The “Exaggerated” Colors of *Black Narcissus* (1947 and 2020)

This article explores the correspondences and differences in terms of color design between two screen versions of *Black Narcissus*, a popular novel by Rumer Godden published in 1939. Conceptual approaches drawn upon include ideas of “the figural,” intertextuality and hybridity as central to understanding how *Black Narcissus* operates on many complex levels, arguing that color is a key expressive mode in their articulation. Powell and Pressburger’s 1947 film and a 2020 television mini-series directed by Charlotte Bruus Christensen are for the first time compared in relation to landscape and the natural environment; interior spaces; costume; race. The texts’ experimentation with color, lighting and diffusion enables boundaries between exterior and interior spaces, as well as between characters’ memories and repressed desires, to be problematized. As “end of empire” texts, the literary and screen iterations of *Black Narcissus* are related to postcolonial theories in which a series of hybrid, “in-between” spaces and cultural attitudes are explored.

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In *Black Narcissus* (Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, 1947) the character Mr Dean (David Farrar) remarks of its mountainous Himalayan location that there is “something in the air that makes everything seem exaggerated.” The film was indeed noted for bringing out this quality, made possible through the ingenuity of production designer Alfred Junge, matte artist and special effects technician W. Percy Day, cinematographer Jack Cardiff and costume designer Hein Heckroth, in a film that despite its Himalayan setting was shot at Pinewood Studios, UK and at Leonardslee sub-tropical gardens, West Sussex, UK (Street 2005). The release of a new screen interpretation of *Black Narcissus* (Charlotte Bruus Christensen, DNA Films, 2020), shot at Pinewood but also on location in the district of Mustang in Nepal, naturally invites comparison with Powell and Pressburger’s celebrated film. This article is an exploration of the correspondences and differences in terms of color design between the 1947 film and 2020 television mini-series, with emphasis on the use of diffusion, expressivity and conveying the impact of an awesome and unsettling landscape. The two screen versions are compared in relation to the following themes: landscape and the natural environment; interior spaces; costume; color and race. They share many features that confirm the compelling, “exaggerated” visual legacy of Technicolor as well as of Rumer Godden’s popular novel on which both are based (Godden [1939] 1994). I argue that the figural, intertextual and intermedial depiction of space, place and color reveals a web of spatial and chromatic interconnections between the novel, film and mini-series that transcend media boundaries.

The article draws on conceptual approaches relating to ideas of “the figural,” intertextuality and notions of hybridity as central to understanding how *Black Narcissus* operates on many

complex levels. Foregrounding a dialogic relationship between the texts allows their aesthetic approaches, particularly in relation to color design and the depiction of the physical environment, to be understood as dynamic, iterative processes. The two screen versions of Rumer Godden’s novel can usefully be placed within a conceptual understanding that draws on ideas of the figural based on the work of Jean-François Lyotard ([1971] 2011) and as developed by David Rodowick (2001) and Ágnes Pethő (2018). For Lyotard “the figural” refers to the excessive, heterogeneous aspects of discourse to be found in beautiful, sublime images. As Bamford explains, this realm brings together “a valorization of the plastic, the spatial and thus the bodily realm of gestures, movement and matter” (2012, 18). Rodowick argues that words should not be seen as distinct from images, and that it is in such “in-between” relations that the figural can be sensed. These approaches thus emphasize connections between texts and the creation of hybrid spaces that delimit media boundaries, revealing their “deep imbrication” and “as an ever-changing aesthetic configuration, and a sensuously perceivable excess” (Pethő 2018, 169). This idea of “a sensuously perceivable excess” is a perfect description of the “exaggerated” aspects of *Black Narcissus* as expressed through Godden’s central positioning of the impact of place, space and culture on the nuns in their mission of establishing a school and dispensary in a palace at Mopu, a fictional location north of Darjeeling in the Himalayas. Both screen versions use this as a key platform for visualizing Mopu and in this enterprise color is central. Jack Cardiff’s Academy Award-winning use of Technicolor and Bruus Christensen’s digital cinematography exploited creative possibilities which in turn bring out color’s own multivalence and transformative power. The meanings

associated with particular colors such as red are elaborated, gain momentum and dramatize key moods, events, spatial relations and temporalities.

As such the novel, film and mini-series "speak" to each other, and can indeed be thought of as interconnected iterations of Godden's novel that was published in 1939, a few years before the Indian Independence Act of 1947. The critical literature on Powell and Pressburger's *Black Narcissus* has foregrounded its "end of empire" resonances, particularly how the film's rich *mise en scène* expresses a western imagining of India invested with an "imperial gaze" (Kaplan 1997). This relates to an Orientalist vision of India as "other" which posits the East as distinct from the West in terms of culture, identity and race (Said 1978). Davidson and Hill argue that although the film's construction of "aesthetic virtuosity" might draw attention to its artificiality as a western vision of the east, its overall verisimilitude and plausible diegesis nevertheless "embodies, more than it subverts, a socially conservative vision" (2005, 11). Other scholars however accentuate the text's potential for ideological critique in that "for every Western scheme of perception or social, sexual, and power relationship, an Indian counterpart shows up the former as a cultural construct" (Stone 2004, 266). Jaikumar describes the film as a "modernist" imperial text in which the colonial backdrop is constructed as problematic and fraught with "excess." This is exemplified by the presentation of place as profoundly unsettling compared with the certainties exuded in previous British films with imperial settings (2001, 60). As I have argued elsewhere, the film's use of formal devices such as flashback complicate its depiction of place as "other" in problematizing the binary notions of east and west typically delivered in imperial fictions (Street 2005). No other scholars have

compared Powell and Pressburger's film with the 2020 mini-series, so this article attempts for the first time to consider the extent to which all these years later (no other versions have been produced) it projects similar themes, particularly how homage to the film's "aesthetic virtuosity" melds with a desire to reflect more contemporary perspectives on the representation of character, place, space, color and race. Although many reviewers of the mini-series praised its debt to the 1947 film, a few considered this held back the emergence of something genuinely distinctive (Fienberg 2020; Baron 2020; Framke 2020; Tallerico 2020). I argue however that while the mini-series celebrates the novel and re-works aspects of the film, it simultaneously adopts a more contemporary approach to several themes and exploits digital technology to articulate its own aesthetic sensibility.

In terms of color design, there are several very clear references in the mini-series that recall the film, while inviting comparisons between the look of Technicolor and today's digital capabilities. The mini-series is very much in visual dialogue with the film, demonstrating in some shots a very close approximation of similar colors, lighting and composition, in capturing the "exaggerated" atmosphere that unsettles the nuns. Bruus Christensen studied Jack Cardiff's cinematography in *Black Narcissus* when she trained at the National Film and Television School in 2002. Her admiration for it convinced her that rather than embark on a radical departure any new interpretation of Godden's novel must respect Cardiff's work because it was so "truthful to the story" (Bruus Christensen 2021). She picked a few classic frames from the film and re-worked them into the mini-series as an expression of this homage. It was not a case of simply copying the frames but incorporating an iconic image, such as Ruth opening the palace doors,

and inserting it in a slightly different context. In the film's dramatic climax, the rebellious Sister Ruth (Kathleen Byron) storms through the doors to confront Sister Clodagh (Deborah Kerr) at the bell tower. In the mini-series the doors are the same design but do not lead directly to the bell or feature in the climactic scene. But they are associated with Ruth who opens and closes them, a gesture which emphasizes their function as a symbolic gateway between the palace and the outside world. A significant difference in the recent version was that Bruus Christensen shot on location in Nepal and took advantage of the place by including extended scenes such as the nuns' arrival, depicted as an arduous journey on foot through the mountains to the palace. This leads to some interesting contrasts as the landscape is showcased in spectacular ways to underscore the "exaggerated" sensibility that is central to both screen versions.

Godden's novel is the foundational urtext from which the chain of figural interconnections emanate. As Pethő explains this approach involves foregrounding the texts' self-reflexive elements: "The repetition or the re-inscription of a medium as a form in the form of another medium, where the procedure of intermediality itself is also figured, that is: it becomes observable and it refers reflexively to itself" (2011, 40). This notion of intermediality emphasizes "intricate interactions of different media" and how "the moving pictures can initiate fusions and 'dialogues' between the distinct arts" (Pethő 2011, 1). Screenwriter Amanda Coe stated that her 2020 adaptation of *Black Narcissus* was very much grounded in the novel as "part ghost story, part romance, it's full of atmospheric detail about the landscape and its people, as well as psychological acuity about the failures of understanding, both cultural and personal, that lead to tragedy." She aimed to "bring the story to life for a new audience" and as I go on to demonstrate,

although we can observe differences in approach in terms of dialogue, characters and style, at the same time some recurring features that would be recognized by spectators familiar with the film are retained (Coe 2021, 18).

The plot in both versions is broadly similar to Godden's novel and will be briefly outlined to inform the underpinning concepts and detailed thematic analyses below. Sister Clodagh is charged with leading an Order of nuns to establish a school and dispensary at Mopu, in a deserted palace which had formerly been a harem built by the Rajput ruler of a princely state. Once there, Clodagh comes to rely on the local knowledge of the area and customs provided by a British man called Mr Dean, the Agent of General Toda Rai, who invited the nuns to reside in his palace. The nuns are forced to make compromises as they adapt to their new environment. Clodagh agrees to allow the General's nephew Dilip Rai to attend the school, even though he turns out to be a distracting presence, reminding Clodagh of her own past in Ireland and a love affair before she became a nun. The narrative explores how Mopu affects the nuns in different ways, leading to a series of tumultuous events that eventually force them to leave. One of the most dramatic is the rebellion of Sister Ruth, a nun who is particularly disturbed by the vibrant locale and the presence of Mr Dean, with whom she becomes infatuated. As her mental health deteriorates, she escapes from the palace in search of Mr Dean but returns after he rejects her affections. She stalks Clodagh, culminating in a dramatic struggle at the bell tower that ends with Ruth falling to her death. The nuns then decide to leave Mopu, their mission defeated after ending in tragedy.

Exploring "the figural"

David Rodowick suggests that: "The figural [...] is not primarily a montage

or chiasmus between the said and the seen; it is force of unbound energy, not simply unseen (the letter missed, an image not visible) but radically unconscious. It is a third dimension, neither sayable nor showable” (2001, 12). This idea of a “third dimension” can profitably be applied to *Black Narcissus* on several levels as a result of working through Godden’s descriptions of Mopu and the impact of its ineffable qualities. The problematizing of dichotomous ideas is one of the perhaps surprising tendencies to be found in the film which depicts the nuns’ attempt to inscribe a “westernizing” presence on Mopu and its peoples. While ostensibly about the differences between east and west, *Black Narcissus* however complicates the idea that these are distinct, in particular suggesting that the locale’s “exoticism” engenders uncanny affective affinities that can be both pleasurable and disturbing. Sister Clodagh’s flashbacks to her life in Ireland, for example, can be read as an attempt to collapse, or at least complicate, strict divisions between east and west since they are occasioned by recognition of familiar, remembered sensations which the environment appears to unlock. In a fiction that can be linked with Orientalism, the film of *Black Narcissus* presents Mopu as “a remarkable, topographic structure that is alien to the nuns’ experience but at the same time strangely familiar in terms of its capacity to re-engage them with memories of the past and sexuality” (Street 2005, 30). The unsettling presentation of place is expressed in a particularly vivid example as a dissolve (overlap of two shots) of Mopu’s vivid blue skies and blossoms (Fig. 1) occasions and melds into Clodagh’s memory in flashback of a visually stunning, shimmering lake in Ireland where she is seen fishing with Con (Shaun Noble), her fiancé (Fig. 2). There are other examples of this slippage as Clodagh experiences, as Godden put it, feeling as if she was “looking at

herself from the outside [...] she seemed to be altogether outside of herself” as the “in-between” space which invades her consciousness suggests an uncanny experience of the figural (Godden [1939] 1994, 33–34).

In a selection of themes which demonstrate this form of intertextuality, it is clear that both screen versions display a heightened appreciation of the power of color to dramatize a narrative. Many of the effects created in 1947 have been celebrated, convincing some—although not Rumer Godden, who thought the film lacked authenticity, particularly in terms of costume—that the film was shot on location in the Himalayas (Chrisholm 1998, 201). Bruus Christensen and production designer Kave Quinn similarly exploited color effects in design, shooting and post-production. They knew the 1947 film well but wanted to “re-interpret” the novel with “a 2020 mindset.” This involved working closely with actors in focusing on narrative and performance to establish the priorities of each scene’s visualization (Bruus Christensen 2020, 103). The use of Nepal, as well as the mini-series’ longer screen time, allowed them to extend Jack Cardiff’s expressive approach to color while also exploring a “third” dimension of sensuous aesthetic experience which is expressive of the figural as a force for reinvention. As a text the mini-series is thus profoundly self-reflexive and reinterpretative.

The idea of a third dimension can also be seen to relate to how each iteration of *Black Narcissus*—novel, film and mini-series—highlights the contradictions of colonialism as the nuns embark on a “civilizing mission” that was typical of missionaries and religious orders sent to spread Christianity associated with British imperialism. Yet they are unable to maintain their distance from the local population as they are charmed by the seductive presence of Dilip Rai in his splendid silks, and Kanchi, a beautiful

Fig 1: *Black Narcissus* (Powell and Pressburger, 1947); Clodagh (Deborah Kerr) dreams of the past.

Fig 2: *Black Narcissus* (Powell and Pressburger, 1947). Clodagh's past in Ireland.

girl who also attends the school. The novel makes clear that the British do not rule Mopu directly: the land was leased to the General's father for "experimental development" by the British government (Godden [1939] 1994, 15). Mr Dean occupies an intermediary role in the colonialist context, but at the same time he accords the local people with a degree of autonomy and respect. His rejection of the missionary work invited by the General therefore acts as a critique of this type of British presence in India, proposing an interesting counter to a key element of colonialist activity. In 1939, when the novel was published, this anticipates the final years of colonial rule, with the British being "in" India but not "of it."

This transitional phase has been referred to by postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha as the "third space" between colonizer and colonized, within which hybrid identifications are possible (Bhabha 1994). As Bagchi argues, this scenario allows Mopu to become "reinscribed as a site of hybridity" in the sense that its position as "both inside and outside colonial and princely rule" frustrates and ultimately defeats the nuns' ability to enforce western notions of superiority, civilization and knowledge: "The non-colonial/not-princely space is transformed into a site that is fraught with multivalences. On this site we witness a strange reversal, instead of the nuns resignifying the site of the 'House of Women' and the lives of the natives, the site and the people resignify not only the nuns' subjectivities but also their faith in the White Man's Burden" (Bagchi 1995, 57, 64). For many of the nuns this is an unsettling yet learning process as they recall past memories and open up to new experiences which cast doubt on their Order's approach as represented by Sister Adela, a nun who visits and notices how they have slipped into ways of which she does not approve, including reliance on Mr

Dean. The following sections focus on how color expresses these complex and fraught multivalences in relation to some key spaces, characters and themes.

Mopu at "the edge of the world"

As described in Godden's novel, the palace was situated high up "on a ledge cut like a lip from the face of the hill and it seemed to be perpetually riding into the north" (Godden [1939] 1994, 21). When the palace is first described to Clodagh by Father Roberts, a priest based in Darjeeling, he refers to it as "like the edge of the world; far more remote than it actually is, perhaps because it looks at such immensity" (Godden [1939] 1994, 27). Both screen versions aimed to convey something of this awesome, sublime sensibility. Pinewood's studios were used in 1947 and 2020, but location shooting in Nepal enabled director and cinematographer Charlotte Bruus Christensen to use the natural environment to best advantage to capture something of the locale's "immensity" (Bruus Christensen 2021). Two opening shots show how the 1947 film (Fig. 3) and the mini-series used the skyline as a signature feature, firmly establishing the significance of the visually stunning topography that unsettles the nuns as they begin their work. Whereas the film's pre-title features a painted backdrop effect with an emphasis on blue, the mini-series begins with a skyline shot in Nepal that creates a similarly visually stunning but more photorealistic impact that highlights blue sky, snow-capped mountains with grey and brown accents lower down (Fig. 4). This natural setting permitted a greater degree of visual extrapolation from the novel's description of the nuns' long, tiring journey to Mopu. A long shot from the mini-series of the nuns on a narrow walkway crossing, for example, shows them as precariously

Fig 3: *Black Narcissus* (Powell and Pressburger, 1947), pre-title painted view shot.

Fig 4: *Black Narcissus* (Charlotte Bruus Christensen, 2020), skyline shot.

Fig 5. *Black Narcissus* (Charlotte Bruus Christensen, 2020), the nuns arrive in Mopu.

placed and dwarfed by the clear blue sky and magnificent mountains jutting skyward; their glistening whiteness contrasts with the silhouetted figures as they slowly move across what looks like a far from sturdy platform (Fig. 5).

In both screen versions the palace and bell tower are used to highlight the difference between the nuns' former lives in Darjeeling that were characterized by order and calm, and the loss of control they feel the longer they stay at Mopu. Although both are presented as if solid structures, their elevated position and exposure to the incessant wind are used to indicate their imbrication with, and vulnerability to, the elements. This tension is played out through the symbolic and physical presence of the bell tower, a set that features prominently in both screen versions. The ringing of the bell is part of the nuns' attempts to retain a sense of order; its placement on the edge of a vertiginous location gestures towards this aim's futility as its sounds waft into the void of the deep chasm below. Godden wrote of how "the bell did not command, it sounded doubtful against the gulf; the wind took the notes away and yet it brought the sound of the bells at Goontu very strongly; pagan temple bells," and that Sister Ruth found it "thrilling to ring the bell, standing on the edge of the cloud and sky, with the tea and the valley and the River far below" (Godden [1939] 1994, 57, 38–39). The tower is thus symbolic of the failure to control time, a reminder of how Mopu's customs cannot be reinscribed into a western mindset. In the film, as Ruth rings the bell her thrilled expression indicates her actions are not about keeping time; she seems to gain strength from it to challenge conformity and unleash her desires.

Both screen versions emphasize its precarious position, with the mini-series particularly highlighting the mountains and sky as a dramatic backdrop. Alfred Junge's designs for St. Faith created

an iconic precedent that inspired the mini-series (Fig. 6). The bell tower set built at Pinewood was actually only a few feet above the ground, as shown in stills of the filming of *Black Narcissus* which document the ingenuity of Pinewood's studio techniques (Fig. 7). Junge's drawings and their realization in the film create the impression that St. Faith is located high in the mountains, on a terrifying precipice. They used models for shots of the palace exterior, whereas in the mini-series this was a set built on an airfield in Bovingdon, UK. The bell tower was built in the studio and CGI was an additional technical means of creating a model of the palace. Particular shots were replicated in the mini-series (Fig. 8 from the film and Fig. 9 from the mini-series). The left side of each frame contrasts the bell tower's solidity with the cloudy mist and terrain on the right, far below in the valley. These shots are expressive of both texts' visualization of the narratives' central concerns with the nuns' loss of control as they experience a new, challenging environment.

The tower's location and symbolic resonances provided a perfect opportunity to showcase spectacular background color effects. Powell and Pressburger showed the bell tower's location early on in the film, but reserved the addition of dramatic, red-tinged skies until later, to accompany the escalating crisis with Sister Ruth. The mini-series however foregrounds the bell tower as a site of danger from the very beginning when an incident is briefly shown of a woman ending her life by jumping off the tower. This tragic event which prefigures Ruth's own fate, becomes indirectly associated with her mental instability when she appears to be haunted by the spirits of former occupants of the palace. At the beginning of the first episode a

Fig 6: Alfred Junge's sketch for bell tower set, *Black Narcissus* (Powell and Pressburger, 1947).

Fig 7: *Black Narcissus* (Powell and Pressburger, 1947). The bell tower set at Pinewood.

Fig 8: *Black Narcissus* (Powell and Pressburger, 1947). Sister Ruth (Kathleen Byron) ringing the bell.

Fig 9: *Black Narcissus* (Charlotte Bruus Christensen, 2020), sheer drop shot.

visually striking establishing shot shows a pink accented sky with the tower in silhouette (Fig. 10). This color design is returned to towards the end, when Ruth struggles with Clodagh. A long shot taken from an apparently aerial constructed perspective, develops an expressionistic connection between their physical conflict and the natural environment, as dawn breaks and with the pink and red heightened in an exaggerated manner (Fig. 11). Bruus Christensen used lighting and effects to create the vivid colors which accentuated the scene's dramatic style. Although she did not want the hard, high contrast look associated with digital cinematography, the technology was nevertheless key to constructing the effect. Special lenses were made in Hollywood to create a soft, diffused style which kept the colors rich and accentuated as the reds and pinks become more vivid (Bruus Christensen 2021). As noted in Baron's review of the mini-series, Bruus Christensen's color grading, aerial location shots, in-camera-effects and image manipulation "harnessed" Cardiff's vision while extending its sublime qualities with digital technology (Baron 2020).

This approach was highly appropriate for achieving the figural sensibility that links both screen versions while also keying in Godden's emphasis on the erosion of boundaries between past and present, place and space, exteriors and interiors. This figural erosion of differences between media exemplifies Rodowick's ideas about the easy reconstitution of images in the digital age that open them up even more to Lyotard's idea of the sensory "interworld" of the figural (Rodowick 2001, 39; Lyotard [1971] 2011, 4). As Pethő notes, such forms of intermedial dialogue allow us to appreciate how film as a medium is "in continuous change and interchange" as new forms of visual expression evolve while acknowledging the historical development of cinema

and its technologies (2011, 1–2). Cardiff's use of pink skies as dawn breaks, combined with low-light levels and silhouetted figures, is perfectly expressive of this liminal sensibility as seen in a shot of Clodagh as she keeps watch (Fig. 12). The red-tinged sky is used evocatively to exploit the color's dynamism. As Bucklow points out, the redness of the sky at dawn and dusk emphasizes the horizon as "a mythical and elusive place" and "an entirely porous and regularly crossed red line between night and day" (2016, 201–02). How it is used in both screen versions of *Black Narcissus* reflects the in-between, figural expression of the physical environment that is symbolic of both the waning of empire and dawn of the postcolonial era.

Designing the palace

The palace the nuns occupy was a former harem known as "The House of Women." Even though they re-name it "The Convent of St. Faith" the surviving interior wall paintings (which do not feature in the novel) show the women who lived there, and these function as a disturbing reminder to the nuns of their enduring influence; although physically absent they seem to haunt the building, affecting Sister Ruth (Aisling Franciosi) in particular in the mini-series. The opening shots of the first episode also include some warm-accented frames that show brief shots from the past of the women who lived there. These follow some colder, blue-accented shots that are used throughout as a contrast to earthier tones associated with interiors and in scenes such as when Mother Dorothea (Diana Rigg) writes to Clodagh from the safety of the Mother House in Darjeeling (Fig. 13). We see Clodagh (Gemma Arterton) reading the letter in much cooler tones which reflect Mopu's very different atmosphere in the winter (Fig. 14). This emphasis picks up the

Fig 10: *Black Narcissus* (Charlotte Bruus Christensen, 2020), pink and mauve accents.

Fig 11: *Black Narcissus* (Charlotte Bruus Christensen, 2020), struggle at the bell tower, pink accents.

Fig 12: *Black Narcissus* (Powell and Pressburger, 1947). Pink and dark accents.

Fig 13: *Black Narcissus* (Charlotte Bruus Christensen, 2020), Mother Dorothea (Diana Rigg) writing a letter.

Fig 14: *Black Narcissus* (Charlotte Bruus Christensen, 2020), Clodagh (Jemma Arterton) reading Mother Dorothea's letter.

novel's description of the site of the palace as "full of wind" and very cold, even to the extent that the icy wind penetrated through the floorboards (Godden [1939] 1994, 21). The palace is very much a hybrid space as the nuns attempt to reinscribe its purpose. As Stone observes, the nuns try to "erase the palace's original aesthetic charge" but "neither the building's provenance nor its iconography – clearly centered on the life of the body, celebrated by the religions of India – is ever fully masked" (2004, 277). A sense of the past lingers, as seen in the wall paintings that the nuns attempt to cover but can still be seen when the wind seeps through the windows, doors and floorboards, causing the drapes over the paintings to part. This collapsing of external forces and interior spaces symbolizes the erosion of boundaries as the wind forces its way into the rooms as if to emphasize the futility of trying to create a convent in an environment steeped in a history that could not have been more different. The incessant wind is both an aural and visual sensation, not literally seen but its impact on people and objects expresses the "excess" associated with the "unbound energy" with which the figural is associated (Rodowick 2001, 12).

Jack Cardiff used a non-naturalistic, expressive palette for *Black Narcissus*, created by chiaroscuro lighting, fog and color filters, and diffusing techniques. As a premier Technicolor cinematographer Cardiff used the opportunities the film presented to explore using color in reduced light conditions and thereby investing it with heightened expressive functions (Fig. 12). This is particularly evident in the "stalking" sequence towards the end of the film when Sister Ruth watches Sister Clodagh from afar. Jack Cardiff used a slight fog filter on the camera which produced a soft look. Pink/mauve and grey tones are highlighted as red/pink light shines

through the chapel's windows (Fig. 15). In the mini-series production designer Kave Quinn replicated the shape of the windows in the chapel in another example of homage to Powell and Pressburger's film when red light is similarly seen cascading through the chapel's windows (Fig. 16). This effect provides a stunning visual representation of how in spite of the nuns' attempt to replicate a western chapel in the palace they cannot keep out the extremities of the physical environment. Here color quite literally marks this in-between, invasive sensibility while advancing red's association with Sister Ruth's rebellion.

In both screen versions the wall paintings are key production design features. In Powell and Pressburger's film these are a little more highly colored and bold in design (Fig. 17). In the mini-series Kave Quinn was keen to show the paintings as a little faded, giving the impression that they had been there for a long time and were very much part of the building's fabric (Quinn 2021). The paintings are used to dramatize Sister Ruth's disturbing thoughts as she grows increasingly unsettled by Mopu's atmosphere. She appears fascinated by the erotic paintings she glimpses beneath the drapes the nuns have used to cover them (Fig. 18). As she goes towards the rooms formerly occupied by the women at the palace, she is faced by a large red curtain whose vivid appearance gestures to dangers ahead and the House of Women's enduring legacy (Fig. 19). It is as if the red curtain serves as a gateway to her psyche, while establishing an associative link with red. The curtain functions as a gestural transformation of the image, as it is swept away to access another dimension. The excess this produces functions as another example of the figural as it indicates a new space of temporal becoming.

Fig 15: *Black Narcissus* (Powell and Pressburger, 1947). Clodagh (Deborah Kerr) in chapel.

Fig 16: *Black Narcissus* (Charlotte Bruus Christensen, 2020), lighting effects in chapel.

Fig 17: Wall paintings in *Black Narcissus* (Powell and Pressburger, 1947).

Fig 18: Wall paintings and coverings in *Black Narcissus* (Charlotte Bruus Christensen, 2020).

Fig 19: Red curtain effect in *Black Narcissus* (Charlotte Bruus Christensen, 2020).

The paintings gesture to the palace's past, as well as to the text's re-working of Alfred Junge's designs. In Godden's novel it is Sister Clodagh who senses the women from the past: "The house had its own people [...] She seemed to hear the door opened in the night, and hear them coming, running, gauze hurriedly twisted round their bosoms, flowers seized and pinned in the hair, feet with anklets chiming, hastening to the door. She heard them come and she heard their voices, whispering as they gathered their finery, coming to the door to welcome Dilip Rai" (Godden [1939] 1994, 105) Even though in the mini-series Clodagh remembers her past in Ireland as she experiences Mopu's unsettling atmosphere, these particular hauntings associated with the "House of Women" are identified more with Ruth and are expressed through color and costumes.

Color and costume

As we have seen, both screen versions use red to dramatize Ruth's increasing psychological disturbance. Powell and Pressburger expressed this link strongly through Ruth's costume and make-up. Rather than wear a western-style red dress as Ruth does in the 1947 film when she sits opposite Clodagh and puts on red lipstick (Fig. 20), in the mini-series Ruth removes her habit and puts on a pale, pink-tinged dress she finds in a trunk and which resembles those worn by Hindu princesses, and the lighting works to de-emphasize its color (Fig. 21). In this choice of costume Kave Quinn was aiming for authenticity rather than the shock value of Byron's western-style red dress (Quinn 2021). The Hindu dress was also appropriate to embellish a storyline developed in the mini-series about Ruth becoming possessed by the spirit of the princess who died tragically in the scene referred to earlier, which is briefly shown at the beginning as a framing device and subsequently glimpsed as

intermittent allusions. Ruth quite literally represents a site of hybridity as the ghost of the princess appears to possess her. In the 1947 film Ruth is not given this perspective, or direct reference to being haunted by the spirits of the women who lived in the palace. Her choice of western dress is telling; she wants to appear like a modern woman and ordered the dress especially. Although in the mini-series Ruth finds the dress in the palace it nevertheless assumes an associative role with the princess who lived there. This prefigures Ruth's fate, becoming another figural site of correspondence between past and present, as well as highlighting the collapse of binary notions of East and West as Ruth's physical appearance is transformed. In this way the mini-series departs from the film in suggesting a very different kind of transformation for Ruth in which the figural excess associates her with the women of the palace rather than westernized femininity.

As Branigan has also noted, red is the central color which gathers momentum in Powell and Pressburger's film as expressive of jealousy, sexual passion, frustration and anger (Branigan 2019, 223–26). The viewer tracks this as red gradually assumes more and more importance in the scenes that show Ruth's escalating instability. Kathleen Byron's performance as Ruth remains one of the film's most compelling elements. Replicating its power to shock in 1947 would have been difficult, and in this respect the mini-series does not repeat the sequence in which Ruth confronts Clodagh, applying red lipstick shown in a mid-shot (Fig. 22) and then an extreme close-up to symbolize the extremity of her rebellion (Fig. 23). Instead, Ruth in the mini-series applies the lipstick in darker light, and she is on her own. Rather than wearing a burgundy red

Fig 20: *Black Narcissus* (Powell and Pressburger, 1947). Ruth (Kathleen Byron) putting on lipstick.

Fig 21: *Black Narcissus* (Charlotte Bruus Christensen, 2020), Ruth (Aisling Franciosi) in pink/red accented dress.

Fig 22: *Black Narcissus* (Powell and Pressburger, 1947). Ruth (Kathleen Byron) putting on lipstick medium shot.

Fig 23: *Black Narcissus* (Powell and Pressburger, 1947). Ruth (Kathleen Byron) putting on lipstick extreme close-up.

Fig 24: *Black Narcissus* (Powell and Pressburger, 1947). Ruth sees red.

dress that made Ruth's transformation so striking in the film, in the mini-series Ruth swaps her nun's habit for the pink garment referenced earlier and puts on sparkling jewels. She wears this ensemble when she goes to Mr Dean's cabin after running away from the palace. She proclaims her love for him, he refuses her advances, speaks of Clodagh and offers to take her back to the palace.

In Powell and Pressburger's film this scene also takes place in the intimate space of Mr Dean's cabin (in the novel he takes her to his office at the factory) and deploys a red-suffused screen to dramatize Ruth's anger at Mr Dean's mention of Clodagh, and her brief physical collapse (Fig. 24). This most striking effect of one color totally covering the screen conveys the extremity of her psychological disturbance. Hitchcock later used a similar effect in *Marnie* (1964) when a red screen functions as an expressionistic marker of subjectivity, an exteriorization of the character's inner psychological state (Belton 2013, 191), and Michael Powell repeated the technique in *Peeping Tom* (1960). It indicates a loss of control as the characters "fall into color" in the sense that David Batchelor identifies when describing color as "a drug, a loss of consciousness, a kind of blindness – at least for a moment. Colour requires, or results in, or perhaps just is, a loss of focus, of identity, of self" (2000, 51). Such cases highlight the power of color, how pure color suffusion appears to ultimately consume the person with whom it is associated: they "become" the color but have lost control. As Bucklow (2016, 8–9) notes, red "triggers different things in us at different times. Red is associated with anger, shame, fear, attraction and an extraordinary range of emotions." This mercurial character and easy slippage of meaning surrounding red dramatizes the in-between, hybrid characteristics

of both texts. Used in this extreme way red appears more prominently in the film of *Black Narcissus* although as we have seen the mini-series uses red and pink light effectively as Ruth's rebellion escalates. The use of the red curtain referenced earlier as functioning as a gateway into Ruth's state of mind can be thought of as another means of achieving a similar, if perhaps less visually arresting, effect. The extremity of the film's red suffusion which quite literally makes Mr Dean as seen from Ruth's viewpoint appear red, is perhaps an instance in which an effect so identified with the film was best not repeated. Red was not used by Godden to dramatize Ruth's dissent so in this instance the mini-series engages with the film's prominent use of red selectively, reserving its full power to shock for the bell tower struggle and as a natural feature of the locale. In this way a strategy of acknowledging the film, yet distancing itself from it in terms of emphasis, was deployed for a differently nuanced mobilization of red as a resonating color.

White habits, skin tones, color and race

Color is used in both the film and mini-series to suggest the contrasting worlds represented by the nuns and the people of Mopu. Jack Cardiff recalled that this required a striking yet not overdone approach: "The effects had to be exaggerated to a point almost of incredulity in order to plant the fact that the nuns are in constant psychological conflict with the wild unearthly beauty of their surroundings, yet the photography must never become vulgar and gaudy" (Huntley 1949, 113). As I have argued, the apparent gulf between these two worlds however becomes less distinct and more complex as the narrative develops and the nuns become increasingly affected by the impact of place and space. At the beginning of Godden's novel, the

nuns are however seen as "other" by the people who watch their arrival, as marked out by their distinctive religious habits. One man describes seeing them from afar as appearing "like a row of teeth," and he fears that they will "eat into the countryside and want to know everything and alter everything" (Godden [1939] 1994, 6). Yet both screen versions do not dress the nuns in starkly white habits. In the film the nuns' habits were a very specific off-white shade and their faces were framed very precisely by their wimples. Michael Powell recalled that giving the nuns off-white/oatmeal robes was "an inspiration" because they "gave a key to the picture to which all other colors had to conform" (Powell 1986, 584). In the mini-series this look was maintained rather than opting for white habits which would have looked over-sharp and white when filmed using digital cameras. The color and the specific shape of the wimple were broadly similar to ensure that lighting the nuns' faces was correct. As a costume, the habit was particularly important in emphasizing the contrast between Clodagh's present status and past life, as seen in flashbacks which show her flowing red hair (described in the novel as "honey and satin") and, particularly in the mini-series, her sexual desires. The habit also adds to the drama of Ruth's physical transformation which occurs at a key point in the narrative when events conspiring against the nuns begin to unfold. The idea that maintaining whiteness was difficult in Mopu is however indicated in the novel when Godden describes how "even their clothes seemed grey and discoloured against the whiteness of snow and cloud" (Godden [1939] 1994, 47), as if the place is actually re-inscribing whiteness as part of the environment rather than representing the nuns and their "civilizing" mission.

An emphasis on whiteness as a structuring color has other

connotations. As Sinclair Dootson has argued: "Film stocks, lighting practices, make-up technologies and laboratory methods are all components in a system conventionally engineered to privilege the correct rendition of whiteness at the cost of darker skin tones" (2020). Processes such as Technicolor used whiteness and Caucasian skin as the foundation of their approach to rendering flesh tones, but the company also exploited other hues and density to present Orientalist-influenced fictions which emphasized racial "otherness" through skin tones in films such as *Toll of the Sea* (Chester M. Franklin, 1922), *The Thief of Bagdad* (Ludwig Berger, Michael Powell and Tim Whelan, 1940) and *Arabian Nights* (John Rawlins, 1942). These tendencies form the background to the presentation of the nuns' facial tones in the 1947 film, an emphasis that found a basis in the novel in which Godden contrasted the nuns' skin with that of the locals and also of Mr Dean, who Father Roberts informs Clodagh has "gone native" (Godden [1939] 1994, 26). In another passage Ruth observes him and is struck by how "she was fragile and white beside him; his flesh was live and bronze," as if his attitudes and familiarity with Mopu's customs and people have actually changed his physical appearance (Godden [1939] 1994, 51). As pointed out by Richard Dyer, white women in "end of empire" fictions such as *Black Narcissus*, are often depicted as having very white skin as an indicator of purity, femininity and "civilizing" presence (Dyer 1997, 48–49). Jack Cardiff explained how to offset Technicolor's reddening tendency for lips the nuns wore flesh-colored lipstick which underscored their pale complexions that remained so for the entire film, as seen in the numerous close shots of Sister Clodagh [Fig. 25] (Bowyer 2003, 80). The little make-up worn by the nuns was "white and bloodless," an effect which made Ruth's lipstick scene all the more shocking

Fig 25: Sister Clodagh (Deborah Kerr), pale skin tones in *Black Narcissus* (Powell and Pressburger, 1947).

Fig 26: Sister Clodagh (Jemma Arterton), bathed in light and skin tones in *Black Narcissus* (Charlotte Bruus Christensen, 2020).

(Powell 1986, 584). In the mini-series however this emphasis on whiteness is not maintained. The nuns' faces are shot far more naturalistically, showing the reddening effect of the high altitude in their cheeks. The invasion of the pink light accentuates this tendency (Fig. 26). This creates less of a contrast with the skin tones of the local people which in the 1947 film supported the accentuation of racial difference. The nuns' red cheeks in the mini-series are a marker of how they are being affected by the climate, as if the atmosphere is quite literally seeping into their very beings, threatening to disturb the clear distinction between themselves and the local populace. Yet it is important to note that in the novel Godden described how the longer the nuns were at Mopu the impact of the climate on the nuns made their skin "more yellow against their wimples" (Godden [1939] 1994, 47).

In the mini-series ethnic actors were cast for character roles such as Kanchi (Dipika Kunwar) and Angu Ayah (Nila Aalia) that were played in the film by British actors Jean Simmons and May Hallatt. This achieved a more authentic look for the Hindu palace and local people that the nuns encounter. This contrasts with Hein Heckroth's more exaggerated colors for costumes worn in the film by characters such as Dilip Rai (Sabu, Fig. 27) and Kanchi (Fig. 28). These were designed, along with the "colourful background of the palace" as a deliberate contrast to the nuns' off-white habits (Huntley 1949, 110). In the mini-series Dilip Rai was played by Chaniel Kular and although his costumes are richly textured and similar to those worn by Sabu in the film, Kular's performance invests the character with greater maturity (Fig. 29). Angu Ayah, the local caretaker at the palace for many years, was played by English actress May Hallatt in 1947, whereas in mini-series Nila Aalia performed the character in a far less caricatured way, bringing out instead

her sagacity and showing her kitchen as containing many props that contributed to the impression of authenticity (Fig. 30). Such interventions are an important means of distancing the mini-series from what were conventional yet ideologically infused decisions about casting in 1947, which highlighted the spectacle of physical transformation through make-up of well-known white British actors such as Esmond Knight who played the General rather than hiring an ethnic actor to play the role. Drawing on Rodowick's discussion of the figural Mules (2018, 1) notes contemporary media's potential to "draw out pastness as a configuration of the text's potential futurity." In this way a different approach to casting reflected the mini-series' critique of ideological assumptions of the past while using that space to explore new directions. Rather than interpreting the film of *Black Narcissus* as a closed text the mini-series took the opportunity to use it as an expressive force for critical re-evaluation and the promotion of new formations. This is particularly timely in view of current re-evaluations of film history which are informed by debates on "decolonizing" film and screen studies.

Conclusion

In the closing pages of the novel Clodagh contemplates the palace after the nuns have left: "The house was empty now; the corridors and rooms empty and silent except for the creaking and straining in the wind" (Godden [1939] 1994, 223). Unable to leave a lasting legacy, the mission will perhaps only be remembered occasionally by the children and local people, if at all. The bell will no longer be rung at the tower and the wind will continue to seep into the palace's interiors. Yet as the novel and screen versions bring out, the nuns have been profoundly affected by Mopu with each text deploying

Fig 27: The Young General (Sabu) in *Black Narcissus* (Powell and Pressburger, 1947).

Fig 28: Kanchi (Jean Simmons) in *Black Narcissus* (Powell and Pressburger, 1947).

Fig 29: Dilip Rai (Chaneil Kular) in *Black Narcissus* (Charlotte Bruus Christensen, 2020).

Fig 30: Angu Ayah (Nila Aalia) in *Black Narcissus* (Charlotte Bruus Christensen, 2020).

recurrent aesthetic tropes which have generated insights inspired by the figural, hybridity and intertextuality. As “end of empire” texts, the versions of *Black Narcissus* can be related to postcolonial theories in which a series of hybrid, in-between spaces and cultural attitudes are explored. As we have seen, experimenting with color, lighting and diffusion techniques enabled boundaries between exterior and interior spaces, as well as between characters’ memories and their repressed desires, to be problematized. While the film was particularly strident in its assertion of red as a dominant affective register,

the mini-series used it selectively to present its own account of Godden’s characters, particularly Sister Ruth. Color was crucial in visualizing Godden’s text, using Technicolor and digital technologies to create the fictional world of the palace at Mopu, as well as to delineate characters, cultures and dramatic sequences. Exploring the comparative use of color in *Black Narcissus* and foregrounding its figural, intermedial dialogue between texts and media, enables us to appreciate the complexities of finding apposite visual expression for its many ineffable and “exaggerated” dimensions.

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