# War Pictures

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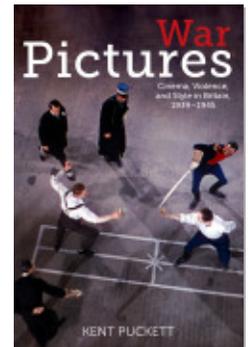
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One really has to rack one's brains to find anything to say about a British film. One wonders why. But that's the way it is. And there isn't even an exception to prove the rule.

> —Jean-Luc Godard, review of J. Lee Thompson's
> *Woman in a Dressing-Gown* (1958)

Before continuing with our diagnosis it becomes necessary to have a definition of style.

> —Cyril Connolly, *Enemies of Promise* (1938)

I first saw *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* (1943) years ago when a friend lent me an old, much-played VHS tape of its shortened and badly recut American release.[1] Even washed-out, wobbly, and stripped of its all-important flashback structure, the film struck me as odd, willful, beautiful, and—to use a word often associated with the British cinema—*eccentric.* The story of a bluff and romantic old soldier as he fought, lived, and found and lost love in three wars (the Boer War and World Wars I and II), *Colonel Blimp* seemed both whimsical and cynical, nostalgic and pragmatic, cosmopolitan and patriotic. Although unquestionably a war film, it also felt to me like something other, something more than a war film. As it turns out, that first, dimly remembered and mixed-up impression of the film was more or less right: like several of the films I discuss in this book, *Colonel Blimp* is a committed work of propaganda that nonetheless embraces a thematic and aesthetic complexity that would otherwise seem antithetical to propaganda.

C. A. Lejeune, a film critic for the *Observer* in 1943, wrote this about *Blimp*: "It is a handsome piece. It is frequently a moving piece. But what is it about?"[2] We might say provisionally that *Colonel Blimp* is about two very different things: while the film sometimes seems to suggest that Britain had to move beyond the old decencies, beyond the "sporting-club rules"

that underwrote earlier wars, at other times it seems to suggest that Britain was fighting in order to preserve exactly those decencies, exactly those old rules. It is in these conflicted terms that the film offers both a criticism and an unexpectedly sincere defense of Clive Candy, the film's out-of-touch old soldier and its titular "Blimp."[3] Essentially ambivalent, *Colonel Blimp* both accepts and deplores the all-in tactics of modern total war; and, because its ideological ambivalence is matched with a superbly excessive visual style—with bravura formal experiments in color, cutting, and composition—the film seems willfully to undermine even as it pursues its practical aims as wartime propaganda.

If *Colonel Blimp* is eccentric, it is at least decisively so (in the words of British film critic Raymond Durgnat, the film's director, Michael Powell, "reveres eccentricity"[4]). Like an uncertain satellite, the film follows an erratic, wavering, or hyperbolic path around its own official ideas about war and violence.[5] This is one way to picture its striking inability or unwillingness to be about any one thing, its inability or unwillingness to center in on a single argument or coherent theme. In charting its eccentric but nonetheless committed course in relation to war, *Colonel Blimp* manages to be propaganda while also resisting the ideological and aesthetic simplifications that a war-weary British public had come to expect from propaganda.[6] Committed and complex, the cinematic eccentricity of *Colonel Blimp* enabled Powell and Pressburger to have their bellicose cake and eat it, too.[7] It allowed them, in other words, to manage what was almost impossible about their war.

*War Pictures* argues for a kind of tactical cinematic eccentricity that allowed some important British wartime films to respond to political and social contradictions characteristic of the British home front between 1939 and 1945. Seen at one and the same time as a characteristic national virtue and as an implicit and maybe unruly kind of critique, the idea of eccentricity helped the British to navigate some political and ethical contradictions necessary to the experience of total mobilization and total war. In particular, the tactical ambivalence these British war films display allowed audiences to confront—if not necessarily to overcome—the disturbing, paradoxical, and maybe self-defeating possibility that a commitment to a total war against totalitarianism was perhaps also a commitment to totalitarianism, and that to fight a fascist you maybe had to become a fascist. In that case, we can look to the specific demands that total war made on a few British filmmakers in order to see and to consider something more general about aesthetic style and its relation to violence during and after World War II. In other words, looking at the stylistic eccentricity of British war cinema will both reveal some local paradoxes that shaped British thinking about combat, commit-

ment, and the home front during World War II and lend us a broader sense of how aesthetic objects can stand as an answer to and expression of history and its violence.

## The Concept of Cinematic Eccentricity

Written between the wars, Edith Sitwell's *English Eccentrics* casts eccentricity as a distinctively English expression of "attitude, rigidity, protest, or explanation."[8] "Any dumb but pregnant comment on life, any criticism of the world's arrangement, if expressed by only one gesture, and that of sufficient contortion, becomes eccentricity."[9] For Sitwell, eccentricity happens when a personal or attitudinal difference is strategically embraced, sharpened, and turned into a gesture of tacit defiance. Sitwell's interwar sense of eccentricity as an essential, exaggerated, and fully lived "criticism of the world's arrangement" thus recalls and intensifies John Stuart Mill's more mild observations about the eccentricities of the English in *On Liberty* (1859): "That so few now dare to be eccentric, marks the chief danger of the time."[10] Although most of Mill's great work is dedicated to identifying shared discursive norms that could best preserve individual liberties within a whole national community, he carves out a counterintuitive but necessary place for the eccentric, for the person whose value derives from his or her essential inability to conform to shared discursive norms: "Precisely because the tyranny of opinion is such as to make eccentricity a reproach, it is desirable, in order to break through that tyranny, that people should be eccentric."[11] More than a quirk of character, eccentricity was for Mill and later for Sitwell a kind of immanent critique, a lived rejoinder to what both understood as an increasingly homogenous mass culture: "Eccentricity," according to Mill, "has always abounded when and where strength of character has abounded; and the amount of eccentricity in a society has generally been proportional to the amount of genius, mental vigour, and moral courage which it contained."[12] Eccentricity is thus a practical answer to what, following Sitwell, we might call the melancholy of the given: "we may seek in our dust-heap for some rigid, and even splendid, attitude of Death, for some exaggeration of the attitudes common to Life."[13] Published in 1933, *English Eccentrics* stands as an odd and oddly prescient argument against totalization, and, as we will see, echoes of her anxious feel for the endangered but necessary eccentricity of the English returned again and again as the British home front tried to think its way through the putative totality of total war.[14]

Eccentricity understood as a form of tacit resistance brings to mind another close, contemporary, but differently classed concept to mind: a *vulgarity* that is also sometimes associated with the British cinema. For

instance, after saying that there was nothing to say about British films, Jean-Luc Godard goes on nonetheless to say something harsh about all that was wrong with them: "From beginning to end [*Woman in a Dressing-Gown*] is an incredible debauch of camera movements as complex as they are silly and meaningless. . . . May the English lose the Middle East soon if the loss of their political power could restore their sense of beauty, if not efficiency."[15] For Godard the provincial clumsiness of the British cinema is an effect of its pushing technical virtuosity toward and past a limit. This resistance to too much technique recalls the critic Jean Queval's earlier complaint that the British cinema's "most consecrated director," David Lean, "seems to be only interested in those exceptional subject matters that flatter the super-technician."[16] Similarly, Durgnat observes that, to some, Michael Powell "seemed a stylist and a rhetorician, camouflaging an absence of idea by a weakness for the grandiose, out-of-context effect"; he was, in other words, "an 'eccentric technician.'"[17] Writing about *Brief Encounter*, Richard Dyer acknowledges, "many people find the whole film too deliberate, too crafted."[18] The US critic Dwight Macdonald struck a related note when he asserted that "the British . . . douse their movies with close-ups the way people with defective taste buds use ketchup."[19] For each of these critics, British cinematic virtuosity threatens to fall into vulgarity when it tries too hard and goes too far, when it fails to subordinate the social and material and thus partial presence of filmmaking-as-technique to the finished film as a whole. "It is," writes the art historian T. J. Clark, "an advantage of the term 'vulgar'. . . that discursively it points two ways: to the object itself, to some abjectness or absurdity in its very make-up (some tell-tale blemish, some atrociously visual quality which the object will never stop betraying however hard it tries); and to the object's existence in a particular social world, for a set of tastes and styles of individuality which have still to be defined, but are somewhere there, in the world even before it is deployed."[20] For Clark, vulgarity is not only a flaw but also a form of protest because, like Sitwell's eccentricity, it reveals limits immanent to "a particular social world."[21]

We could say, then, that eccentricity and vulgarity are what happens when style reaches a limit, a limit that Paul Valéry similarly approached when he cast style as an aesthetic effort that, as it reaches hopelessly toward universality, must instead stop just short of "extravagance and eccentricity": "A personality . . . acquires the interest of an original, of a unique specimen which stands out from among the collection of similar beings that is the human race; it becomes a kind of *deviation toward the ideal* [emphasis mine]."[22] Roland Barthes, drawing on Valéry, similarly sees style as a "crude" encounter between the ideal and the concrete: "Whatever its sophistication,

style has always something crude about it: it is a form with no clear desti-
nation, the product of a thrust, not an intention, and, as it were, a vertical
and lonely dimension of thought . . . it is the writer's 'thing,' his glory and
his prison, it is his solitude."[23] Closer to home, Durgnat maintains: "Personal
style is the content which the artist contributes, intuitively, to every subject
with which he deals. Inevitably, it is frequently the deepest, the determinant
part of the content."[24] For Durgnat as for Clark, personal style is that "which
the object will never stop betraying however hard it tries"; it is that which is
the truth of a work's content even though it is not properly of that content.
Because eccentricity and vulgarity name aspects of style that cannot be
willed or unwilled, because they represent style's thing, they can perhaps
reveal a potential for political resistance latent in all style.

Style, vulgarity, eccentricity: a film like *Colonel Blimp* is, it seems to
me, unthinkable without them. Although undoubtedly a film of wartime,
which is to say a film that emerges from and responds to an especially
totalizing social situation, *Colonel Blimp* is also a film whose style as style
seems somehow at odds with that situation. At the same time that the film
explicitly supports measures necessary to total war, it seems also to reject
the concept of totality upon which total war depends. Consider, for ex-
ample, its persistent but apparently unmotivated use of the color red, a
color that cuts through and against particular shots with an almost feral
insistence. There is the red that punctuates the humid, bustling interior of
Cafe Hohenzollern when Candy visits Berlin in 1902; the red of the crosses
that mark exhausted nurses' uniforms as they rest in a repurposed French
church during World War I; the red that illuminates Deborah Kerr's face as
she waits for a traffic light to shift in the midst of World War II's blacked-out
London. Because these irruptions of red feel unmotivated and thus related
more to one another than to any aspect of the film's narrative, they suggest
an aleatory order of significance that works independently of narrative or
plot or natural causality.[25] The red of one war doesn't just recall or remind
us of the red of another; it is, rather, exactly the same red, a fact that both
calls attention to the film's rich and deliberate use of Technicolor and turns
film style into a figure for the mysterious and eternal recurrence of war, vio-
lence, and love. The simple but profound stylistic repetition of the color red
across three wars thus recalls the trivial Proustian miracle that occurs when
Marcel realizes that the taste of a cookie dipped in tea is exactly what it was
decades before; insofar as the taste is a straightforward because perfectly
full repetition, it cuts across history making different, counterintuitive, and
critical modes of analysis possible. Red works both as an aesthetic or affec-
tive intensity to be enjoyed for its own sake and as a tacit and embodied

argument against narrative's or, indeed, history's capacity to explain why some feelings, images, or events seem inevitably to recur. Because the red is an assertion of a director's will, it is an element of style; because it is a little garish, it is perhaps vulgar; and, because it is a detail that refuses to attend to the film's putative political, thematic, or narrative center, it is richly and technically eccentric.

Throughout *War Pictures*, I'll return to instances of stylistic or technical eccentricity that put different kinds of pressure on the whole and, as it were, official work of these films. I'm interested, in other words, in how their objects, ideas, images, and figures can appear as concentrated moments of ambivalence, as points of instability—Jacques Lacan calls them "anamorphic ghosts"—that serve as hinges between different and sometimes opposed ways of looking at the world and at war.[26] Light that seems impossibly to stream across the threshold of a flashback in David Lean's *Brief Encounter*; a stray allusion—to an old song, a famous painting, or to Donald Duck—that means two radically different things in two equally available historical contexts; a cut (or, in *Colonel Blimp*, the conspicuous absence of a cut) that calls attention to disparate but equally viable systems of aesthetic value; contrapuntal casting decisions that overload the intrinsic narrative significance of a character with the excessive and extrinsic charisma of the character actor; willful anachronisms—in Laurence Olivier, Lean, and, later, Derek Jarman—that appear to force the present into rough, inconclusive contact with the past.

I take these moments of conceptual ambivalence or impaction as instances of what Antoine de Baecque has recently called "cinematographic forms of history"; they are moments that index "the irruption of history" into the flow of an official discourse that would have us rather forget the past: "A few filmmakers have tried to capture this sense of irruption, or at least have striven, through a particular *mise-en-scène*, to give form to history, whether the history of the past or the history unfolding before their eyes."[27] More recently, D. A. Miller has pointed to the "hidden pictures" that seem to interrupt Alfred Hitchcock's films, to instances "in which a strongly narrativized image has been fashioned to conceal something that—if ever seen—would not enhance its coherence, but explode it."[28] The films I look at are marked with these images, objects, "moments of irruption," and "hidden pictures," with forms that push style to and past a limit in order to produce a tactical eccentricity specific to the political pressures of wartime. Indeed, as I argue in relation to David Lean's *Brief Encounter* (see chapter 3), these moments of cinematic eccentricity not only call attention to the fraught or contradictory conditions particular to World War II but also trouble the

very idea of a war as a discrete, bound, or narratable period; insofar as they upset ordinary or "natural" cinematic temporality, they help us also to see how war's violence can run excessively past or over war's official beginnings and ends, blurring the conceptual and narrative lines that would allow us to separate times of peace from times of war.[29]

Casting cinematic eccentricity in these terms will remind some readers of Kristin Thompson's classic essay on "the concept of cinematic excess" in which she states: "Style is the use of repeated techniques which become *characteristic* of the work; these techniques are foregrounded so that the spectator will notice them and create connections between their individual uses. Excess does not equal style, but the two are closely linked because they both involve the material aspects of the film. Excess forms no specific patterns which we could say are characteristic of the work. But the formal organization provided by style does not exhaust the material of the filmic techniques, and a spectator's attention to style might well lead to a noticing of excess as well."[30] In other words, if style characterizes a work, excess or eccentricity push that character toward and maybe past a limit, toward the raw and indigestible condition of the film's or the image's thing. Just as Sitwell and Clark respectively saw eccentricity and vulgarity as inchoate attitudes of protest against the melancholy homogeneity of a social given—the monotony of the "dust-heap"—so does Thompson see cinematic excess both as an expression of the essential materiality of film and as an incomplete relation that exists between individual details and the ostensibly homogenous or totalizing systems they both rely on and resist. She quotes Stephen Heath: "Homogeneity is haunted by the material practice it represses and the tropes of that repression, the forms of continuity, provoke within the texture of the film the figures—the edging, the margin—of the loss by which it moves: permanent battle for the resolution of that loss on which, however, it structurally depends, mediation between image and discourse, narrative can never contain the whole film which permanently exceeds its fictions."[31]

In *Colonel Blimp* certain aspects of the film—its regular and unmotivated use of the color red, the larger-than-life fact of Clive Candy's smooth and sweating head, the oddly balletic energy of the motorcyclists racing through its opening scene—are excessive because they appear to resist resolution into a larger thematic or narrative unity, because they gesture with eccentric or vulgar insistence toward modes of being that will not be made to make sense. These impacted, difficult, or aberrant instances of cinematic style assert themselves against the thematic, aesthetic, or political unities that would seem otherwise to organize the film; they remain distinct, com-

pelling, incommensurate, and indigestible despite otherwise reasonable demands of taste, plot, or ideology. We might say that part of what made it so hard to see in 1943 what *Colonel Blimp* was about was exactly its excessive, eccentric, and maybe vulgar insistence on the self-evident force and value of film style, its unwillingness or inability to subordinate aesthetic character to the demands of one or another social, political, or narrative system.

## A People's War

Of course, suggesting that a film as big and accomplished as *Colonel Blimp* is marked with moments of cinematic excess will seem uncontroversial if not passé.[32] However, what remains striking and specific about the aesthetic ambition of *Colonel Blimp* is how its particular form of excess works within an avowed work of political propaganda made during a time of total mobilization. For, while it is more or less obvious to our post-poststructuralist sensibilities that bodies, affects, or things will never be entirely absorbed within one or another social, aesthetic, or narrative totality, something else must be at stake when that excess appears in a propaganda film made self-consciously in the midst of what was taken almost universally as a total and thus totalizing war. Powell and Pressburger were indeed explicit about their film's tactical relation to the putative totality of total war: "Englishmen," they wrote in a memo prepared for Brendan Bracken's Ministry of Information, "are by nature conservative, insular, unsuspicious, believers in good sportsmanship and anxious to believe the best of other people. These attractive virtues, which are, we hope, unchanging, can become absolute vices unless allied to a realistic acceptance of things as they are, in modern Europe and in Total War."[33] They thus sold their film as a film about total war and, more to the point, about the need to put British audiences in a position clearly and simply to see and thus to accept "things as they are" in total war. However, as I discuss at length in chapter 1, the ministry wasn't convinced and it ultimately withheld its support from Powell and Pressburger's film, suggesting in an internal memorandum that, instead of clarifying the nature and stakes of total war, the film rather confused matters: its "overcomplication of ideas" was "dangerous."[34]

Confusing instead of clarifying, yes, but maybe not their fault. As Paul K. Saint-Amour has recently pointed out, "total war" has always been maybe too fuzzy, maybe too capacious a concept to be all that useful as either a military or a historical term of art:[35]

> [T]he range of meanings clustered under the expression "total war" can be profoundly at odds with one another. It makes a great difference whether you

ascribe the targeting of civilians to the rise of certain weapons technologies, to an exterminatory war of ideas, or to the emergence of a certain kind of state or military-industrial complex. Scholars who write of total war must choose between incompatible options—between viewing it, for instance, as an expanded conflict (e.g., from fronts to areas) versus an intensified one (e.g., from defeating to eliminating an enemy). Or they must content themselves with all-of-the-above arguments. As a concept, total war has become at once so comprehensive and so self-contradictory that even those who remain committed to it must repeatedly justify their use of the term.[36]

Seen in these terms, total war is maybe less a coherent and thus representable material or historical situation than an academic or imaginative problem, an idea that indexes interpretive contradictions, anxieties, and aspirations that follow from the fraught and bewildering experience of war pursued on a global scale.[37] "If," as Jan Mieszkowski suggests, "total war was explicitly understood as an ideal that might never be realized in practice, this has not prevented several generations of historians from debating which previous wars . . . are most genuinely deserving of the title, suggesting that another cultural 'achievement' of the First World War was the way in which it pitted theoretical and historical analyses of modern militarism against one another, a rift that has yet to be resolved."[38]

   That said: if it is hard, given the fundamental looseness of the term, to say why or how one war was at last more total than another, it is nonetheless clear that total war was an enormously powerful, specific, and starkly immediate *idea* for those living through World War II—a war that did, after all, turn on the way it practically undermined conceptual differences between soldier and civilian; in other words, turn on "the central significance of civilians in the conflict, the indispensable roles that they played in the war's outcome, as well as the vulnerabilities that they shared, as a direct consequence, with the soldiers."[39] Kristine A. Miller writes: "The Blitzkrieg on the United Kingdom during World War II was the most direct attack on civilians in British history. As London and other British cities came under siege beginning in September 1940, the common cause of national defense seemed to reduce distance between soldiers and civilians, to resolve differences between men and women, and to repair divisions between leisured and working classes."[40] Thanks, then, to what Eric Hobsbawm calls "the strange democratization of war," millions of people between 1939 and 1945 had to think about the reach and consequence of their everyday experience in the terrifying, leveling, and nonetheless highly abstract terms of total war.[41] How else were you to think of a war that seemed to touch everyone

and everything? Put differently, whatever its status as material reality or logistical fact, the *concept* of total war allowed ordinary people to understand or to imagine or to feel their local experience as meaningfully related to the war as a whole: "What was happening," writes Elizabeth Bowen, "was out of all proportion to our faculties of knowing, thinking and checking up."[42] This is what Mieszkowski takes as total war's specifically conceptual necessity: war becomes "total only once it had to be imagined as such."[43]

It was thus the idea of total war that allowed the British to experience and to cast their war as a "People's War" or as an everyday, everyone kind of epic. Drawing on Hegel's lectures on fine art, Saint-Amour writes:

> [B]oth national holism and its signature literary genre are galvanized by war: "conflict in a state of war [is, writes Hegel,] the situation most suited to epic. For in war it is precisely the whole nation which is set in motion and which experiences a fresh stimulus and activity in its entire circumstances, because here the whole has an inducement to answer for itself." A hundred years before the expression's first use, something like total war is presupposed in Hegel's characterization of epic: a nation wholly animated by war produces epic accounts of itself as an integrated, self-identical, self-fulfilling totality.[44]

Thinking about life on the blitzed home front as a kind of all-in, quotidian, kitchen-sink epic depended on taking even the dullest details of ordinary life as a necessary part of a whole war effort. Going to work, saving money, spending money, caring for family, eating, not eating, planting a garden, turning lights off or on, boiling just enough water for tea: in the avowed terms of total war, these behaviors can be understood merely, if perversely, as various means to a single strategic end. Everything counted; every part had its role to play in the whole. And indeed, once one accepted the fully motivated totality of total war, one had more or less to reject the very idea of excess; in a total war, there is simply no such thing. As Barthes puts it in a different context: "Even were a detail to appear irretrievably insignificant, resistant to all functionality, it would nonetheless end up with precisely the meaning of absurdity or uselessness: everything has a meaning, or nothing has."[45] Taken to its logical limit, the concept of total war reveals the experience of excess as either impossible or unpatriotic.

This is, perhaps, why so much domestic propaganda focused on the idea of reducing or repurposing waste; in addition to making the most of resources, campaigns against the idea of everyday waste allowed ordinary people to affirm the conceptual totality of war again and again and again.[46] Cleaning one's plate, flipping a switch, drinking tea, going to the

cinema thus became personal, daily, and ritual ways in which to accede in both practice and belief to the more or less unimaginable scale of a truly global mechanized war. Taken together, these minor commitments add up to what Adam Piette calls "the war in the mind," to an idea about totality that underwrote and sometimes even supplanted the real experience of war.[47] In *Tense Future* Saint-Amour goes on to discuss a number of "texts of interwar modernism"—including *Ulysses* and *Parade's End*—that rely on an "encyclopedic" style to undermine the epic totality of total war: "Set beside such an epic premise, the fragmentariness and internal fissuring of long modernist fictions begin to look less like the flaws through which a longed-for totality seeped away and more like a critical refusal of epic's all-too-vital political logic. These distended interwar works, that is, did not decline from epic but simply declined it, refusing to embrace its renewed contemporaneity."[48] The films I consider also take up something like this act of "critical refusal," this immanent, formal rejection of the idea of totality. Insofar as they rely on impacted moments of stylistic excess or eccentricity, they quietly refuse the concept of totality, calling attention to the particular and the uncounted as political, ethical, and aesthetic values. Cinematic eccentricity allowed some wartime filmmakers to imagine or to embody experiences or beliefs that might exceed or escape the otherwise restricted economy of total war.

That is, however, only part of the story. For, if the British were in fact encouraged to understand their war as epic, as whole, as total, they were also asked explicitly to see it as a war for the preservation of more or less unassimilable particulars. If, in other words, eccentricity could stand as a tacit argument against totality, it was also often imagined as exactly and paradoxically that which the British were fighting for. Although World War II was a total war, it was nonetheless cast again and again as a defense of national, regional, and even personal idiosyncrasy. As we will see, British propagandists such as J. B. Priestley sometimes struggled to present World War II as a distinctively and, perhaps, oxymoronically "English epic," as, in other words, a very big war fought to protect a democratic jumble of very small but very precious things: for Priestley, the war was being fought for little people, for little "ham-and-egg teas," and for the "fussy little steamers" at Dunkirk.[49] Angus Calder writes: "If Churchill evoked Henry V and Thomas Babbington Macaulay, Priestley's heroes were Falstaff and Sam Weller. He depicted the 'little man,' who preserved the spirit of English comedy within himself."[50] In other words, the British were forced to find ways to preserve ideologically the little or the particular or the eccentric as a civilizational value while also accepting the large, totalizing terms of total mobilization;

they had to strain somehow to see particularity as a reason to wage a total war against totalitarianism.

### This Sceptered Isle

This is why eccentricity seems to me so useful a concept with which to capture the British cinema's complex wartime emphasis on style. Although eccentricity had long been understood as an especially English national value, it took on a special significance immediately before and during the war.[51] Reviewing Sitwell's volume in 1933, E. M. Forster agreed, noting anxiously: "[E]ccentricity ranks as a national asset, and . . . so long as it is respected there is some hope that our country will not go mad as a whole. Madness, today, is becoming a State-monopoly, beneath whose death-dealing wings the standardized individuals march to their doom."[52] Sir Ernest Barker, in a 1947 volume on *The Character of England*, defined eccentricity as an expression of the essentially heterogeneous disposition of English, "may we say, less subtly, that most of us are mixtures, unreconciled mixtures, and that elements of freakishness, disconcertingly mixed with the element of form, can make disconcerting appearance?"[53] Cyril Connolly's 1938 *Enemies of Promise*, a book that appeared in the midst of the Munich crisis, takes pains both to defend and to adapt what Connolly identifies as "the Mandarin style," an "eccentric, unpractical, untidy" but perfectly civilized mode that he wanted to preserve not as an alternative to war but rather as a motivated and tellingly, if inadvertently, imperial justification for war: "Civilization—the world of affection and reason and freedom and justice—is a luxury which must be fought for, as dangerous to possess as an oil-field or an unlucky diamond."[54] In each of these cases and, indeed, in much of the period's propaganda, English eccentricity is cast not only as a specific and defining national quality but also as an endangered national value. "Under threat of extinction," writes Karen Schneider, "the British way of life cried out for preservation, warts and all."[55] Seen thus in relation to both Britain's war with totalitarianism and its long transition from "empire to welfare state," eccentricity thus begins to emerge as an index of a larger cultural outlook that Jed Esty refers to as "becoming minor": "If there was an Anglocentric and anthropological turn among intellectuals bent on remaking England into a knowable community, it was a largely discursive event, even a fantasy. But the nature of that Anglocentrism remains important, not only because we need to understand and remember the baleful effects of nativism, but also because the reconsolidation of Englishness seems so intertwined with the broadening definition of culture in the period."[56]

   This effort to become minor is visible in repeated and imprecise wartime

efforts to present Britain not as a vast, morally compromised, and culturally homogenizing global empire but rather as a confined, Shakespearean, and "scepter'd isle," as, in other words, the little island home of a rugged, honest, and idiosyncratic people. It is in these terms that the war could be imagined as "a defense," writes Marina Mackay, "of the small and particular against the undemocratically homogenizing."[57] For Adam Piette, "Fear of invasion transformed Britain in the minds of its subjects into a tiny island."[58] Victoria Stewart writes, "Eccentricity often goes alongside ingenuity, an ability to think beyond existing paradigms and, implicitly, in a Second World War context, to counter what was perceived as the stereotypically German approach."[59] Jeremy Havardi argues that eccentricity is one of the myths informing what we think we "know" about the English and their war: "they prefer eccentricity, improvisation, guile and ingenuity to mechanized efficiency."[60] C. P. Snow, reflecting on "the tightness" and "extreme homogeneity" of British officialdom during the war, observes: "It is perfectly true that the English unconsciously adopt all sorts of devices for making their population, genuinely small by world standards, seem a good deal smaller than it really is."[61] And we might think again of Priestly's celebration of the paradoxically epic littleness of the civilian ships that brought so many British troops back from Dunkirk: "But here at Dunkirk is another English epic. And to my mind what was most characteristically English about it—so typical of us, so absurd and yet so grand and gallant that you hardly know whether to laugh or to cry when you read about them—was the part played in the difficult and dangerous embarkation—not by the warships, magnificent though they were—but by the little pleasure-steamers."[62] We can also see this effort at work in a number of propaganda films that saw the large experience of war expressed in the little lives of ordinary, embodied, funny, sometimes sad, socially specific, and entirely eccentric characters, films like *The Lion Has Wings* (1939), *In Which We Serve* (1942), *A Canterbury Tale* (1944), and *The Volunteer* (1944). In each case, a longstanding association between England and eccentricity was used to make Britain's opposition to totalitarianism into a matter of not only political circumstance but also national character in the deepest sense; understood—however factitiously—as minor, idiosyncratic, and little, Britain could position itself as not only a strategic but also an ethical and existential antithesis to the totalitarian ethos of Hitler's Germany.[63]

## This Is England

Some of the best examples of this opposition between democratic particularity and totalitarian homogeneity appear in several films that Humphrey

Jennings made for the Crown Film Unit during the war; films such as *London Can Take It!* (1940), *Words for Battle* (1941), *Listen to Britain* (1942), and *Fires Were Started* (1943) use cinematic technique (montage in particular) to imagine Britain as an internally differentiated and democratic totality, as, in other words, a collection of distinct and idiosyncratic fragments, images, and perspectives that both added up to and yet managed nonetheless to exceed a shared social whole. Jennings, himself a notable eccentric, pursued his long commitment to the idea of Britain as an internally differentiated and nontotalitarian whole in his early association with I. A. Richards and William Empson at Cambridge, in his work with the British Surrealist Group in the mid-thirties, in *Pandemonium*, his unfinished "imaginative history" of the Industrial Revolution, as well as in the war films he made under what we might call the weak influence of John Grierson.[64] In each case, Jennings uses techniques of collage, montage, conceptual juxtaposition, and the chance encounter in order to capture the feel of particulars that both add up to and critically exceed a particular aesthetic, social, or historical whole.[65] If, however, the effort to think between the part and the national whole runs through all his work, its most developed and influential expression appears in a handful of wartime films that directly inspired the filmmakers I look at in in this book. Consider, for example, *London Can Take It!* The film, which Jennings made with Harry Watt, is built out of shots of ordinary people going to work, navigating a partially ruined city, and waiting for nightfall and the inevitable reappearance of bombers during the London Blitz. Individual images—of people walking, sleeping, shopping, talking, stepping through a shattered storefront, clearing away rubble—produce a sense not only of London's ability to "take it" but also of its sheer democratic variety. Jennings's London is full, chaotic, tense, funny, and open; and, although it seems to teeter on the verge of chaos, its parts—like the images that add up to the whole of Jennings's film—somehow add up without losing their individual character.[66]

Charles Madge, who was, with Jennings, one of the founders of Mass Observation, wrote: "I think it may help to understand [Jennings] if one reconsiders what he meant by 'the image.' It was a meaning personal to himself and bound up with his early researches into poetry and painting. His use of 'image' is not far off from the way it is used in psychology, in literary criticism and in surrealist theory, but it is not quite identical with any of these. It has resemblances to the psychological concept of the gestalt: 'the combination of many effects, each utterly insensible alone, into one sum of fine effect.'"[67] Crucially, this juxtaposition of images or fragments is almost entirely specific to the cinema: "Jennings—amongst a host of

London can take it!

other avant-garde film makers—recognized how technical advances in film could be used to expand the image space and the promise of modernity to the masses: the possibility of combining collective activity with individual agency into free identity."[68] Seen in these terms, Jennings's films are maybe the best because the richest expression of what we might think of as an *official eccentricity*, of minorness strategically cast as an ideological alternative to totalitarianism; they are instances of eccentricity—a free identity—put to work for the collective activity of national propaganda.[69] Jennings made the difference between his local, regionally specific, and recalcitrant propaganda and that of the Nazis explicit: "In a BBC broadcast, Jennings told listeners that [his film] *The Silent Village* portrayed 'the clash of two types of culture,' what he called 'this new-fangled, loudspeaker, blaring culture invented by Dr. Goebbels' against 'the ancient, Welsh, liberty-loving culture which has been going on in those valleys way, way back into the days of King Arthur.'"[70]

However, if imagining England as an honest, recalcitrant, and minor island nation is an example of official eccentricity at work, we can also see traces of a more difficult, more anarchic and *unofficial eccentricity* in British war culture, modes of aesthetic and political excess that, while they may have worked against totalitarianism, also called attention to compromises, obfuscations, and modes of violence that the British had both to embrace and to disavow in the service of total mobilization. Adam Piette's *Imagination at War* offers one undeniable account of how unofficial, private experi-

ences threatened official, public accounts of the war: "These public stories turn out to be hopelessly charged with broken, complex and dark feeling once read at the raw level the mind living through them."[71] We can see this unruly political attitude in George Orwell's observation that "everything in our age conspires to turn the writer, and every other kind of artist as well, into a minor official, working on themes handed to him from above and never telling what seems to him the whole of the truth."[72] This official bad faith was for Orwell most evident in the hard truth of wartime Britain's willingness to look away from the "vaster injustice" of empire: "[H]ow can we 'fight Fascism' except by bolstering up a far vaster injustice? For of course it *is* vaster. What we always forget is that the overwhelming bulk of the British proletariat does not live in Britain, but in Asia and Africa. . . . This is the system which we all live on and which we denounce when there seems to be no danger of its being altered. Of late, however, it has become the first duty of a 'good anti-Fascist' to lie about it and help to keep it in being."[73] A similarly unofficial take on the official demands that war made on the mind appears in E. M. Forster's celebration of Milton's *Areopagitica* as a prescient and intransigent argument against wartime censorship: "We are willing enough to praise freedom when she is safely tucked away in the past and cannot be a nuisance. In the present, amidst dangers whose outcome we cannot foresee, we get nervous about her, and admit censorship."[74] It is there as well in the comic despair of Evelyn Waugh's *Put Out More Flags*: "War in the air, war of attrition, tank war, war of nerves, war of propaganda, war of defense in depth, war of movement, people's war, total war, indivisible war, war infinite, war incomprehensible, war of essence without accidents or attributes, metaphysical war, war in time-space, war eternal . . . all war is nonsense, thought Ambrose."[75] And, indeed, something like this unofficial energy at work in the unpretentious but no less difficult surrealism that cuts through and threatens to exceed the official war aims of Jennings's films, in cuts and combinations that accentuate and even exaggerate contradictions immanent to the concept of total mobilization.

This dark, unruly current is also there in Olivier's otherwise obviously patriotic *Henry V*. As I argue in chapter 2, although the film is rightly remembered as one of the critical triumphs of wartime propaganda, Olivier's decision to foreground the recalcitrant and minor presence of both Falstaff and Ancient Pistol stands as a quiet and maybe inchoate rebuke to any and all forms of authority, even Merry England's. In the case of Falstaff, Olivier's decision to begin his film with an image of a dying, diminished Falstaff—a scene that appears nowhere in Shakespeare—forces us to consider what energies had to be lost in order at last to secure the marital

glory of Henry, Agincourt, and, perhaps, Churchill himself. Put differently, insofar as Falstaff is one of Shakespeare's great figures of wit, pleasure, and life, Olivier's startling invention of Falstaff's death scene uses a moment of cinematic excess in order to mourn excess, to acknowledge the degree to which an English total war must threaten or sacrifice values that had seemed most English. In the case of Pistol, Olivier's tacit suggestion is even more difficult; that is, although Pistol's continued role in both the play and the film offers a sort of weak compensation for Falstaff's disappearance earlier in the Henriad, his lingering, sloppy appearance at the end of Olivier's film suggests something sour about the divergent ends of war. For, while the battle was won, Pistol—as played by Robert Newton, a great and wasted actor—looks at last directly into the camera, promising, "To England will I steal, and there I'll steal." Running quite against Henry's image of an ideologically consistent "band of brothers," Pistol instead evokes the image of a veteran ruined by war, a figure whose experience bars him from a community for which he had fought. In these terms, the hard eccentricity of Ancient Pistol represents the degree to which the dilemma of total war and the creep of its necessary totalitarianism threatened to unleash fundamentally antisocial forces during and after the war. Seen in light of increasingly pronounced home front anxieties about what years of war would have done to British soldiers about to come home, the English eccentric stands less as a workable part of a propaganda program and more as a fundamental and lingering rebuke to the very idea of a postwar society to come.

## It Takes a Fascist . . .

Participants returned to this unofficial, critical sense of moral compromise or contradiction again and again during the war, often enacting or referring explicitly to what we might call the double bind of total war, the real and practical imperative to fight and to destroy totalitarianism whatever the cost. "Total war against a totalitarian state had," writes Angus Calder, "a logic of its own, a logic, one might say, of the *Catch-22* variety, which overrode qualms."[76] This is why Churchill made sure (after Chamberlain, Norway, and the fall of France) to cast the war as a civilizational struggle: "Here in this strong City of Refuge which enshrines the title-deeds of human progress and is of deep consequence to Christian civilization; here, girt about by the seas and oceans where the Navy reigns; shielded from above by the prowess and devotion of our airmen—we await undismayed the impending assault."[77] According to Michael Walzer, after Czechoslovakia, Poland, and France, it had become clear "that Nazism was an ultimate threat to everything decent in our lives, an ideology and a practice of domination so murderous, so de-

grading even to those who might survive, that the consequences of its final victory were literally beyond calculation, immeasurably awful."[78] Churchill thus cast the war as a "supreme emergency," a quasi-legal designation that paved the way to total mobilization and, later, to the recognized illegalities of strategic bombing: "Our task is not only to win the battle—but to win the war. After this battle in France abates its force, there will come the battle for our Island—for all that Britain is, and all that Britain means. That will be the struggle. In that supreme emergency we shall not hesitate to take every step, even the most drastic, to call forth from our people the last ounce and the last inch of effort of which they are capable."[79] For Walzer, Churchill's phrase "supreme emergency" implies "that there is a fear beyond ordinary fearfulness . . . of war, and a danger to which that fear corresponds, and that this fear and danger may well require exactly those measures that the war convention bars."[80] It was thus in the almost-technical terms of the supreme emergency that the British understood the need to suspend exactly those values for which they needed also to fight.[81]

The concept of the "supreme emergency" will no doubt remind some readers of what Giorgio Agamben, following Carl Schmitt, refers to as the "state of exception," a juridical logic that grounds the law's sovereign authority in its ability paradoxically to suspend itself as law: "if the law employs the exception—that is the suspension of law itself—as its original means of referring to and encompassing life, then a theory of the state of exception is the preliminary condition for any definition of the relation that binds and, at the same time, abandons the living being to law."[82] Indeed, the passage of the Emergency Powers (Defence) Acts of 1939 and 1940, which I discuss in chapter 2, did much to blur the line between totalitarianism and democracy in wartime Britain, a fact that aligns Churchill's government with what Agamben takes as contradictions broadly characteristic of the modern state: "This transformation of a provisional and exceptional measure into a technique of government threatens radically to alter—in fact, has already palpably altered—the structure and meaning of the traditional distinction between constitutional forms. Indeed, from this perspective, the state of exception appears as a threshold of indeterminacy between democracy and absolutism."[83] That said, although this model does help to account for some aspects of the double bind of total war, I am more interested in seeing how things worked at a less stark and more local level of abstraction. In other words, what seems essential to Agamben's model is the fact that, because the state of exception occurs at the threshold or limit of political consciousness ("a zone of indifference, where inside and outside do not exclude each other but rather blur with each other"), it tends to appear within ordinary,

everyday thought as a return of the repressed, as a distorted, disguised, or symptomatic expression of a more fundamental and thus more obscure contradiction.[84] Because the state of exception is one of thought's structural preconditions, it cannot, as it were, be thought directly.

I want to argue that the British experience of the wartime state of exception worked differently. What is striking about the British experience of paradox is that it was experienced as a known, conscious, quotidian, but no less painful, thing. The shared and mind-bending sense that cherished values would have to be suspended in order to protect exactly those values was not an unconscious or distorted or latent content during the war. It was—and this is the most remarkable thing I learned while writing this book—what a lot of ordinary people thought and said to one another about the war while it was happening. As opposed, then, to following Agamben and seeing the double bind of total war as a kind of structuring and preconditional secret, as wartime Britain's political unconscious, I want rather to understand what it meant that so difficult a paradox could and did circulate as the articulate and confounding stuff of everyday life during the war. In these terms, we might look less to the gothic designs of Schmitt or Agamben and more to the wistful and pragmatic compromises that William Empson took as characteristic of Britain's war: "You see," he said of the hero he thought this war demanded, "he's willing to do more than get himself killed. He's willing to cripple his own personality for the sake of a cause he believes in."[85] I want in what follows to try to capture the structure of this conceptual problem both as it shaped British thinking about the war and as it found aesthetic expression in some important wartime films. What, after all, does it mean or feel like to be both for and against a war at the same time? To be, as total mobilization demanded, both a civilian and a soldier? To know that one has to undermine one's values in order to preserve those values? What does it mean to need to imagine and indeed to work toward the end of a culture in order to find the strength to fight for that culture?

This entirely open and explicit but no less difficult ethical bind often took a similar proverbial form, something like "it takes a fascist to fight a fascist." Expressions of this "to catch a thief" logic appear in different but related forms throughout the war, in parliamentary debates, in essays and editorials about censorship and propaganda, in ordinary conversations overheard by members of Mass-Observation, in private letters, journals, diaries, novels, and poems, as well as in both documentary and feature films. Early on in the war, Churchill acknowledged that it might "seem a paradox that a war undertaken in the name of liberty and right should require, as a necessary part of its processes, the surrender for some time of so many of

the dearly valued liberties and rights."[86] In *Why Britain Is at War*, Harold Nicolson wrote, "We may loathe the Nazi system from the very depths of our souls, yet it is a hard thought that we must ourselves adopt Nazi methods in order to defeat the thing that we dislike."[87] Later, while working at the Ministry of Information, he wrote in his diary: "At present the Ministry is too decent, educated and intellectual to imitate Goebbels. I cannot live by intelligence alone. We need crooks. Why I hate Hitler so much is that he has coined a new currency of fraudulence which he imposes by force. I am prepared to see the old world of privilege disappear. But as it goes, it will carry with it the old standards of honour."[88] For Cyril Connolly, it was "a war of which we are all ashamed and yet a war which has to be won."[89] Orwell put it bluntly: "to be corrupted by totalitarianism one does not have to live in a totalitarian country."[90] E. M. Forster wrote in 1939: "Sensitive people are having a particularly humiliating time just now. Looking at the international scene, they see, with a clearness denied to politicians, that if Fascism wins we are done for, and that we must become Fascist to win. There seems no escape from this hideous dilemma and those who face it most honestly often go jumpy. They are vexed by messages from contradictory worlds, so that whatever they do appears to them as a betrayal of something good."[91] Referring to this and to similar statements, Jed Esty observes, "As the decade wore on, fascist aggression made fervent nationalism both increasingly unappealing and increasingly necessary."[92]

As mentioned previously, a sharp and explicit version of the dilemma appears in *Colonel Blimp*. Indeed, in their memo to the Ministry of Information, Powell and Pressburger identify a set of English values—fairness, naïveté, honesty—before making their real case: "We think these are splendid virtues: so splendid that, in order to preserve them, it is worthwhile shelving them until we have won the war."[93] Insofar as the film's protagonist, Clive Candy, represents exactly these virtues, his experience over the course of the twentieth century and its wars represents not only the life and death of a particular image of Britain but also a set of structural problems that are built into the idea of a national character as such; in order to preserve one's character, that character must (at least for the duration) be suspended or "shelved." One reviewer wrote: "The moral of his career is left uncertain; with one voice the film censures his beliefs, with another protests that they are the beliefs of all upright men."[94] As I've been suggesting, the presence of these two voices isn't evidence of simple incoherence or bad faith; it is rather an effort to capture in cinematic form a contradiction necessary to the British experience of World War II. I'll look at the dilemma of *Colonel Blimp*—that it pits Englishness against Englishness in order to

save Englishness—and examine how resources specific to cinematic form might offer ways to embody, to acknowledge, and perhaps to escape or to transcend that dilemma.

One can see other, less direct versions of the double bind at work within several of the war's pivotal moments. We can see it in something like its reverse form in the drama of appeasement played out between Chamberlain and Hitler in 1938. Instead of sacrificing values in order to preserve those same values, the attempt to appease Hitler at Munich was, as Churchill argued in his celebrated eulogy for Chamberlain, rather a last-ditch and hopeless effort to preserve English values that led nearly to their loss:

> It fell to Neville Chamberlain in one of the supreme crises of the world to be contradicted by events, to be disappointed in his hopes, and to be deceived and cheated by a wicked man. But what were these hopes in which he was disappointed? What were these wishes in which he was frustrated? What was that faith that was abused? They were surely among the most noble and benevolent instincts of the human heart—the love of peace, the toil for peace, the strife for peace, the pursuit of peace, even at great peril, and certainly to the utter disdain of popularity or clamour.[95]

It was, in other words, precisely because Chamberlain really embodied certain national values that he came close to seeing those values destroyed absolutely. What the war needed, Churchill implies, was someone willing not to embody but rather to suspend English virtues in the name of those same virtues; this was exactly what Churchill, acting in the name of the supreme emergency, was willing to do.[96] Chamberlain and Churchill thus represent mirror images of the same double bind; one almost destroyed the national character by trying to save it while the other saved it precisely by suspending it and, in time, maybe losing it altogether. We can see this same bind at work in the British public's ambivalent response to the figure of the commando (see chapters 2 and 3); says Alan Allport: "He was brave and skilled, but his style of fighting was unsportsmanlike, 'dirty,' suspiciously un-English. The name connoted a flirtation with illegality, an impatience with mere rules, a willingness to mete out justice with direct action regardless of the methods employed. The commando was a bit of a brute. He brought gangster values to the battlefield. Would he bring them home as well?"[97] The commando became one especially visible representative of a larger ambivalence around a war that was both necessary and regrettable. And finally, we can see the double bind again at the war's end in the growing sense that, for good or ill, total war had fundamentally altered the social fabric of Britain,

its imperial ambitions and identity, as well as the basic terms in which it was able to imagine or to anticipate a future.

As we will see in relation to the weird, involute temporality of *Brief Encounter*, the pressures of wartime meant that, whatever else, ordinary life in Britain after the war would be different. On the one hand, the rhetoric and the reality of sacrifice shared across socio-economic classes made it impossible to return in the short term to conditions that existed before the war. This shift was anticipated in and shaped by the 1942 Report on Social Insurance and Allied Services, which was prepared by the economist William Beveridge and served as a rough blueprint for the postwar welfare state as implemented by Clement Attlee and the Labour Party after their surprise postwar victory in 1945. What's more, the fact of women's broad participation in the war effort—in factories, in the fire service, as members of the Women's Land Army, the Air Raid Precautions, the Women's Voluntary Services, the Auxiliary Territorial Service, the Women's Auxiliary Air Force, and elsewhere—made the idea of simply returning to an older model of the family and domestic life unlikely and, for many women, unwelcome. Independence, freedom, authority, and different ways of imagining the sexual division of labor in Britain were unintended consequences of years of total mobilization. The structural challenge of a total war against totalitarianism thus had immediate and lingering political consequences for the British sense of self.

### Churchill's Black Dog

The double bind of total war, the fraught idea that "it takes a fascist to fight a fascist," deserves an even closer look. Taken to its limit, the dilemma that the British faced as a result of their encounter with the putatively anti-totalitarian totality of total mobilization begins to approach a concept of absolute and transitive aggression that Freud, Lacan, and others had begun to develop before, during, and after the war. Indeed, the specific transitivity of the phrase "it takes a fascist to fight a fascist" resembles a logic of identification and aggression that Lacan, for instance, took as essential to psychic life immediately after the war. In both "The Mirror Stage" (1949) and "Aggressiveness in Psychoanalysis" (1948), Lacan lays out an account of development that turns on what he sees as a fundamental narcissistic mistake. When the small child, who experiences his or her body as uncoordinated, broken, in fragments, sees the whole and apparently coordinated image of either another child or, indeed, his or her own reflection in a mirror, it installs in the ego a structuring desire for and an identification with the imaginary coordination, coherence, and wholeness of what Lacan calls

"the Ideal-I." The child, jubilant at the potential represented by this image, reaches out toward that ideal reflection only to stumble and fall. This mix of jubilation and consequent disappointment, then, leads to what Lacan understands as a sort of primal jealousy, an essential and aggressive relation to the other that turns on the idea that, in order to become whole, one must make the other less so; that to become whole, one must tear the other to pieces. Left there, this would stand as one especially macabre moment in a larger story of psychic development.

Lacan, however, takes things a step further, suggesting that, because this moment of identification, jubilation, and jealousy is built on a mistake, one can never do enough to close the gap that stands between us and our ideals; one can't fix something that isn't really broken. As a result, the aggression that results from that founding error is directed outward at more and more of the world; because this first narcissistic wound must remain open, it bleeds out into and onto everything else, resulting in a version the world-killing aggression that both Lacan and Freud associate with the death drive. As Leo Bersani and Ulysses Dutoit write in their essay on Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line*: "In telling us that the greatest human happiness is exactly identical to the greatest human unhappiness, psychoanalysis at once 'explains' a violence that no individual or social transformations could eliminate, and renders superfluous any further explanations."[98]

Lacan's two essays on aggression were, of course, signs of their time. As Jacques-Alain Miller argues:

> You can understand why he took up the subject of aggression in 1948, because at that time it was a popular topic in psychoanalysis; it was what the ego psychology psychoanalysts considered acceptable in Freud's notion of the death instinct, that is, in his notion that there is not only libido, but also the death drive. After World War II, which seemed to have demonstrated the existence of some kind of death drive, after five years of world war, concentration camps, the atom bomb, etc., the idea that there might be such a thing as a death drive in humanity didn't seem so far-fetched.[99]

As we will see, a number of writers took up the idea of an essential and intractable violence before, during, and immediately after the war, including Walter Benjamin, Simone Weil, Johannes Huizinga, Norbert Elias, Marc Bloch, and others. Looking back on Britain's decision to firebomb German cities, Anthony Burgess wrote that it seemed "to arise from some mysterious human darkness, against the light of reason."[100] In 1940, Virginia Woolf wrote, "The young airman up in the sky is driven not only by the voices of

loudspeakers; he is driven by voices in himself—ancient instincts, instincts fostered and cherished by education and tradition."[101] Anthony Storr speculates that Winston Churchill emerged as a hero partly because the particular terms of World War II satisfied his innate depressive's aggression—his "black dog"—in a way nothing else could: "Winston Churchill was often accused of being a warmonger, which he was not. But there is no doubt that fighting enemies held a strong emotional appeal for him, and that, when he was finally confronted by an enemy whom he felt to be wholly evil, it was a release which gave him enormous vitality. Hitler was such an enemy; and it is probable that Churchill was never happier than when he was fully engaged in bringing about Hitler's destruction. For here, at last, was an opportunity to employ the full force of his enormous aggressiveness."[102]

In her recent *At the Violet Hour*, Sarah Cole has written about the ways in which British and Irish culture between the wars attempted to capture the essential or primal excess of war's violence in aesthetic form; indeed, in her account, interwar culture was an ongoing and necessarily incomplete negotiation between an enchanted violence that promises structure and renewal and a disenchanted violence that refuses "that structure" and insists "on the bare, forked existence of the violated being, bereft of symbol."[103] She draws on Weil's "*The Iliad*, or the Poem of Force" in order to capture the feeling that, at best, our fragile world was and was only the presence of a few institutions straining weakly against the force of an essential violence: "Force is an entity that corresponds less to any given act or individual than to a broad compulsion with the capacity to constrain, strike, or even annihilate. More generally, force, as I am imagining it, is almost a condition of existence, a way of considering the swell of power that surrounds and can demolish the individual, even as, in some cases, it provides a sense of that individual's purpose (to resist, to rebel)—or, as Holocaust survivors tell it, to resist or rebel by the bare fact of remaining human."[104] Or, to put it in terms Forster used as he tried to say "What I Believe" in 1938: "So that is what I feel about force and violence. It is, alas! the ultimate reality on this earth, but it does not always get to the front. Some people call its absences 'decadence'; I call them 'civilization' and find in such interludes the chief justification for the human experiment."[105] For Forster, civilization isn't a natural state occasionally interrupted by eruptions of violence; it is itself an interruption, a welcome and ephemeral pause in an otherwise continuous history of violence.[106]

This brings us back to the relation between style and violence that I began to lay out earlier, to ways in which historically specific modes of eccentricity or vulgarity were mobilized in Britain during wartime; in other

words, back to moments of accreted, impacted, or heightened style that seem to push the character of particular films toward and past an implicit limit. In addition to thinking of these moments either as an expression of Sitwellian protest or as a mode of specifically cinematic excess, one might think about Theodor Adorno's 1934 essay on Beethoven's "late style." Adorno takes issue with the fact that most commentary on the late works explains their difficult, knotty style in terms of the biographical fact of Beethoven's impending death: "The accepted explanation is that they are products of a subjectivity or, still better, of a personality ruthlessly proclaiming itself, which breaks through the roundedness of form for the sake of expression, exchanging harmony for the dissonance of its sorrow and spurning sensuousness charm under the dictates of the imperiously emancipated mind."[107] This explanation of the late works tries, in other words, "to gain awareness of death directly in the work of art," to see the individual impending death appear as content within a given work.[108] Adorno goes on to argue that this approach is misguided because art cannot in fact be about death in any direct sense: "If the legitimacy of art is abolished before death's reality, then death can certainly not be assimilated by the work of art as its 'subject.' It is imposed on creatures alone, and not on their constructions, and thus has always appeared in art in a refracted form: as allegory."[109] In other words, because the reality of one's own death is essentially unrepresentable, it doesn't make sense to say that any piece of music, a book, or a film is in fact *about* death, at least insofar as we take aboutness to mean a direct and referential relation between a form and its content.

That said, death does matter to the late works, and it matters precisely, if paradoxically, because it is unrepresentable; that is, insofar as the imperative to confront death forces a particular medium to confront its necessary representational limits, it makes itself felt in a work precisely in the moments when style, failing to get at what it feels it must address, ends up pointing back toward itself. The simultaneous need and inability to represent death thus allows style at last to break free from reference: "Touched by death, the masterly hand sets free the matter it previously formed. The fissures and rifts within it, bearing witness to the ego's finite impotence before Being, are its last work. . . . In this way, in late Beethoven, the conventions become expression in the naked depiction of themselves."[110] Death, in other words, makes itself felt in the late Beethoven work when style becomes clotted, excessive, or, to use my word, eccentric; it makes itself felt when forms express themselves as forms, when style is set free to be for itself. In his own self-consciously Adornian reflection on late style, Edward Said refers to the great and elderly Beethoven's work as "wayward and eccentric."[111]

The films that I discuss are not necessarily late in a chronological or biological sense, but they do, I think, share a relation to style that Adorno has in mind. That is, if what makes a style late is its need to deal with death, the films I discuss must deal with the fact of war, with an experience tied up not only with the widely, absurdly shared imminence of death but also with death's essential resistance to representation. If, as we have seen, the conceptual totality of total war resists representation, that resistance returns in these films in moments of impacted style, moments of aesthetic eccentricity or stylistic excess that give paradoxical expression to the fact of a war that, as a result of its scope, its intensity, and its approach toward totality, cannot be represented directly. Because the British experience of total war and total mobilization resisted representation, it freed the films I discuss to confront and to embody that resistance in moments of heightened, impacted, vulgar, wayward, excessive, or eccentric style.

## Original Violence

I have begun to suggest that this whole and complex play of identification, form, force, aggression, eccentricity, and style is somehow contained within the historically specific and yet proverbial phrase, "it takes a fascist to fight a fascist." In other words, at the same time that the oft-repeated phrase captures some specific aspects of the British experience of World War II (the psychic legacy of appeasement, the gangster tactics of the commando, and the fear that the war had in one way or another broken the future), its barely managed mix of aggression toward the other and deferred but inevitable aggression toward the self stands as a real but tacit effort to register the nature of an unofficial violence that would both exceed and stand as a source of the local and official modes of violence imagined in and harnessed by total war. Aspects of the films and texts I address thus stand at a nearly subterranean level as efforts to explicate or unpack the tautological violence of that phrase; they make a tacit case about the sources and the depths of human violence that may have been let loose by the war but that seemed also to precede and to exceed it, to come from and to lead toward, as it were, some deeper, more mysterious, and technically eccentric place. And, indeed, the drive is, if nothing else, eccentric. That is, while the films discussed here might argue at the official level that wars cause violence and that we fight wars in order to put an end to violence, at the unofficial level they use moments of impacted, ironic, or exaggerated style in order to gesture toward a more disturbing argument about the nature of human violence; rather than seeing violence as an effect of this or that conflict, these films ask us to consider the possibility that an innate human tendency toward violence,

what Johan Huizinga calls "original violence," had been revealed by the specific terms of modern total war: "As soon as one member or more of a community of States virtually denies the binding character of international law and, either in practice or in theory, proclaims the interests and power of its own group—be it nation, party, class, church or whatsoever else—as the sole norm of its political behaviour, not only does the last vestige of the immemorial play-spirit vanish but with it any claim to civilization at all. Society then sinks down to the level of the barbaric, and original violence retakes its ancient rights."[112] Thought of in these terms, the only way to mitigate or at least to face the violence of war is to confront its deepest sources.

In an effort to capture forms of ideological and historical ambivalence, these films thus foreground complicated relations between past and present both within the disorienting frame of wartime and between the war and what came before and what might come after. They thus put expressive pressure on the problem of wartime, a kind of time that, as Mary Favret sees it, "teeters," a kind of time that sees "past, present, and future all threaten to surrender to an obliterating violence."[113] As if to acknowledge exactly this pressure, the films I discuss employ complicated temporal structures that rely on flashbacks, nested narratives, and multiple aesthetic frames. Contemporary critics, in fact, noted the degree to which the flashback had become an almost pathological sign of the times; one wrote in 1941, "Lately I notice . . . a revival of the flashback to a degree which amounts almost to a mania."[114] In some cases, this strategy is tied to an evident desire to understand the present in relation to the past: *Colonel Blimp* begins with a conflict between a younger and an older man that leads the latter to reflect on how his past made him what he is in the present, on how youth somehow makes age: the synchronic becomes diachronic. *Brief Encounter* similarly begins at its end, with a middle-aged women thinking through the beginning, middle, and end of her brief and chaste affair with a man she met at a train station. And, while really being about the later days of World War II (1944), *Henry V* gives us the Battle of Agincourt (1415) as seen from the perspective of Shakespeare's present (1600); as a result, Olivier's film presents Britain's long history of violence as less a progressive line than a recursive knot.

More than satisfying a desire to understand how the present is the result of a past, these complicated designs trouble the stability of past, present, and future. And although we can, of course, identify a narratorial "present" in each of the films—1942 in *Colonel Blimp*, the end of the affair in *Brief Encounter*, 1600 in *Henry V*—they seem often to exaggerate or accentuate their structural complexities in order to make it difficult to measure ac-

curately the difference between one time and another. In this, these films use the specificity of cinematic form—cuts, casting decisions, soundtracks, and close-ups—to make good on Benjamin's roughly contemporary hopes for historical materialism in *The Arcades Project*: "Historical materialism must renounce the epic element in history. It blasts the epoch out of the reified 'continuity of history.' But it also explodes the homogeneity of the epoch, interspersing it with ruins—that is, with the present."[115] In other words, these films reflect and foreground a temporal confusion essential to wartime, a confusion that makes it hard on the battlefield or in life to register the difference between cause and effect, before and after, past, present, and future; as a result, they use techniques specific to cinema in order to approach an eccentric history methodologically appropriate to thinking about the conceptual ambivalence of modern, total war.

### Propaganda in a Tragic Key

In a recent essay, T. J. Clark calls for what he calls "politics in a tragic key." Central to this politics is the recognition that human aggression is both inevitable and terrible:

> It is a logical error of the left . . . to assume that a full recognition of the human propensity to violence—to blood-soaked conformity—closes off the idea of a radical reworking of politics. The question is: what root is it we need to get down to? And even a Hazlitt-type honesty about "a *hankering* after evil in the human mind" can perfectly well coexist (as it did in Hazlitt's post-Augustan generation) with a "By our own spirits we are deified." Human capacities may well be infinite; they have certainly been hardly explored, hardly been given their chance of flowering; but the tragic sense starts from an acknowledgment that the infinity (the unplumbable) is for bad as much as good.[116]

As they use eccentricities of cinematic style to imagine a past that did not escape but rather managed its original violence and as they compare that past to a present where violence appears to have broken all its bounds, the films I discuss work toward something like Clark's politics in a tragic key; it is precisely because they do not deny human violence that they are able or at least seek to imagine an alternative to one of its most spectacular and logically deranged forms: total war. Indeed, what's remarkable about these films is in part their ability formally to capture both the irreducible fact of that human violence and our necessary, limited, but also human efforts to escape or to manage that violence. This, to return to the beginning, is

what I want to see as the specific and strategic eccentricity of the British cinema. Faced not only with the outsized practical and ethical demands of total war but also with the intimation of more absolute sources of violence, these films cultivate moments of aesthetic and formal eccentricity both in order to find expression for ideas that might resist more direct modes of argumentation and in order to protest violence's tendency to reduce exactly the kinds of difference that eccentricity seeks to preserve. These films embrace cinematic style in order to strike a Sitwellian pose in the face of death. And although they are not late works in his sense, these films nonetheless share a quality that Adorno took as an effect of style's confrontation with death: "The force of subjectivity in late works is the irascible gesture with which it leaves them. . . . Touched by death, the masterly hand sets free the matter it previously formed."[117] The artist's encounter with death, a previously private encounter that had become all too public during the years of World War II, works not to personalize the work but rather to set stylistic aspects immanent to the medium free; and just as the musical material of Beethoven's late quartets reveals limits to both public and private modes of significance, so do the medium-specific eccentricities of the British cinema come to the surface as a tacit and stubborn—and maybe vulgar—answer to an official ideology that would subordinate life's particulars to one and only one form: total war. In this these films work toward an ideal that, in another piece, Clark has seen at work in Poussin's *Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake* (1648): "Will any picture of the world that aims to *contain* the powers of blackness necessarily look forced—putting death at too great a distance, letting light win out predictably over dark, squaring and immobilizing its objects, faring and truing? Can some pictures show the necessity—the naturalness—of that stilling and containment? Show it happening as part of the agony?"[118] What I see in these films is something like this: both an attempt to contribute something to a war that had to be won and a necessarily eccentric effort to imagine the limits of a violence that, like a snake with its tail in its mouth, seems always to find its way home.

### Snapshots of *War Pictures*

Chapter 1 examines the exemplary case of *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp*, a film that Winston Churchill and the Ministry of Information sought actively to undermine. Whereas the government saw it as counterproductive, Powell and Pressburger held that the film was, in fact, a successful argument in favor not only of war but also of a specifically *total* war. In order to assess the relation between these different claims, I look at how the form of the film—particularly its relation to montage—allows it to embody

a complex and necessary argument about the nature and necessity of war. The film allowed Powell and Pressburger to articulate or rather to embody a paradoxical idea that I take as characteristic of British thinking about the war, the idea that it might "take a fascist to fight a fascist," that, in other words, Britain strategically would have to suspend exactly the values for which it understood itself to be fighting. This leads to some larger claims about what we might call the practical historiography of World War II, to claims both about the film's engagement with the theory of war in the wake of Clausewitz and about the ways in which this film and other wartime texts rely on an imagined pastoral past in order to understand and to deal with the violence of the present. The film thus embodies a historical self-consciousness that characterized some of the most important aesthetic responses to the war.

Chapter 2 looks at Olivier's *Henry V* (1944), a film that, as opposed to Colonel Blimp, was taken immediately as a critical and political triumph. Rather than accept the film's status as unproblematically good propaganda, I see Olivier's accomplishment in relation to the larger context of thinking about Shakespeare during the war. Shakespeare's plays and *Henry V* in particular were mobilized popularly and by a number of prominent scholars during and for the war. Olivier's film thus appears as part of a moment in British cultural history that continues to inform our understanding of Shakespeare, his play, and the twentieth-century history of literary criticism. I look at this context in order to see how Olivier's film both supports and undermines its own apparent patriotism. In order to make this case, I bring together the film's complicated representation of British history, its use of a particular type of tracking shot, and, most importantly, its use of casting, type-casting, and casting against type. In particular, I consider the tacitly critical presence of the great and alcoholic character actor Robert Newton as Ancient Pistol in order to reflect on Olivier's canny and hitherto unnoticed take on the ethical complexities of war. Newton, who was both a great actor and what we might call today a train wreck, stands in the film as a figure for another, more complicated argument about the human costs and the consequences of total war.

Chapter 3 considers a film that would seem to have little to do with a war to which it never refers: David Lean's *Brief Encounter* (1945). Although the film never names the war, it was made during, set before, and released after the war, an odd historical situation that makes Lean's film almost perfectly, if obliquely, "about" war. I look at aspects of the film—its use of a particular kind of light, differently significant fashions, and a reference to Donald Duck—that would have meant entirely different things before and

after war. As a result of putting pressure on the very significance of things as they drift across the representational divide between before and after, the film emerges as a powerful and engaged form of historical reckoning. I then turn to an image that seems exemplary in this regard: a recurrent shot of the actor Celia Johnson's face. Seeing the face as a form of history allows me both to connect Lean's film to a broader tradition of European art cinema and to argue for the film's complex thinking about what the world might have held in store for men and women after war. Looking at Celia Johnson's face looking off into the distance activates a series of identifications and reversals that get to the heart of what was fraught about the last days of total war. More particularly, I work to understand Celia Johnson's face in relation to the transformative pressures that total mobilization put on the British experience of sex and gender during and after the war. *Brief Encounter* thus emerges as a film with crucial comments about the social legacy of World War II, a legacy that, I argue, continues to be felt in British culture and the British cinema.

In the Epilogue, I argue that Jarman was one the first postwar filmmakers in Britain to recognize what was at stake in these earlier films. Indeed, both his historical distance from the war and his political and personal commitments as a gay artist working in Thatcher's England made it possible for him to see those films not simply as a past against which to react but rather as an intensely critical cinema: "There is only one English feature director whose work is in the first rank. Michael Powell is the only director to make a clear political analysis in his films, his work is unequalled. *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* is the finest English feature, and *A Canterbury Tale* and *A Matter of Life and Death* are not far behind."[119] Powell's clear-sighted and tacitly political appreciation of what it took to make a film during wartime partly inspired Jarman to make his own bracing, wildly intelligent films. As Jarman recognized, this hard-won and necessarily incomplete confrontation with war and history reveals these eccentric works of wartime propaganda as films, indeed, as art of the very highest order.