gives Mr. Dean and the spectators a smug satisfaction of knowing more than the nuns. The privileged spectatorial position of ironic distance from its protagonists indicates that, like Mr. Dean, the viewer may be privy to the mission’s innate limitations and the place’s inscrutable power.

Nevertheless, irony is not the film's sole or lingering flavor. It would be more appropriate to say that melodrama and irony tussle with each other in this film, with melodrama heightening every aspect of the protagonists' emotions and irony undercutting them. When the nuns are at a high pitch of anxiety, running in search of the escaped Sister Ruth ("It's Sister Ruth. . . . She's gone mad!"), Angu Ayah produces the very parody of their scream, and Joseph, the nuns' little helper, points out that the commotion "would be a very little thing" to the meditating Indian Holy Man. The combination—of the suppressed or exploding high drama of the nuns' emotions, always plagued by a character or a perspective that will not take them seriously enough—brings a dimension of internal duality lacking in other modes of imperialist fiction. The film's oscillation between irony and melodrama is symptomatic of its refusal to give us, the audience, a clear emotional cue for reading the text's imperial content. Herein lies its invitation to the uncanny in our encounter with the film.

In explicating the sublime in modernism, Jean-François Lyotard notes that the modern is "the art which devotes its 'little technical expertise' (son 'petit technique'), as Diderot used to say, to present the fact that the unrepresentable exists."<sup>26</sup> Just as the uncanny in fiction may be evoked by a sensation of eerie familiarity with an alien object that escapes complete description, the sublime in literature is experienced as a sentiment (or presentiment) of a truth exceeding reality, of words that inadequately capture concepts. Both hint at something beyond the level of representation, something discomfiting to the present fiction. When irony and melodrama operate together in *Black Narcissus* to narrate an encounter between five female missionaries and a resistant land, they map out *shadowy* reasons for the disparity between the idealism of the nuns' intentions and the horrors of their visit. The evils visited on the encounter between the nuns and Mopu are found to originate not wholly in the nuns and not wholly in the natives. The mission fails because there is something indefinable in the place, conveyed through a sense of the uncanny that alters the possibilities of what the nuns can do, what they can be, and what they can expect to do or be.

Thus the encounter between the missionaries and the place may be understood through the related themes of imperial work and imperial identity, found in all three modes of the imperial imaginary during decolonization. For Sanders, work is a duty to his king for which he expects no greater reward than mosquito bites; the place, being benign, vulnerable, and responsive to Sanders, merely facilitates the accomplishment of his disinterested commit-

ment to imperial labor. For Carruthers, in *The Drum*, work is “my India, the frontier,” with all its danger and thrill. The place is a fabulous landscape with its vast mountains and unending possibilities of snipers and smuggling routes, impelling protagonists to deeds of daring. In *Black Narcissus* the place radically alters the nun’s identities by overturning their existing expectations about themselves, their pasts, their role in an alien land, and their mission among its people. The film reveals another face of imperial work and identity.

### *Imperial Identity/Imperial Work*

British expansion occurred through mercantilism, militarism, and missionary activity, the last of which was considered the most humanitarian of the empire’s projects. Such distinctions make little sense, especially in light of the fact that early religious conversions were no less zealous than imperial trade and irremediably mixed up with imperial politics.<sup>27</sup> As J. A. Hobson, the earliest European to analyze imperialism as a politico-economic system, asked, “How much Christianity and civilization balance how much industry and trade?”<sup>28</sup> Significantly, in narrative fiction, if military officers and bureaucrats in a pliant colony emphasized the validity of imperial enterprise, female missionary nuns in a resistant land enacted imperial vulnerability. Imperial modernist novels and films such as *A Passage to India*, *Bhowani Junction*, and *The Rains of Ranchipur* use feminine collapse and hysteria as a central trope, with the women serving as overused symbols of a nation’s fallibility and confusion. In gendering the subject positions of authority and vulnerability, such narratives not only replicate imperialism’s inherent patriarchy but also attempt to exculpate a discriminatory politico-economic system by dramatizing the empire’s retreat through representations of well-intentioned and fundamentally compassionate women.<sup>29</sup> Representing white women who respond to hostile and foreign lands with brave resignation fosters sympathy, and sympathy for the characters expands to create sympathy for their context and cause.

Three things stand out prominently about the sisters’ work in *Black Narcissus*. Their order is voluntary in that it requires annual vows of renewal; it is defined not as a contemplative order but as one devoted to work; and work serves as a mode of self-realization and worship. In addition to providing a plot device for Sister Ruth’s break with the order at the end of the film, the voluntary nature of the order emphasizes that the performance of duty is a matter of choice, conviction, and courage. This idea of voluntary service is

filled with the melodramatic romance of a higher purpose, where the freedom to choose results in a daily affirmation of the order. Renan called the nation “a daily plebiscite,” imagining a nation (much like this imagining of a religious order or of an empire) as a community of people who affirm a unified “spiritual principle” of their own free will. In this event, Sister Clodagh’s Irish roots take on additional significance, since the novel and the film fantasize her willing subservience to British missionary work in India. Her faith, all the more meaningful for coming from someone who belongs to a region and religion subordinated by England, affirms a national British unity for the colonial mission.

As with the men in imperial films, work is the sisters’ mode of self-actualization. In *Heart of Darkness* Marlow says, “I don’t like work—no man does—but I like what is in work—the chance to find yourself. Your own reality—for yourself—not for others.”<sup>30</sup> The concomitant of this is that in the absence of work, the sisters lose their identity: without colonial subjects, there is no need for imperial agents.<sup>31</sup> Typically, narratives validate imperial work by demonstrating its importance for the colonies. In *Black Narcissus*, however, the old general bribes the natives with money to attend the free school and dispensary opened by the nuns. The people of Mopu have to be coaxed into providing the sisters with minds to educate, bodies to heal, and souls to save, in order to legitimate the mission’s presence in Mopu. The potential irrelevance of the sisters’ work is emphasized with great irony throughout the film, particularly when the sisters’ lessons comprise of teaching five-year-olds in Mopu how to spell “canon, warship, bayonet, dagger, gun,” and of instructing the Indian prince to conjugate French verbs.<sup>32</sup>

Though the film provocatively questions the convent’s value for Mopu, it is the place that is finally held responsible for obstructing work as a faith-affirming activity. Repeatedly, Mopu is perceived as a distraction, a temptation. Whereas in *Sanders* the Isisi River is neither seductive nor gets the better of the officer, in *Heart of Darkness* Marlow finds he cannot resist the hypnotic pull of the Congo River: “The snake had charmed me.” Mopu is no exception, and there are several ways in which work in this Himalayan abode becomes more an occasion for excess than for self-denial, a source of extreme pleasure rather than purification.

Sister Philippa’s experience with her garden offers a particularly poignant example, not only because the garden holds a wealth of cultural and moral associations within the biblical tradition but also because of Sister Philippa’s own exacting, monastic standards for herself. The garden, in addition to



19. Dean and Sister Clodagh meet the Holy Man, the original owner of Mopu. Courtesy USC Cinema-Television Library.

being a postlapsarian location of tempted virtue and knowledge, is a significant symbol in imperial cinema. To temporarily empty the symbol of its potential ambiguity, within imperial films the garden functions as a symbol of the colony (as an unkempt wilderness) or as a code for civilization (as a tended field). Similar to the ambiguities of Hollywood westerns (see chapter 5), we see how modernist imperial films offer complicated constructions of a colonial territory that will no longer fit into the latter half of a civilized/savage binary. The categories that the nuns wish to impose on the land simply do not hold, as brilliantly shown in the scene in which the half-naked, silent Holy Man is declared to be “General Sir Krishna Rai, KCBO, KCSI, KCMG, several foreign decorations, too,” a man conversant in English and several European languages, as well as the original owner of Mopu’s lands.

Similarly, the place in *Black Narcissus* functions not only as an element that threatens “civilization”; it is also an entity that destabilizes travelers’ identities by revealing *them* to be the outsiders. A dramatic exchange between Sister Clodagh and Sister Philippa regarding the garden is only one of sev-

eral episodes that are of interest in this context. Their conversation occurs when Sister Clodagh discovers that Sister Philippa has planted fragile, exotic flowers instead of hardy, useful vegetables in the convent's garden. When reprimanded, the usually stoic Sister Philippa breaks down and requests a transfer; although a transfer would be a mark against her, she feels she deserves to be punished for getting too engrossed in her work and in the place.

SISTER PHILIPPA: I was becoming too fond of the place. I was too wrapped up in my work, I . . . thought too much about it. I'd forgotten.

SISTER CLODAGH: Forgotten what?

SISTER PHILIPPA: What I am. I was losing the spirit of the order.

Sister Philippa exemplifies a crisis of identity and a breakdown of its coherence, problematizing the relationship between the imperial agent and her colonial work.<sup>33</sup> In this sense, the convent's garden serves as a metonym for the interrelated functions of place, work, and imperial identity. The sisters realize that if they are to keep "the spirit of the order," the place cannot make a difference to them. Rather, their work must change the place.

To this end, the sisters practice their own forms of regimenting time and space. Sister Philippa sets about planting potatoes. Sister Ruth (Kathleen Byron) rings the bell on the cliffside chapel to mark the hours and to call for prayer. Sister Clodagh takes down sensuous pictures from the palace walls and changes the name of the "House of Women" to the "House of St. Faith." But the obdurate sensuality of the place will not die.<sup>34</sup> When suppressed in the architecture, it flowers in the form of the silent Kanchi (Jean Simmons) and in the overwhelming attraction between her and the young general (Sabu). It overcomes Sister Philippa, forcing her against her will to transform a well-regimented garden into a pleasure-paradise. The spirit of the place mocks them through Mr. Dean's vaudeville song: "No, I won't be a nun. No, I cannot be a nun. For I am so fond of Pleasure!! I cannot be a nun." The battle between the irrepressible sensuality of the place and the regimentation and restraint of the nun's work propels the narrative and its dramatic images. In the chapel, as the sisters sing their Christmas carols, this sensuality explodes in Kanchi's simmering looks (shot lingeringly by the camera) and in Sister Clodagh's memories (bursting through in luminous flashbacks). Thus, the mute place does not merely resist change: it makes its will legible through imperial minds and bodies, as it revives the sisters' memories and erupts in the form of spots and boils on their skin, inciting insomnia and headaches.<sup>35</sup>

In *Heart of Darkness*, before Marlow heads for the Congo River, a doctor ex-





20. Mopu makes Sister Philippa see too far and remember forgotten things. Courtesy USC Cinema-Television Library.



21. Sister Clodagh's mind strays from her prayers in Chapel. Courtesy USC Cinema-Television Library.

amines him. He measures Marlow's head with great enthusiasm and takes down careful notes, remarking, "It would be interesting for science to watch the mental changes of individuals on the spot."<sup>36</sup> In Africa, Marlow feels himself "becoming scientifically interesting."<sup>37</sup> Similarly, in *Black Narcissus* the place (rather than Mr. Dean) circumscribes the nuns' efforts by catalyzing their preordained failure. "It's the wind," says Sister Clodagh, explaining her weakness in Mopu. "It's the altitude." "It's the place with its strange atmosphere and new people." "There must be something in the water," complains Sister Briony, though Mr. Dean informs them that the problem with Mopu's water is its purity. The place seeps into Sister Philippa's daily routine in the form of a clarity that disallows the necessary amnesia required for discipline and obedience to the order. She thinks too much, sees too much, and questions everything, including the value of her work. When she uses her work to push away "distractions," the calluses on her hands from excessive gardening become another way in which the place claims her body. Most vividly, Mopu possesses and consumes Sister Ruth. The place ingests her and spits her out, a different person. If Sister Clodagh's present blurs into her past, Sis-

ter Ruth literally *becomes* her past. Her body enacts the most violent return of the repressed, where all denied history and passions explode onto the surface, transforming her very being.

Sister Ruth's degeneration into scarlet passions and cadaverous bestiality by the end of the film is not unique to her alone; to a large degree, all the nuns are implicated in Sister Ruth's insanity. The usual climatic spectacle of imperial films in which horse-backed British officers charge against native forces of evil instead manifests itself in *Black Narcissus* in the taut lines drawn between Sister Ruth in her red dress and lipstick and Sister Clodagh in her flowing white wimple, holding her bible, caught in a battle of wills as a melting candle marks time between them. Dramatically visualized as a split self in this scene, Sister Ruth is arguably a distended reflection of all the weaknesses and deviances that the nuns, particularly Sister Clodagh, experience in their encounter with Mopu. So if Sister Philippa was misled by the pleasures of her garden and Sister Honey by her compassion for children, Sister Ruth takes an unholy delight in ringing the chapel bell while looking down its murderous precipice. If the young general reminds Sister Clodagh of her past love for Con and an unacknowledged attraction manifests itself between her and Mr. Dean, Sister Ruth is consumed by her desire for Mr. Dean and by her need to become her past self.

Sister Ruth is first introduced by her absence at the table in the Calcutta convent. In this sequence, which occurs early in the film, the Reverend Mother and Sister Clodagh are selecting nuns for the mission at Mopu. From an area that looks down onto the cross-shaped dinner table, Mother Dorothea describes to Sister Clodagh the strengths of each of the nuns whom she selects. The sequence is theatrical, as the nuns—unknowingly but still on cue—do something to affirm the Reverend Mother's characterization of them. Sister Briony is selected for her strength (she picks up a large jug of water), Sister Honey for her popularity (she tells a joke and giggles), and Sister Philippa for her talent with gardens (she examines an apple). Sister Ruth is the only one who is recommended for the mission because she is "a problem"; appropriately, Sister Ruth is missing from the table. Her absence and her definition by negation—she is not there, the nun's vocation may not be her vocation—makes her character the vortex that absorbs the weaknesses of each of the sisters.

In *Heart of Darkness* Marlow says about Kurtz, "The wilderness had found him out early, and taken on him a terrible vengeance for the fantastic invasion. I think it whispered to him things about himself which he did not

know. . . . It echoed loudly within him because he was hollow at the core.”<sup>38</sup> Sister Ruth is the most susceptible to the place because she is, from the beginning, most devoid of any attribute or use. While Sister Clodagh is proud, Sister Briony strong, Sister Honey popular, and Sister Philippa a gardener, Sister Ruth is merely missing. Four of the five sisters respond to the wilderness, but only one becomes possessed by it. Only one steps over the edge. As Marlow says of Kurtz, “He had stepped over the edge, while I had been permitted to draw back my hesitating foot. Perhaps all the wisdom, and all truth, and all sincerity, are just compressed into that inappreciable moment of time in which we step over the threshold of the invisible.”<sup>39</sup>

### *Imperial Redemption*

Mere hesitation at the edge of their psyches’ precipices is insufficient to absolve the other sisters. The resolution of the film is significant for the way in which the narrative is divested of its high emotionalism and the mission’s respectability salvaged after such a severe collapse. The cathartic release of the film’s high emotionalism is followed by a quieter cognition of the nuns’ suffering. The explicit demonstration of the nuns’ despair allows for a recuperation of their dignity.

Violence is part of the resolution of all imperial films, as it combines a cinematic spectacle and a narrative catharsis that restore equilibrium to the story. As narrative flow is predicated on repeated reconstitutions of coherence, the violence is a climactic escalation of oppositions running through the films. In realist films like *Sanders* signifiers of the colonizers and the colonized do not occupy the same frame without a drastic regimentation along racial categories. *The Drum* flirts with dissolving rigid boundaries but abounds in confrontational visual arrangements that suffuse the white protagonists with danger. In *Black Narcissus* both the imperial encounter and the climax are of a different nature. The film’s divided frames are most dramatic when they are “internal,” that is, when they dramatize conflicts *between* or *within* the nuns and pit signifiers of the colonizers against other signifiers of colonizers (the lipstick-versus-bible sequence, Sister Clodagh’s and Sister Philippa’s struggles against their memories).<sup>40</sup> Here, the agents of empire internalize elements that are typically assigned to “bad” natives, or that are expelled through a violence that does not require self-investigation. An internalization of conflict increases the horror of violence, as it comes from the realm of the familiar, the self. Bhabha’s analysis of the ambivalence of



22. Difficult internal struggles as Sister Philippa creates a garden of flowers rather than hearty vegetables. Courtesy USC Cinema-Television Library.

the colonial encounter is perhaps most applicable to the modernist imperial mode, where the colonial other becomes a “tethered shadow” of the Western self by becoming a part of her being.<sup>41</sup>

The power of the “uncanny” in *Black Narcissus* resides in the fact that its narrative crisis is not provoked by a battle between self and other (as in imperial realism) or self and an other who resembles the self (as in imperial romance). The terror derives from the fact that the protagonists, the sisters of St. Faith, cannot separate themselves from the alien elements of the place that eventually appear in the shape of Sister Ruth.<sup>42</sup> The film’s crisis is instigated by a journey to an unknown land, but the resulting violence is performed through the psyches and bodies of imperial agents. The death sequence at the cliff, shot entirely without dialogue, testifies to this internalized confrontation, as does the fact that “Mopu” is pure artifice, a fantasy set.

Michael Powell and Brian Easdale, who was responsible for the music and sound score, rehearsed the actors with stopwatches for the death scene, “trimming or elongating movements so that the edited scene would exactly fit the written score.”<sup>43</sup> As the film critic Harry Sheehan notes, the climax is a choreographed sequence that is cut and set to music, so that “emotion” takes

“precedence over plot mechanics.”<sup>44</sup> Sister Clodagh is ringing the chapel bell by the cliff at 6:00 AM, as her lips move in silent prayer. To a crescendo of music, Sister Ruth arrives out of the shadows and her desperate eyes fill the screen. She looks neither alive nor human as she moves stealthily toward the Sister Superior she hates. At this moment, the evil of the place is finally localized onto everything Sister Ruth represents. In her intent to kill a woman in prayer and in her macabre visual transformation, she finally passes beyond the reach of humanity.

This sequence of *Black Narcissus* is presented as a melodramatic tableau. In *The Melodramatic Imagination* Peter Brooks argues that melodrama is “motivated by a totally coherent ambition to stage a drama of articulation,” where the conflict of moral sentiments is made explicit through the attitudes, signs, gestures, and expressions of the characters.<sup>45</sup> In the chapel-bell sequence, the movements of the two sisters, their radical opposition in appearance and desire, their twirl around the bell’s rope, which sends the attacker hurtling down the cliff to her death, and Sister Clodagh’s expression of extreme horror on which the camera freezes, all constitute a concentrated eruption of emotions—threat, danger, revenge, sin, fear, horror—that have run steadily under the film’s text, ending with the triumph of the innocent. The musical score confers “additional legibility” on this otherwise silent tableau of emotions.<sup>46</sup>

Silence has a privileged place within this “drama of articulation.”<sup>47</sup> Not surprisingly, the natives are the most mute of all. They are commented upon and evaluated (as in Mr. Dean’s letter). When people like the young general do speak, they misspeak (he wants to study “physics with the Physical Sister”). Kanchi doesn’t say a word in the entire film, preoccupied as she is with her sexual obsessions and her beauty. But *Black Narcissus* silences the non-whites while allowing them to be articulate signs of that which destabilizes the nuns. The “subalterns” that cannot speak in the Spivakian formulation are reproduced once again within dehumanizing Eurocentric categories (in that they are not allowed their perspective, their interiorities), but their very existence distresses and “distracts” the nuns. The native’s lack of access to the symbolic realm is guaranteed within this imperial text, but their silence is imagined as threatening inscrutability.

Rumer Godden’s novel describes the young general, played by Sabu in the film, as being “outside everything they [the nuns] had considered real; he was the impossible made possible.”<sup>48</sup> In other words, Godden, the writer of stories about the British Empire, imagines all that might be unthinkable or

unreal and creates an Indian character who gives expression to it. This is similar to the argument in the British journal that proposed that color film made “something of the ‘unreality’ of the East . . . available for the Westerner.”<sup>49</sup> The operation of muteness in *Black Narcissus* is much like the operation of color in *The Four Feathers* and *The Drum*: it makes the East fantastic while guaranteeing access to that fantasy. In their silent combat, Sister Ruth and Sister Clodagh manifest the ineffable forces that have silently confronted each other in this narrative. The place, its people, the wind, the palace, the mountains, the gardens, all of which have been imagined as inscrutable and all of which have emerged in glimpses in the sisters’ distractions, desires, sicknesses, and memories appear full-blown in the irrevocable transformation of Sister Ruth. With the final representation of Sister Ruth as a murderous and crazed animal, the imagined horrors of the place are made completely legible through her body and intentions.

Melodrama achieves a more complete form in imperial modernism, and its complexity lies “in the amount of dust the story raises along the road, a cloud of over-determined irreconcilables which put up a resistance to being neatly settled in the last five minutes.”<sup>50</sup> A vagueness, due in particular to the unarticulated and undefined reasons for the sisters’ defeat and retreat, contributes to the sense of unease at the conclusion. The destabilizing element in this film lies in its sublime manifestation of discomfort with the colonial encounter. In *Black Narcissus*, the antagonistic element is neither an evil native nor an avaricious European but the demon place that ultimately splits the romantic heroine in (minimally) two parts. The parallels between Sister Clodagh and Sister Ruth permeate the film’s imagery, not just in their physical resemblance to each other but also in the striking sequences of Sister Clodagh’s flashback to Ireland: her memory of running to meet Con, who is represented as an elusive whistle in the dark, portrays her love as full of the same coiled excitement, anxiety, and finally the same futility as Ruth’s desire for Dean. The incredible sequence in which Dean rejects Ruth, in which he suddenly becomes the predator and she the prey, begins Ruth’s complete transition to monster. Following a dramatic fade to purple, Ruth loses consciousness chanting Sister Clodagh’s name, and *Black Narcissus* begins to explore fully its potential for horror.

By concluding the film not with Ruth’s death but with Clodagh’s redemption, the film retains, to paraphrase Achebe, a fulsome fascination with the restorative powers of colonial trauma for the colonizers, as exemplified by Sister Clodagh’s role in the film. As an Irish woman in a British order, her



23. Sister Ruth lurks, transformed by her obsessions, her lipstick, and her red dress. Courtesy USC Cinema-Television Library.

memories of Ireland—shown in breathtaking images of translucent shimmering water and in the deep, rich colors of her grandmother’s footstool and jewelry—make her sensibility the perfect conduit of the nuns’ experience of marginality and denaturalizing alienation in a strange land.<sup>51</sup> The film’s aesthetic modernism that thematizes this aspect of alienation could lead us to radical realizations of the “cultural imperialism within Europe that accompanies its domination over the rest of the world.”<sup>52</sup> But the film abandons a critical presentism for an emotional look ahead and a look back. As Sister Clodagh therapeutically anticipates future missions, her status as émigré within England and Mopu becomes a way of romanticizing her commitment to her faith. And the nostalgic tone of Dean and Clodagh’s last exchange leaves us with the distracting ache of their parting.

Sister Ruth’s accidental death in the physical struggle between her and Sister Clodagh appeases the place and breaks its hold on the nuns. With this, two deaths are balanced at the end of the film—that of a native infant (which causes the people of Mopu to isolate the sisters) and that of Sister Ruth (after which the people of Mopu are reconciled with the chapel). In giving up one body for the one taken and in assimilating it into a strange land (at Sister Clodagh’s request, Mr. Dean is to look after Sister Ruth’s grave), the imperial





24. Sister Clodagh remembers trying on her grandmother's emerald necklace in Ireland.  
Courtesy USC Cinema-Television Library.

mission fantasizes its own conclusion. Sister Ruth's death is its ultimate exorcism. It allows for a catharsis of the evils of the imperial encounter, but is still insufficient to recuperate imperialism's redemptive ideal. This redemption occurs through the character and the experiences of Sister Clodagh.

Sister Clodagh goes through dramatic and positive changes by the end of the film. She can smile when Mr. Dean affectionately calls her "a stiff-necked, obstinate creature." She can share a sense of companionship with Mr. Dean, whom she was quick to judge on their first encounter. Like Sister Philippa with her garden, she desires a demotion as the just consequence of her failure at St. Faith. Her pride is no longer invisible to her but a weakness that she has had to confront at Mopu and a failing that she treats with ironic self-deprecation. Sister Clodagh's encounter with the inexplicable in Mopu has wrenched from her a more honest and noble response to her realities and her past.<sup>53</sup> For the first time in the film, painful memories that resurfaced in Mopu no longer haunt her, but make her a better person. Like Harry Faversham of *The Four Feathers* as he leaves for Khartoum, Sister Clodagh embarks on a life of self-abnegation full of difficult but instructive memories,

rather than a life of denial filled with intrusive memories. The experience also lends her clarity and an ability to speak of her past. In her last exchange with Mr. Dean, the film represents the wisdom and maturity gained by this romantic heroine. Her loss, and the film's excessive style of narrating the story of her loss, is the fragile recovery of moral victory for the sister. Significantly, the nuns retreat not to go home but to continue their mission elsewhere.

In a finally, if tentatively, imperialist film, the collapse of its worldview is averted by a visibly modernist preoccupation with the Western self and by the film's redemptive thematics. As Sister Clodagh looks up to see Mopu fading into a mist, the place appears symbolic of the disappearance of several expectations that she brought to the mission. The clouds and the height of Mopu make it an unattainable ideal, but Sister Clodagh emerges as all the more admirable for her attempt to succeed. Mopu's disappearance also seals the place from inflicting any further harm on the sisters. No blame can be assigned to the sisters any more. In *Heart of Darkness* Marlow remarks on the degenerate Mr. Kurtz's last, defeated words, "The horror! the horror!" by saying: "Much better his cry, much better. It was an affirmation, a moral victory paid for by innumerable defeats, by abominable terrors, by abominable satisfaction."<sup>54</sup> The naming of horrors takes courage within this narrative as well, and Sister Clodagh gains a shaken but undefeated will to continue her work. Faced with its contradictions in the era of anticolonial nationalism, British imperialism forgives its own past; as imperial modernism suggests in multiple ways, you cannot accuse those who have suffered deeply, and you can accuse them even less if they are able to face their sins.

These heroines turn out to be more than pocket-book tragediennes. They are physically and psychically battered, but they acquire humility and a redoubled faith that absolves them of their inadequacies. An abstract and pure commitment to an ideal emerges as being more valuable than the realization of it. Such abstraction is convenient in a novel written close to India's decolonization and filmed in the year of India's independence. Talking to Michael Powell in 1990, a writer noted that "what grants them [the nuns] stature in Powell's eyes is that when they finally do come away, regardless of the humiliation undergone there, it is with a canter rather than a slink."<sup>55</sup> The actual loss of a territory is insignificant, these texts appear to say, when lost land and power can be symbolically recuperated as an eternal, moral victory. Here is Marlow speaking of Jim after his death in *Lord Jim*, "He passes away under a cloud, inscrutable at heart, forgotten, unforgiven, and excessively romantic. Not in the wildest days of his boyish visions could he have

seen the alluring shape of such extraordinary success! For it may well be that in the short moment of his last proud unflinching glance, he had beheld the face of that opportunity which, like an Eastern bride, had come veiled to his side.”<sup>56</sup> Sister Ruth has to die so that Sister Clodagh may be revived. In the frozen moment of Sister Clodagh’s terror at the death of the crazed nun lies her “rebirth” into faith and her own illusory moral victory. As this victory can only be won through a thorough experience of defeat, imperial modernism explores the nadir of colonial encounters in a manner unlike other modes. But its admission of culpability does not explore a politics of self-critique, as it remains caught in an inward-looking cycle of guilt and absolution.

The argument that literature in the modern period invests art with a redemptive potential is prominently associated with the work of Leo Bersani. While my argument has been directed at a specific narrative and aesthetic form of imperial cinema, the similarity lies in an emphasis on art’s aspiration toward a morality that allows aesthetics to function as “a corrective of life.”<sup>57</sup> That British imperial films of the 1930s rehabilitate empire for an era of decolonization becomes clear from the range and function of empire cinema’s imaginative modes. The coherence of the imperial self, presumed in the romantic and realist texts, is broken in the modernist narrative. Within the former modes, the unified imperial self is either sustained by memories of home or unthreatened by the alien place. In *The Drum* nostalgia for home gives the men something to fight for. *The Four Feathers* is driven by memories that are didactic. Amnesia becomes a necessary part of serving in the colonies in *Sanders*, and *Black Narcissus* is close to *Sanders* in this emphasis, with the critical difference that forgetfulness is impossible because the imperial bodies are in a radically different relationship to the colonial place. The place has entered the characters at a subconscious, subcutaneous level.<sup>58</sup> The significance of the breakdown of the imperial entity in *Black Narcissus* is that it foregrounds an aspect shared by all these representations of empire, namely, that the amnesia of the realist hero, the sustaining memories of the romantic hero, and the traumatic memories of the modernist hero are elements of narratives generated by a larger cultural loss. This is the loss of a transparent relationship of a nation to its past.<sup>59</sup>

Imperialism occupied an uneasy place in the future of the British nation, rendering the identity of an imperial protagonist problematic. Constructing heroic narratives of imperial nationalism presumed certain responses to contemporary criticisms against empire: it presumed to disavow the reality of anticolonial nationalisms (prominent in *Sanders*), to expel them in a mytholo-

gized confrontation (as in *The Drum*), or to give aesthetic expression to the breakdown of the imperial protagonist, allowing the film form to be guided by an awareness of this collapse (in *Black Narcissus*). The loss of a comfortable continuity with the nation's past was coupled with the necessity to comprehend that loss, as evidenced by the literary, cinematic, popular, and canonized narratives in the twentieth century that circled around the problem of empire in the longer history of the British nation. These must be understood as signs of a culture that produced absolving fictions of its nation's history in order to adapt to and incorporate political change.

