1 “But what is it about?”: The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp

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The cheat or the spoil-sport shatters civilization itself.
—Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens* (1938)

He did not cease to complain . . . that the war was being carried on contrary to all the rules—as if there were any rules for killing people.
—Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace* (1869)

When *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* appeared in 1943, it looked to many like a good movie that made for bad propaganda; if it was beautiful, moving, often funny, it seemed also too willful, too complicated, too weird, too eccentric to help its audiences know what to think and feel about the war. The *Monthly Film Bulletin* wrote that its “message may be obscure, but its emotional appeal is high.”¹ The *Tribune* claimed that, although the film was “excellent entertainment . . . no-one decided exactly what they wanted to say with it.”² The *Manchester Guardian* said that it “contradicts itself, mixes its motives, and never seems quite to settle down.”³ The *Daily Mail* wrote that “to depict British officers as stupid, complacent, self-satisfied, and ridiculous may be legitimate comedy, but it is disastrously bad propaganda in the time of war.”⁴ These mostly mixed responses to the film’s apparently mixed motives are more or less representative. Molly Haskell writes: “When it opened, audiences were enthusiastic about the performances but disconcerted by the ambivalence toward war.”⁵ To be fair, the film did ask a lot from its first, war-weary viewers: instead of offering comfort or selling the war, it embraced formal complexity almost for its own sake. Its protagonist, a benighted but lovable English gentleman, stands both as a manifestly good man and as an implicit rebuke to Britain’s backward-looking military establishment; the film takes care not only to feature a “good German” but also to make that German its most eloquent and, indeed, its most recog-
nizably “English” spokesman; and the film overlays its very modern story of Britain’s twentieth-century wars with a quasi-mystical tale of romantic eternal recurrence: disappointed in love, Clive Candy—the “Blimp” of the film’s title—is haunted across decades by the appearance and reappearance of his feminine ideal, a figure played in each case by the same actor, Deborah Kerr. As opposed to sending a clear message about war, the film embraced, says Ian Christie, an “often skittish, playfully allegorical” tone that seemed self-consciously to distance it from other, more obviously instrumental war movies, films that were “championed for their realistic qualities, which, in the terms of the dominant critical discourse of the time, meant sober, unsensational narratives with believable characterizations and a prevailing sense of stoicism and emotional restraint.” Oddly romantic, gently surreal, often sweetly funny, the film appears to distance itself from the expected and perhaps necessary pragmatism of wartime propaganda. In a line I have already quoted, C. A. Lejeune, film critic for The Observer, summed up the film’s attractive and playful incoherence in a word: “It is a handsome piece. It is frequently a moving piece. But what is it about?”

Aesthetic complexity is one thing; aesthetic complexity in a time of war is quite another, a fact that became apparent as several members of government weighed in against the idea, the production, and at last the international distribution of Colonel Blimp. In a 1942 memo to Churchill, Sir James Grigg, secretary of state for war, wrote, “I think it of the utmost importance to get [Colonel Blimp] stopped.” A Ministry of Information report on an early draft of the film’s script anticipated the critics’ confusion, arguing that its complexity was not only ineffective propaganda but also a possibly active hindrance to the war effort: “The over-complication of ideas is . . . dangerous.” Churchill himself became involved and wrote to Minister of Information Brendan Bracken, asking him: “[P]ropose to me the measures necessary to stop this foolish production before it gets any further. I am not prepared to allow propaganda detrimental to the morale of the Army.” Although rightly unwilling to suppress the film (to do so “would have been a politically insensitive move in a democracy at war”), Bracken and the Ministry of Information did turn down Powell and Pressburger’s request that Laurence Olivier be given leave from the Navy’s Fleet Air Arm to play Candy; did deny them access to locations, vehicles, uniforms, and so on; and, in time, did interfere with the film’s international distribution. Colonel Blimp did not play in the United States until later and, even then, it appeared in bowdlerized versions: by the 1950s it was circulating as The Loves and Adventures of Colonel Blimp; its all-important flashback structure had been stripped away; it had been cut from 163 to some 90 minutes;
and it was being marketed not as a war film but rather as a kind of “mad, mad, mad, mad” madcap romp: “The lusty lifetime of a gentleman who was sometimes quite a rogue! Dueling—hunting big game—pretty girls—life’s a grand adventure with Colonel Blimp!”

If the sense that the film was not good propaganda feels right enough (the film, we might want to agree, is too good to be good propaganda), Powell and Pressburger nonetheless responded to government reservations with alacrity, making a surprising case for the film’s value as propaganda. Not at all complicated, they said, Colonel Blimp was an explicit argument not only in support of the war but also about the peculiar nature and necessary demands of total war: “Englishmen 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.” Their argument is at once clear and oddly involved: Englishmen must change to stay the same; because the war is a war for national survival, Britain needs to suspend exactly the aspects of its national character that it wants most to preserve; it has to embrace the “all-in” tactics of total war in order to protect values that would consider those tactics as repugnant. This paradox—that one needs to undo Englishness in order to save Englishness—is central to the film’s form and content and is, as we shall see, a concentrated expression of a contradiction immanent to the British experience of World War II, one I have already tried to capture with the phrase, “it takes a fascist to fight a fascist.” In the build-up to the film’s release, the industry periodical Kinematograph Weekly restated Powell and Pressburger’s case even more directly: “The film’s vital theme that we must forget chivalry and sportsmanship to fight the enemy successfully and its dedication to the new aggressive spirit of the Allied Armies is a challenge to those among the democratic peoples who are only just awakening to the meaning of total war.” Years later, Powell reiterated this position, remembering the film as an argument about the suspension of the English past in the service of the present crisis, an argument against “British procrastination and British regard for tradition and all the things which we knew and which were losing the war.”

One can of course see why Grigg, Bracken, and Churchill were unconvinced despite Powell and Pressburger’s several assurances. Colonel Blimp lacks battle scenes; it is ambivalent, to say the least, about the means and ends of each of the three wars it represents (the Boer War, World War I, and World War II); it is often remembered more for its hoary sentiment than for its bellicosity; it both recommends and preemptively mourns the loss of
tradition—“all the things which we knew”—as it asks us both to forget and to remember “chivalry and sportsmanship”; it is a profound and moving embodiment of nostalgia for the English past as well as a steely rejection of nostalgia as fundamentally inappropriate to the tactical presentism of total war. Read through the distinctly mixed terms of its first reception, the film emerges as an ideal case of what (after Gestalt psychology, Wittgenstein, and E. H. Gombrich) is sometimes referred to as “multistability,” a quality of some images that, according to W. T. J. Mitchell, “illustrate the co-existence of contrary or simply different readings in a single image.”

Like the Necker cube, the “Double Cross,” and the “Duck-Rabbit,” The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp forces a viewer to confront the only apparently absurd possibility of a single object that coherently manages and contains ontologically opposed orders of significance: life and death, past and present, the love of tradition and the rejection of tradition. The film thus offers an ideal case for thinking about what makes a film more or less—more and less—about war.

I want to see the this-and-that multistability of Colonel Blimp as an expression of another related and equally ambivalent wartime phenomenon, the official and unofficial desire to develop an effective, democratic, and layered alternative to Nazi propaganda. Faced with the bad but apparently effective example of Goebbels’s Ministry of Propaganda, the Ministry of Information struggled early on in the war to balance apparently incommensurate goals: the goal of maintaining a strong relation to democratic values of openness, thoughtfulness, and critique and the goal of producing a coherent and persuasive propaganda apparatus that could compete with the Nazis’ less scrupulous output. F. C. Bartlett, the Cambridge psychologist who had been commissioned by the Ministry of Information to address exactly this issue, sought to bring these maybe incompatible goals together in the form of what he called “democratic propaganda,” an open, self-conscious, and yet no less effective form of media persuasion that he opposed to the iron fist of “dictator propaganda”:

It does not go all out to short-circuit reason, as the dictator propaganda does. It recognizes that men act where their affections, sentiments, and emotions are concerned, but that these must and can be led by intelligence without losing their strength. It knows that the stability of a social order does not depend upon everybody’s saying the same things, holding the same opinions, feeling the same feelings, but upon a freely achieved unity which, with many sectional and individual differences, is nevertheless able to maintain an explaining and consistent pattern of life.
On the one hand, the virtues of Bartlett’s idea are obvious enough; his proposed or rather hoped-for mix of argument, persuasion, and belief fit well with a broader set of cherished and, one might even say, Churchillian values: tolerance, directness, irony, and so on. On the other hand, Bartlett has a difficult time sustaining his good-faith effort both to imagine the wartime state as “a freely achieved unity” (a body both really free and highly organized) and to imagine such a condition as anything other than naive wish fulfillment; what, after all, is the practical difference between a freely achieved unity and unity imposed from beyond, between a spontaneously mobilized democracy and totalitarianism, between freedom as such and the freedom to obey?\(^\text{19}\) One is reminded here of what Kant identified long ago as a paradox fundamental to enlightenment: “Argue as much as you will, and about what you will, but obey!”\(^\text{20}\) Years after the war, Jacques Ellul, who had fought with French Resistance, wrote: “[T]here is . . . no ‘democratic’ propaganda. Propaganda made by democracies is ineffective, paralyzed, mediocre.”\(^\text{21}\)

Bartlett’s hopeful and Ellul’s negative assessments of the democratic possibilities of propaganda need both to be seen in relation to the larger fate of state propaganda before, during, and after the war. Mark Wollaeger writes: “By the forties, when the propaganda techniques pioneered by the British had been refined and deployed around the world for over two decades, propaganda seemed inescapable, and the sinister connotations it had begun to gather by the twenties were firmly established. For the Western world, Soviet domestic propaganda had begun to blur distinction between propaganda and education, and the Nazi campaign added associations with obfuscation and systematic deception.”\(^\text{22}\) Propaganda, in other words, was already antithetical to democracy by the time Powell and Pressburger made their film. An achieved “democratic propaganda” would thus have seemed to many like a fantasy.

This, I think, is the political and aesthetic challenge of \textit{Colonel Blimp}. Even though it would have been clear to them that democratic propaganda was impossible, Powell and Pressburger went ahead and made democratic propaganda anyway; they made a film that both supported and questioned the war and, in so doing, embraced a paradox immanent to total war; in other words, they made \textit{The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp}. I argue that \textit{Colonel Blimp} is a great war film precisely because it embraces and embodies a salutary and politically necessary contradiction that sits differently at the heart of democratic propaganda and total mobilization; the film uses cinematic style to reveal total war as a necessary response to a supreme
emergency even as it registers the civilizational loss represented by the passage from a productively neurotic culture of fair play to the generalized psychosis of total war.

**War Starts at Midnight**

*Colonel Blimp* begins in 1942 with a quarrel between Second Lieutenant “Spud” Wilson, a young and ambitious officer, and Clive “Sugar” Wynne-Candy, an elderly Major General and the “Blimp” of the film’s title. Spud, having been ordered to make it “like the real thing,” initiates a mock military exercise between the Army and the Home Guard—Operation Beer Mug—hours before its officially scheduled start. He and his men capture Clive, who, lobster red and wrapped in only a towel, is caught napping among other old officers in the Turkish baths. Set against the tacky orientalist backdrop of the baths, the scene establishes a set of visual contrasts that will inform much of the film; as opposed to the young, good-looking, clean-shaven uniformity of Spud and his nearly identical men, the appearance of the older officers is characterized exactly by its rich, decaying, and almost florid particularity: the old gentlemen wear gaudy or plain robes, solid or striped towels wrapped loosely or tightly around bodies portly or thin. Some wear thick glasses; one sports a monocle. Clive himself, his aging body assertively human and dotted with beads of perspiration, stands not only as spokesman for the older generation but also as something wholly and almost aggressively itself; as opposed to the stereotyped, black-and-white image familiar from David Low’s comic, the physical presence and particularity of Roger Livesy’s Colonel Blimp is almost grossly visceral; it is flesh, facial hair, strained veins, popping eyes, sweat, and spittle.

Once confronted, Clive gives Spud a Blimpish dressing-down: “But you damned young idiot, war starts at midnight! Haven’t you been told!” Spud, in turn, tries to teach old Clive a new trick about winning at modern war: if the Nazis don’t follow the rules of the game, why should we? “When I joined the Army, the only agreement I entered into was to defend my country by any means at my disposal, not only by National Sporting Club Rules but by every means that has existed since Cain slugged Abel!” Clive finally snaps when Spud claims to know not only what Clive is but also what he was forty years ago:

**Candy:** You’re an extremely impudent young officer, sir. But let me tell you that in forty years’ time you’ll be an old gentleman, too. And if your belly keeps pace with your head, you’ll have a bigger one than any of us!
SPUD: Maybe I shall. In forty years. But I doubt it. And I doubt if I'll have time to grow a mustache like yours, sir. But at least in 1983 I'll be able to say I was a fellow of enterprise.  

Clive then tosses Spud in and, as they sink beneath the water’s surface, he continues to lecture the younger man, saying several times that the latter can’t know what things were like “forty years ago”: “You laugh at my big belly, but you don’t know how I got it! You laugh at my mustache, but you don’t know why I grew it! How do you know what sort of man I was—when I was as young as you are—forty years ago . . . forty years ago . . . forty years ago.” The words “forty years ago” hang, says the script, “in the air, like the thick clouds of steam” as the camera executes a slow tracking shot past Spud and Clive and on toward the far end of the pool. With nothing but that spooky auditory cue to index the temporal shift, the film then flashes forty years back as a much younger Clive Candy emerges from the pool into which the elder Clive fell: the Clive who went into the pool was an old, walrus-faced man; the Clive who emerges from the water is a young and handsome career officer, recently awarded a Victoria Cross for his service in South Africa. From this point on, the film works to show what Spud cannot know: what difference forty years make. It follows Clive over the course of its three hours as he moves through life, three different wars, and three iterations of his great love, each again played by Deborah Kerr. The film then ends more or less where it began on the day following Spud’s taking
of the Turkish baths, with Clive grimly—and then gamely—accepting his obsolescence now that times and wars have changed.29

Clive’s drift into the past is not marked with a cut or edit or dissolve or wipe; it is not, in fact, marked with much of anything that could cinematically indicate a shift of scene or time. The camera instead tracks simply and smoothly from one side of the pool to the other, moving in the process from one time into another. Without a cut to mark the shift, the film’s present in 1942 seems thus to flow imperceptibly into its past, an effect reinforced by the camera’s patient attention to the limpid play of light across the gently churning surface of the narrow pool’s water. It is, of course, odd that the film does not cut but instead tracks back from 1942 to 1902. In the classic cinematic grammar, even “slight lapses in time” are usually signaled with some kind of cut (or wipe, dissolve, fade, etc.)30 In this instance, however, the film is not clear; past and present are brought together in a single, continuous tracking shot, a fact that makes it difficult—at least for a moment—to know where in the film we are; the tracking shot holds us suspended for a long moment in the space between two different moments in time.31 This is all the more striking given the film’s investment in the difference between the past and the present. In other words, whereas much of the film accentuates the hard difference between old and new wars, the lack of a cut appears instead to run past and present together, to imagine cinema as a medium conceptually capacious enough to contain or to superimpose or to blur two very different moments in time.

To cut or not to cut was of course a significant stylistic question for the cinema in 1943. The cut was, thanks to John Grierson’s Soviet-inspired statements about the centrality of montage to documentary realism, an especially charged aspect of British as well as European thinking about cinematic technique, one that brought together his interest in cinema as
a form of philosophical revelation (a cut between different things could, Grierson argued, reveal the presence of the real at work behind the merely actual) and his political commitment to an ideally centralized state (an ideal he referred to, with some sense of provocation, as a “good totalitarianism”). Aspects of these theories had, as I pointed out in the previous chapter, already been mobilized for the war effort in Humphrey Jennings’s several influential propaganda films. The decision either to cut or not to cut was also at the heart of a broader set of questions about the historical potential and responsibilities of cinema in Europe during and after World War II, questions asked most influentially and controversially by André Bazin. For Bazin, the turn taken by Orson Welles and Jean Renoir away from a logic of montage associated with Griffith and Eisenstein (as well as with Grierson and Jennings) toward depth-of-field cinematography was significant both because it showed that cinema was not, as some critics had claimed, reducible to montage and because it introduced what he understood as an essential historical complexity into filmmaking. Whereas montage makes arguments about the relation between people and things, filming continuously in deep space implies a different kind of understanding, introducing the challenge of existential uncertainty into cinema: “The uncertainty in which we find ourselves as to the spiritual key or the interpretation we should put on the film is built into the very design of the image.” Put differently, because depth-of-field cinematography can make visible the relations between things in space and time, it can say more and more honestly than montage about what holds or doesn’t hold a complex world together; it shows rather than tells. For Bazin, it was a more appropriate and rigorous form of history; or, as Raymond Durgnat puts it, “In the gospel according to Bazin, God invented the cine-camera, but the devil created scissors.”

In this light, Powell and Pressburger’s decision to track and not to cut should be understood in the context of film history as well as history as such. As Bazin might have put it, where a cut could have simplified the film’s historical argument about the past’s relation to the present (and would at least have been logistically easier to execute), the tracking shot makes the very idea of historical development, progress or causality into a palpable problem; and, because the shot forces us to consider the meaning of a cut in its felt and phantom absence (it is a no-cut, a shot where a cut might and maybe should have been), it encourages us to see the film in terms of both a history of cinematic style and a history of violence that Bazin saw as an impetus behind that stylistic shift. Clive Candy’s uncut and fluid movement through and into the past is, in other words, another instance of what I call
cinematic eccentricity. It is an almost viscous moment of cinematic style that refers both back to itself and, as I will argue, out toward some problems essential to the British experience of total war.

**Brute Force and Ruddy Ignorance**

Why put so much stylistic pressure on bathetic conflict between Clive Candy and Spud Wilson? Why track when it would have been easier and cleaner and clearer to cut? The shot, I maintain, is partly a response both to the immediate and adolescent violence of Clive’s encounter with Spud and to the more serious and far-reaching political violence that Spud both embraces and represents. Rushing into the Turkish baths, Spud shouts out, “Brute force and ruddy ignorance!” The cry is, on the one hand, a sign of Spud’s youthful enthusiasm; as we see in early scenes, he and his men prepare for and pursue war with an adolescent’s reckless and feckless intensity. On the other hand, read in terms of the film’s larger message and some of his other statements, “brute force and ruddy ignorance” points to something more broadly significant. When Spud first arrives at the idea of prematurely attacking Clive, he does so in response to a note scribbled in pencil on the typed order from HQ: “make it like the real thing.” When one of his men asks, “What do they mean by ‘like the real thing,’ Spud?” Spud replies, “Well, obviously our losses divided by ten and the enemy’s multiplied by twenty!” In an earlier draft of the script, Spud says more about what he understands as “the real thing”: “Well, obviously prisoners must be bayoneted to death, women must be raped, our losses divided by ten and the enemy’s multiplied by twenty!”

Spud takes the brutalization of soldiers and civilians not as an unintended if inevitable consequence of conflict but rather as a realistic aspect of modern military strategy; rape, murder, and torture are acceptable—they are the real thing—because they work, because they hasten war toward a favorable conclusion. This understanding of war and its tactics is disturbing not least because the film ultimately means for us to accept Spud and what he represents; it recognizes Spud—and, thus, “brute force and ruddy ignorance”—as right for or at least tactically appropriate to the war at hand. This, we should understand, is at least partly what Powell and Pressburger had in mind when they advocated “a realistic acceptance of things as they are, in modern Europe and in Total War.” To accept total war is to accept a different and less restrained relation to the use of violence.

Spud’s sense of what’s appropriate, what’s really real about “the real thing” thus reflects the tactical dissolution of the difference between
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.”

In addition to reflecting technological advances and, in particular, the exponentially expanded reach of aerial warfare, the broad militarization of the home front had far-reaching effects on the very idea of what war was and what it meant to imagine an end or an outside to war. As I suggest in the introduction, total war was as much a concept as a situation during World War II; it was how people thought about themselves and each other during war time.

Paul Saint-Amour states that the “expression ‘total war’ appears to have been coined by the right-wing French editor Léon Daudet in March 1916, during the early weeks of the Battle of Verdun.” Daudet’s early sense of the potential totality of war was already a matter of imaginative scale: “For Daudet, with his blood-and-soil organicist view of the nation, modern warfare had become total partly in intensity, demanding that one extinguish rather than merely defeat the enemy. But it was the metaphors of extent—the claim that war must encompass every space, every civil system, every aspect of national life—that was uppermost in his definition of total war, and would preoccupy military theorists for most of the interwar period.”
A war thought of in these terms threatened to erase real and theoretical differences between combatants and noncombatants: according to J. F. C. Fuller in *The First of the League Wars* (1936), total war “means that when war begins all private life comes to an end, and the nation has only one concern—war.”

In addition to its dramatic physical and institutional effects, total war thus affected the meaning of things both large and small. Going to work, saving money, spending money, caring for family, eating, not eating, turning lights off or on: in total war, these behaviors are understood merely—if perversely—as diverse means to a single military end. Faced in 1929 with the prospect of aerial warfare’s indefinite expansion of the front, Paul Whitcomb Williams anticipated later conditions when he wrote: “Who can say what are ‘distinctively military supplies’ in wartime when so much of the output of almost every factory producing anything from jam to steel goes to assist the conduct of military operations? No doubt this provision was designed to exclude jam factories and include woolen mills making army clothing, for example, but who shall say that meat is less important to an army in the field than raiment, and why should aircraft be permitted to bomb one and not the other?”

As opposed to an earlier idea of war in which the use of violence was limited to professional armies operating as representatives of a state’s interests, a total war is not fought by proxy; if everyone and everything is mobilized, everyone and everything—both the makers and the consumers of jam—are necessarily acceptable targets.

As Spud seems implicitly to understand, what’s real about total war is precisely how it affects what it is possible to think: “When I joined the Army,” he says, “the only agreement I entered into was to defend my country by any means at my disposal, not only by National Sporting Club Rules but by every means that has existed since Cain slugged Abel!” Cain and Abel are figures of an original, fratricidal violence; and, insofar as their legacy implies that every human being is at least potentially both a victim and a killer, Spud’s reach back toward their example is proof not only of his modern commitment to any and all means but also of his innate understanding of the quasi-theological—the total—nature of total war: once begun, such a war denies as a matter of principle the difference between the innocent and the guilty, the civilian and the soldier. Put differently, insofar as Cain and Abel represent the two sides of an exchange (like the producers and consumers of Whitcomb Williams’s jam), Spud’s rhetorical synthesis of the two positions into a single object of identification works to give expression not only to extreme violence but also to a fantasy of perfect and enclosed
totality. They represent a perverse because suicidal answer to alienation: if not a snake with its tail in its mouth, then maybe a man punching himself in the face.

**War Is Nothing but a Duel**

To return to the film’s tracking shot: why would Powell and Pressburger bring together Clive’s life, the more or less motivated stylistic choice to track and not to cut, and the open-ended violence that underwrites modern warfare? Let’s look at another tracking shot—another no-cut—that appears at the culmination of a later, equally important scene: a duel fought between the young Clive and Theo Kretschmar-Schuldorff, a German officer who becomes both Clive’s lifelong friend and something like the film’s conscience. Clive visits Berlin in 1902 in response to a letter from Edith Hunter, an English governess working in Germany and the first of his three nearly identical loves. The letter describes rumors that are circulating about British misconduct during the Boer War. After arriving, Clive stages a showdown with Kaunitz, the apparent author of the rumors: “He’s the most awful little skunk! He was spying for us, he was spying for the Boers, he made South Africa too hot for himself and skipped.”

Clive and Kaunitz engage in a comic battle of wills in the Cafe Hohenzollern, each bribing the house orchestra with beer to play or not to play an aria from Ambroise Thomas’s *Mignon* (1866). The tune, “I am Titania,” was the only record they had at the blockhouse where Clive was an officer and Kaunitz a prisoner: “We had a phonograph and we broke every record but this one. We know it by heart.”

The centrality of “I am Titania” to this scene and, in fact, to the whole of the film’s soundtrack is worth noting. Taking the place of Powell and Pressburger’s initial choice—Wagner’s “Brunhilde Aria”—Thomas’s tune was not only recognizable and, as opposed to the Wagner aria, decidedly catchy but also a performance with a clear thematic and aesthetic significance for *Colonel Blimp*. First, because it was a French composer’s (Thomas’s) rendition of a German author’s (Goethe’s) use of an English playwright (Shakespeare), the song embodies nostalgia for a fragile, passing, and maybe only imaginary moment of European political and cultural comity; second, its association with Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship* (1795) calls to the surface the film’s fraught and maybe stalled-out generic relation to the *Bildungsroman*, a form that follows the development of an individual from adolescence to maturity (“forty years ago!”); finally, Thomas’s coloratura aria would have been well-known in 1902 as a technically demanding showstopper, a song that called specific attention to ways in which style can sometimes overwhelm substance. It is not only a famous melismatic
challenge, one that forces singers to show off and swoop gratuitously up and down the scale (it was, said one critic with distaste, an “obvious concession to the virtuosity of the soprano”), but also a canny musical representation of its character’s essential and, one might say, natural artifice. Goethe’s seductive, artlessly artful Philine is a consummate actor, a figure who thrives precisely because she treats identity as a protean form of play; it is no coincidence that she loves the role of Titania, Shakespeare’s wonder-working queen of the fairies. The several associations embedded in the tune—its cosmopolitanism, its culture, its relation to play and to style—come together to stand in for a European milieu that the film sets implicitly against the present of realpolitik and twentieth-century modern war. Indeed, this, the film suggests, might be one reason why the opportunistic proto-fascist Kaunitz can’t stand it; “I am Titania” represents not only a moment in the history of operatic style but also a system of values on the verge of extinction.

Finally confronting Kaunitz directly, Clive inadvertently insults the whole of the German army: because some of them are acquainted with Kaunitz, he shouts for all the café to hear, “the officers of the Imperial German Army ought to be ashamed of themselves!” In response to this blanket insult, two exquisite German officers (Oberleutnants von Ritter and von Reuman) appear the following day at the British embassy to “demand satisfaction” and to arrange the details of a duel to be fought between Clive and Theo Kretschmar-Schulдорff, then also a young and rising officer.

At the embassy a diplomat, the military attaché, and two German officers
sit down to hash out the details of the coming duel with the help of the Brown Codex: “This is our famous ‘Brown Codex,’ Major Goodhead, the ‘Code of Honour’ observed by all duelists.” They continue:

**VON RITTER:** Do you prefer to strip the upper part of the body of the combatants or do you prefer them in shirtsleeves?

**GOODHEAD:** Shirtsleeves. I see here [referring to the Brown Codex] that Paragraph 133 says: “It is advisable a few hours previous to the duel, to take a bath!”

**VON RITTER:** Only the principals. Not the seconds. (*He laughs.*)

**2ND SECRETARY:** It is a very strange sensation to be preparing a duel between two people who have never even seen each other.

**VON RITTER:** (*Carelessly*) It happens sometimes. Marriages also! (*He laughs again.*)

Seen from one perspective, this attention to the details and apparently absurd rules that govern social life is broadly representative of an ethnographic delight in custom that characterizes many of Powell and Pressburger’s films. This is as much the case with their attention to the structured and close-knit kinship rules that govern a traveling ballet company in *The Red Shoes* (1948) as it is in their interest in regional particulars in *I Know Where I’m Going!* (1945), *A Canterbury Tale* (1944), and even Powell’s early *The Edge of the World* (1937).

Von Ritter’s careless joke—“Marriages also!”—reveals yet another social aspect of the duel and the film as a whole. This, the first encounter between Clive and Theo, forms the basis of a lifelong friendship between men, a friendship that provides a larger frame for the film’s thinking about war, for the unfolding of its plots, and for the complex ways in which desire is figured, directed, and redirected from one war and from one person to the next. In other words, the scene is, as Andrew Moor points out, charged with an erotic excess that neither the film nor the duel can easily discharge: “Shot-reverse-shot close-ups, when Clive first meets Theo for the duel in *Blimp*, intend to record the men carefully inspecting their opponent’s mettle, and they certainly register mutual recognition and respect. Could this admiration of martial skill, military rank and athletic physique spill over into something more erotic though? The camera cranes away to the heavens almost before this thought can register. The answer, it seems, is a decisive ‘no,’ but the question still hovers.”

The shot/reverse shot sequence that
initiates the duel is indeed punctuated with a charged moment that the film seems promptly to forget. First we see Theo’s face: cold, ready, prepared. Then, when we cut to Clive, a faint but unmistakably friendly smile, oddly candid, plays across his face. Cutting back to Theo, we see his confusion: what can such a look mean? The smile might be part of Clive’s strategy; it throws Theo slightly off guard as proof of Clive’s ample confidence. It also makes clear Clive’s understanding of the duel as game. Although deadly serious, a duel is nonetheless a form of play and Clive, the good sport, smiles at play. It might, though, also mean something more. It adds in other words a flirty charge to the scene, a first hint that there might be something more to Clive’s affection for Theo than either the rules of the game or the terms of total war could contain.\(^5^2\)

That said, we must see the Brown Codex not only as a book, not only about living life socially or erotically with others, but also about a strange and highly formalized way of managing and, indeed, producing death. According to Kevin McAleer, by the end of the nineteenth century, several books like the Brown Codex had appeared in Germany, setting the terms of how duels were to be fought: “a series of authoritative handbooks had been published which dispelled confusion and, in tandem with fate, stage-managed the whole drama from insult to post-mortem.”\(^5^3\) As McAleer suggests, what was most striking about dueling in the \textit{fin-de-siècle} was the fact that it seemed to capture a more general and, as we will see in what follows, essentially fragile historical relation between social order, aesthetics, and an apparently basic human tendency toward aggression and violence; because the duel, he suggests, was not only violent but also an act of an apparently archaic and ritual violence, it stood as a point where contradictions necessary to social life at a given moment in time were revealed: “As the point of interaction between primordial destructive drives and civilizing impulses,
ritual violence in the modern age . . . provides historians with a prime example of humankind’s perennially ambivalent nature.” The duel was, in that case, an especially concentrated and late expression of what Norbert Elias refers to as the “civilizing process,” the particular ways in which particular societies both acknowledge and manage their aggression; for Elias, aggression is “bound . . . by the advanced state of the division of functions, and by the resulting greater dependence of individuals on each other and on the technical apparatus. It is confined and tamed by innumerable rules and prohibitions that have become self-constraints. It is as much transformed, ‘refined,’ ‘civilized,’ as all the other forms of pleasure, and it is only in dreams or in isolated outbursts that we account for as pathological that something of its immediate and unregulated force appears.”

In these terms, the duel needs to be understood as a form of both violence and violence-control. Although apparently gratuitous, the duel as ritual violence would represent a courtly and residual alternative to “immediate and unregulated” shows of force. It is, as it were, a secondary response to these primary processes. As I have suggested, it is exactly this specific and thus fragile compromise between the rules of the game and the barely repressed violence of the game that interests Powell and Pressburger. As terrible and wasteful as a duel is, it nonetheless represents a tentative, limited, and historically specific rapprochement between civilization and violence that seemed on the verge of being lost to the homogenizing and unrestrained pressure of total war.
However broken, the duel thus remains an expression of a civilizational ethos that Clive and Theo share and that both Elias and Huizinga associate with a particular phase of European life: “Being essentially a play-form, the duel is symbolical; it is the shedding of blood and not the killing that matters. We can call it a late form of ritual blood-play, the orderly regulation of the death-blow struck unawares in anger. The spot where the duel is fought bears all the marks of a play-ground; the weapons have to be exactly alike as in certain games; there is a signal for the start and the finish, and the number of shots is prescribed. When blood flows, honour is vindicated and restored.” Powell and Pressburger’s tacit opinion of the duel as a highly ritualized and entirely serious form of play more or less follows Huizinga’s; the seconds discuss the rules that govern the duel’s duration (“You will start only at the command ‘Los!’”), what weapons can be used (“You know, of course, that the saber must not exceed the maximum weight of 60 Dekagrammes!”), and its location (of course, a gymnasium, which Powell and Pressburger represent as organized with the geometric detail of a backgammon board). Although all parties are in agreement about the possible diplomatic consequence and thus the seriousness of the duel, they also agree to treat the conflict as an honest and honorable game played out between equals. For Powell and Pressburger, as well as for Huizinga, the duel as game is thus an expression of a particular and passing moment in high bourgeois European culture; and although this playful spirit characterizes the plot, the dialogue, and the visual style of the film’s first act, it more or less fades with the onset of Clive’s second and third wars as the cultural conditions that made such a display possible or even imaginable had also all but faded away. This is once again to mark a historical difference between war as a game and war as “the real thing” that Spud embraces by ignoring the rule, “war starts at midnight.” Unlike Clive and Theo, Spud not only betrays the rules of the game but also denies that war has any rules at all.

Clive, on the contrary, is associated with a variety of games throughout Colonel Blimp, with cards, polo, rugby, hunting, and so on. Indeed, his ready facility with the logic of the game and the terms and performance of the duel explicitly aligns him with the principal military theories of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and, in particular, with those of Carl von Clausewitz, the great nineteenth-century philosopher of war. An early presentation “of the idea behind the story of Blimp” (probably prepared in the spring of 1942) describes Clive’s military education in this way: “In his youth Clive Candy was full of enterprise and impatience with his elders. His opinions about war were no better and no worse than the principal military figures of his time. He was anxious to succeed in his
chosen profession, he saw active service early in his career and was lucky in obtaining promotion and distinction. He kept his eyes open during the South African campaign, he studied Clausewitz and the other military theorists. He was a promising young officer. There were hundreds like him. It makes sense, then, that Clive’s greatest moment of represented heroism takes the form of a duel, the type of combat that Clausewitz took as the purest form of war: “I shall not begin by expounding a pedantic, literary definition of war, but go straight to the heart of the matter, to the duel. War is nothing but a duel on a larger scale.” In placing a duel at the heart of their film’s first act, Powell and Pressburger imply a historical connection between Clive, a theory of war that privileged the duel as a form, and a culture that made the man, the duel, and the theory possible.

The duel is Clausewitz’s ideal form of combat for a few reasons. First, it stands, in its radical simplicity, as a necessary heuristic; because of its conceptual purity, the idea of the duel allows Clausewitz to draw an implied line between the theory and practice of war, between war as it would behave if left in a vacuum and war as it in fact occurs in a world defined by a whole range of difficult and conflicting causes and effects. Clausewitz thus focuses on what he calls “absolute war,” a pure but only theoretical or idealized image of war against which the incalculably particular fog of real wars might begin to be measured and differentiated: “Once the antagonists have ceased to be mere figments of a theory and become actual states and governments, when war is no longer a theoretical affair but a series of actions obeying

“War is nothing but a duel.”
its own peculiar laws, reality supplies the data from which we can deduce the unknown that lies ahead.” For Clausewitz, absolute war cannot be achieved because limits specific to particular conflicts will always get in war’s way; although war seems in and of itself to want to drive toward its extreme form, reality intervenes, setting limits to what any particular war can in fact achieve. These limits take the form of what he calls “friction,” material conditions that the world throws up in the way of war’s immanent drive toward its essence (bad weather, poor roads, the vagaries of human desire and ability); as Gary Wills puts it, “time and space militate against the abstract unity of war considered in itself.”

In addition to these material sources of friction, Clausewitz understood war as held back also by the political limits of any given conflict: “war cannot be divorced from political life; and whenever this occurs in our thinking about war, the many links that connect the two elements are destroyed and we are left with something pointless and devoid of sense.” Real wars are fought for worldly interests and ends, reasons antithetical to the idea of absolute war as an end in itself. As a result, states will always pull back from absolute war’s pure and general end—that is, the wholesale destruction of the enemy—either once a particular political end has been achieved or once the military cost of a war threatens to outweigh its possible political gain. Wills writes, “Victory must never exist for its own sake at the strategic (as opposed to the tactical) level.” Although it is in the essential character of war qua war to seek out its absolute limit, material conditions and political ends that are both external and necessary to particular wars keep them in check and from reaching their immanent and absolute—their total—form. For Clausewitz, war works dialectically, driving itself relentlessly and abstractly forward toward the material and political limits that in turn hold it back. Jan Mieszkowski observes: “As a duel, war follows specific rules and has a precise beginning and end. A ritual or performance, it is a staged spectacle that obeys its own rhetorical logic irrespective of the uses to which it is put by its performers or audience members.”

The elaborate system of customs, conventions, and rules embodied in the Brown Codex thus produce the duel as an autonomous military event situated within and subordinated to a wider and more complex political context. Insofar as diplomats with political reasons of their own arrange the details of a duel that soldiers must fight, it is an embodiment of a war as both different from and a continuation of politics by other means. It serves specific political ends—Clive, without knowing or caring much about it, helps the embassy avoid an embarrassing international situation—and polices a difference that defines the Clausewitzian view: the ultimate dif-
ference between soldiers and civil servants, between combat and diplomacy, between war and politics.

“Then, without a Break . . .”

Given its centrality to the film’s plot as well as its place in a larger historical discourse around the changing culture of European war, it is odd that we do not in fact see the duel. Instead of seeing the fight, we see drawn-out preparations for the duel and its very beginning before being swept away from it in a gesture that recalls the earlier no-cut, the tracking shot of Clive falling into a pool old and emerging from it a much younger man. As the swordsmen begin to fight, the camera tracks up and away from their combat, toward and then right through the gymnasium’s high ceiling. Indeed, the gym’s visual field is high, wide, and notably deep, a fact that allows Powell and Pressburger to track bodies and things as they move side to side, forward and back, and ultimately up and even through the ceiling. Powell and Pressburger’s script describes their trick shot this way: “Then—without a break—the camera slips through the huge windows and we are out in the street.”

The camera then hovers for a moment up in the lightly falling snow before tracking back down and in toward a carriage in which Edith awaits news of the duel’s outcome. As in the earlier example, the shot is marked by its oddly fluid quality; where we might expect some kind of pronounced cut to announce the passage from inside to outside, Powell and Pressburger use an effect—a soft, self-effacing dissolve—that blurs the physical barrier between those different spaces. Because they more or less obscure the cut, the inside seems in this sequence simply to become the outside.

The shot looks like and is, I believe, partly a deliberate reference to another, more famous shot: the look inside Kane’s snow globe at the beginning of Citizen Kane (1941), a similarly retrospective film about how a past produces the present. In the case of Welles’s film, the fluid, suspended space of the globe’s interior conveys an almost amniotic sense of security and nostalgia. As, however, the globe rolls out of the dying man’s hand and shatters, we trade the floating and oceanic feeling of its homely interior for the sharp reality of the world beyond. The move from one to the other is, in other words, proof of the hard difference between Kane’s world-making narcissism and the friction of things as, after all, they really are. However, whereas Kane shows us that where there is an inside there is also an outside and that the difference between them must matter, in Colonel Blimp, the ostentatiously unbroken movement away from the duel into the larger world beyond points to an interest in erasing not only the cinematic apparatus
as presence but also the difference between inside and outside. Just as the camera’s long, limpid tracking motion across the pool seemed to undermine the difference between present and past, so does the subtle move toward and through the roof seem to undermine the difference between inside and out, between the interior, organized play-space of the gymnasium and the inchoate world beyond. The break or cut that shatters the effect of fluid singularity in *Kane* never arrives in *Colonel Blimp*. As a result, the scene encourages us once again to feel the absence of the cut, the break, the difference both in its own terms and in relation to cinema.

Why, in a scene otherwise apparently invested in rules that allow for the constitutive, Clausewitzian difference between things (politics and war, friend and enemy, the beginning and end of combat) does the camera turn away from the differential logic of the duel in order to execute a shot that, at least the level of form, undermines what the scene had seemed to support? Why turn to the fluid space of the no-cut when something solid seems more appropriate? On the one hand, the drift away from the duel is, as Moor points out, a way of containing erotic possibilities that had been raised by the buildup to and the stripping down for the duel; just when we want most to watch, the film lowers a veil, preventing us from seeing Clive
and Theo’s bodies. (Some of this cinematically repressed erotic excess, I maintain, makes its return later in the film.) On the other hand, it is, I think, at this point that the film makes at the level of style its clearest argument about the nature of the move away from earlier ways of thinking about war toward Spud’s rough prescription: “brute force and ruddy ignorance!” Insofar as the shot blurs the difference between inside and outside, its style seems to run against the grain of its content and implicitly to question the idea that war picks up where politics leaves off. Where limited, Clausewitzian war depends on rules that maintain the difference between politics and war, total war—the war that Spud endorses—refuses to see politics or private life as safe in or different from war: “when war begins all private life comes to an end.”

Whereas, at the level of its content, the film makes a case for the historical separation of military and diplomatic imperatives, at the level of film style, the dissolution of the difference between inside and outside—between the bound, rule-based world of the duel and the fluid chaos of everyday life, between the restricted economy of the game and the general economy of everything else—anticipates the collapse of a social and cultural order that allowed wars to be imagined in limited terms and that was already on the verge of slipping away in 1902. Philipp von Hilgers writes:

> The duel—which had been the principle to which, when in doubt, all complexities of war were still reduced up to the First World War—had thereby served its time. The Thirty Years’ War might have produced the monopoly of violence, but the world war realized it in its totality. The threat of the death penalty in Prussian law did not put an end to the duel. Nor did Kant’s appeal to reason, which argued that duelers by no means demonstrated the courage of the warrior, which was instrumental to states. No state power was able to fight an institution that allowed the suffering and the exercise of violence for the restoration of honor. The duel is finally abandoned with the First World War, due to the intrinsic killing mechanisms of the war, which revoke the equivalence with the duel.

The years between Clive’s first, second, and third wars thus coincide with a broad European repudiation or revision of Clausewitz’s sense of the necessary structuring difference between real limited war and the ideal, heuristic form of absolute war, a revision that, as we’ve begun to see, affects aspects of living and thinking that go beyond the technical abstractions of military strategy. Powell and Pressburger’s representation of Clive Candy as a follower and embodiment of Clausewitzian principles takes place against these
changes. They take care to portray Clive as a late and residual survival of the same bourgeois culture that produced Clausewitz and that had been all but undone by the events of World War I. More, though, than simply tracking a passage from one idea to another about war, the film asks what difference that passage makes. Was the violence of World War II different in kind from what had come before, or was it simply a more direct, a more honest expression of what has always been at stake in war? Should we understand the doctrine and the tactics of total war as a tragic and insane exception, a lapse from a continuous logic of European civilization, or instead as a particularly virulent expression of a violence necessary to and always at work at the heart of that civilization? What makes Colonel Blimp capable of arguing for war and of saying something significantly more than that is the fact that it can, however incoherently, hold on to two ideas at once, seeing total war and its violence as both exception and rule.

The Rules of the Game

Colonel Blimp casts the elaborate structure of games, duels, hunts, codes of behavior, and good sportsmanship that characterize the lives of educated Europeans in 1902 as an important part of a shared social, political, and military life. As David Bell puts it in relation to the long history of eighteenth and nineteenth-century European war, “This state of virtually permanent but restrained warfare seemed entirely natural and proper to the noblemen who led Europe’s armies under the Old Regime, for it allowed the aristocratic values of honor and service to find full expression without serious threats to social stability and prosperity.” War, because it was understood as an important but distinct (because professional) part of life, could exist alongside a coherent and stable social world; because it was both continuous with and different from the rest of life, it could exist as a natural and ordered—if violent—aspect of European existence. That said, although his manners owe a self-conscious debt to that earlier moment of war as serious play, Clive is not himself exactly of that old order; he is rather a representative of what Franco Moretti has taken as the bourgeois déjà-la, one of those “already existing things,” to which a class and culture turn when their survival is under threat. Clive’s old-fashioned sense of war and his commitment to antiquated codes of chivalry thus draw on residual cultural forms in a manner that both gives his way of life its last historical chance (it borrows, as it were, a stability from that past that it can’t muster in the present) and stands as sure evidence of the decline and demise of that way of life.

Spud is, on the other hand, a resolutely modern and historically domi-
nant example of what Huizinga refers to as the spoil-sport: “The player who trespasses against the rules or ignores them is a ‘spoil-sport.’ The spoil-sport is not the same as the false player, the cheat; for the latter pretends to be playing the game and, on the face of it, still acknowledges the magic circle. It is curious to note how much more lenient society is to the cheat than to the spoil-sport. This is because the spoil-sport shatters the play-world itself. By withdrawing from the game he reveals the relativity and fragility of the play-world in which he had temporarily shut himself with others.”

Because he rejects not only the war game (“war starts at midnight!”) but also the idea that war could itself be understood as a kind of chivalric contest with rules of its own, Spud represents the end of an already attenuated civilizational project, a fading bourgeois way of life that the film encourages us to understand both in terms of a larger compromise between politics and society and in terms of the way that project allowed for and was reflected in the individual’s psychic management of aggression and desire.

I have argued elsewhere that a similar tension between residual and emergent attitudes toward violence is at work in Jean Renoir’s The Rules of the Game (1939). That film’s careful representation of the formalized chaos of an antic week in the country and the hunt that is its thematic and aesthetic highlight is threatened at every turn with a violence that would undo a narrow-bandwidth symbolic order that continues—if only barely—to organize the desires and aspirations of its bourgeois participants. Clive inhabits much the same civilizational twilight as La Colinere’s partygoers. His behavior seems at once to represent the successful logic of a certain moment in time, a moment when ritualized performances of violence kept another “immediate and unregulated” violence at bay, and to anticipate the moment when those performances could no longer manage or bind that other violence. We might consider Clive’s dozens of animal heads, trophies he collects between wars when he is forced to play at the hunt instead of at war. Powell and Pressburger handle the appearance of these heads with considerable cinematic wit. In order to mark the passage of years between the film’s three acts, the heads “pop” onto the wall in one jump cut after another, a style that anticipates the swinging-sixties cinematography of Richard Lester or even lighter moments in Godard.

That said, the scenes’ lightness doesn’t entirely dampen the raw intensity of Clive’s taste for the kill. The sheer number of heads is something shocking, evidence of a kind of biocidal compulsion. His globetrotting is cast in terms of a Blimpish indifference to the broad violence of a waning British Empire that, as we have seen, Orwell took as the war’s big lie; when asked about the pain of losing his wife in a foreign country, he responds, “It
wasn’t a foreign country. It was Jamaica.” The film also introduces Clive’s role in World War I with a last cut to an image of a German spiked helmet accompanied by a plate that says, “Hun. Flanders, 1918.” The inclusion of this helmet in his collection is, of course, tasteless, suggesting limits internal to Clive’s residual system for managing what pleasure he takes in organized violence. Whereas the game was meant to stand as a *cordon sanitaire* separating play violence from real violence, the trophy helmet points to an affective contradiction that was always at work in Clive’s gentlemanly type of impulse control. The gesture thus remains a late representative of a residual cultural logic while it shows the degree to which that logic was always already on the verge of fraying into obsolescence both because of external historical pressures and because of the disarraying force of a necessary contradiction.

Clive’s growing collection of animal heads points also in two other related directions that, once again, undermine differences between past and present wars, between the imagined chivalry or legality of Clive’s early military experience and the indiscriminate brutality of total war. In the first case, the imperial cast of Clive’s collection reaches explicitly back to his unrepresented experience in the Boer War, the film’s off-screen conflict that, I maintain, stands in *Colonel Blimp* as a more or less explicit contrast to the enormity and violence of World Wars I and II. Of course, it makes sense that, seen from the perspective of those later wars, the Boer War might be dimly remembered as an aristocratic game or, indeed, a boy’s adventure tale. In his 1937 memoir of the conflict, J. F. C. Fuller called it “the last of the gentlemen’s wars”: “It belonged to the days when kings fought kings, and not to a democratic age when demented, newspaper-fed masses of men vilify and tear each other to pieces. It belonged to the days of the sword and the lance and not to those of the magazine rifle and machine gun.”
Fuller’s halcyon memory of the Boer War says much about the revisionary force of World War I, an experience that not only shaped Fuller’s career as an increasingly critical (and, indeed, increasingly Clausewitzian) military historian but also made him into an early advocate of a fast, mobile, and limited type of warfare also associated with Basil Liddell Hart.

However, as Fuller himself later admitted, there was little that was gentlemanly about the Boer War, a conflict in which the British indeed earned some of the vitriol that brings Clive to Berlin in 1902: “They hate us in Germany. They are spreading propaganda all over Europe that we are killing women and children in South Africa, that we are starving them in concentration camps, shooting mothers, burning babies—you wouldn’t believe the things they have invented!” Whatever else, the Boer War was a brutal, modern war. Once the Boers—outgunned and outnumbered—transitioned into guerrilla tactics after the battle of Paardeberg in February of 1900, the viciousness of the fighting and the cruelty of the fighters became more pronounced. This was partly a consequence of technological developments that would be perfected later in the century: with, for instance, the invention of smokeless gunpowder, “the old terror of a visible foe had given way to the paralyzing sensation of advancing on an invisible one, which fostered the suspicion that the enemy was everywhere. A universal terror, rather than a localized danger, now enveloped the attacker.” The British move to counterinsurgency tactics led to even more disturbing kinds of excess: “Thousands of Boer homesteads were burned as part of a British ‘scorched earth’ policy designed to deprive Afrikaner guerrillas of their primary sources of support in the countryside.” In addition to the destruction of Boer homes, the British also established a network of concentration camps, a fact made all the more uncomfortable given the phrase’s later association with the Nazis (the words had already become a grim punchline in Ernst Lubitsch’s 1942 comedy, *To Be, or Not to Be*). By October 1901, “the concentration camps had acquired a terrible notoriety. Overcrowding, insanitary conditions, an insufficiently balanced diet, and inadequate planning caused a tragic loss of life. Women and children, swept into the camps from isolated farms, were easy prey to a variety of diseases, and measles, typhoid, jaundice, malaria, bronchitis and pneumonia all took their toll.”

Although Powell and Pressburger’s film seems largely to support—or at least not explicitly to contradict—Clive’s idea of the Boer War as different in kind from what came after, that war’s equivocal reputation—the violence of the conflict, the controversy that surrounded the camps in Germany and England, and the real severity of British methods—puts destabilizing and immanent pressure on a difference between wars to which the film seems
otherwise committed.\textsuperscript{80} Indeed, the appearance of the brutally effective South African officer, Major Van Zijl, in the film’s middle section suggests as much: “Now listen! I am in command here now and I know how to deal with you scum. I am not a simple English gentleman but a simple South African and I assure you that I have means to get what I want.”\textsuperscript{81} While the film draws a clear and immediate distinction between his apparent willingness to torture World War I German prisoners and Clive’s more humane and less successful approach, the scene and Van Zijl’s scarred face seem tacitly to suggest that his expertise might have been hard won at English hands a decade and a half before, a possibility that hints at something darkly tenacious within Powell and Pressburger’s history of British violence.

This brings us to an even more suggestive and immediate second aspect of Clive’s hunting trophies. If the appearance of animal’s heads one after the other would suggest a general sense of British sportsmanship, the same strain of aristocratic play that the young Fuller fantasized as at work in the Boer War, it would also have invoked one sportsman and politician in particular: Lord Halifax, the former foreign secretary who, along with Chamberlain, had emerged by 1943 as nearly synonymous with the policy of appeasement. Halifax was a highly visible hunter, having been made master of the Middleton Hunt in 1932. As a result, he was invited in late 1937 to attend the International Sporting Exhibition in Berlin. Members of Chamberlain’s government, particularly Sir Neville Henderson, ambassador to Germany, were eager to take the invitation as an opportunity for Halifax to meet

“A simple South African.”
informally with Hitler and to feel out his intentions in Europe. Halifax’s meeting with Hitler at the Berghof, his Bavarian mountain retreat, had been well-publicized in the British press and amounted in hindsight to the first disastrous step in the process that would culminate with Chamberlain’s concessions to Hitler in Munich. Going against the counsel of Anthony Eden, the foreign secretary he would soon replace, Halifax suggested to Hitler that, under the right circumstances, Britain would not resist an expansion of Germany’s borders: “I said that there were no doubt other questions arising out of the Versailles settlement which seemed to us capable of causing trouble if they were mishandled, e.g. Danzig, Austria, Czechoslovakia. On all these matters we were not necessarily concerned to stand for the status quo as today, but we were concerned to avoid such treatment of them as would be likely to cause trouble. If reasonable settlements could be reached with the free assent and goodwill of those primarily concerned we certainly had no desire to block.”

This, of course, was exactly what Hitler wanted to hear, and it helped to set in motion events that would lead to war.

Although there’s much to say about Halifax’s visit and its consequences, of interest here is its visual association with the 1937 hunting exhibition. Newsreel footage of Halifax’s visit has him in front of a wall of mounted heads that made up the British corner of the exhibit; we see an antelope “shot by H. M. the Queen” alongside other grisly examples. What’s more, the voiceover makes explicit links between the exhibition and Halifax’s not-so-secret mission, calling the trip a show of “friendship for Germany” and pausing significantly to describe Halifax’s passing look at a map of “Germany’s lost colonies,” a clear reference to the Sudetenland Crisis. The oddity of the footage and its clumsy yoking together of Halifax’s taste for hunting and what would come to be seen as Britain’s shame is striking and

Halifax in Berlin.
would likely have made an impression on Powell and Pressburger, who decorate Clive’s study in a similarly sanguinary style; looking back from the film to the footage, it seems as if Halifax could have delivered his remarks from Clive’s room, an association that invokes a connection between Clive’s apparently harmless sense of sportsmanship and the misguided values that allowed Hitler to rise so quickly to power.

Such a connection between these images in 1937 and Powell and Pressburger’s 1943 film might seem strained if it weren’t for the fact that David Low, creator of the original Colonel Blimp character, had himself used the image of Halifax surrounded by mounted heads as the basis of a pointed caricature printed in the *Evening Standard* on November 19, 1937. Entitled “Nazi Hunting Exhibition,” it shows a doddering Halifax arm-in-arm with Hitler in front of mounted heads labeled “Weimar,” “Versailles,” and “Locarno,” suggesting that Hitler’s choice of game included the governments and treaties that had stood and might continue to stand in his way. Next to those heads are three or more empty plaques, each about ominously to be filled with another treaty, another government, or, indeed, another country. Mussolini giggles in secret beneath a nearby chair while the British lion looks with appropriate anxiety at the wall’s waiting vacancies. Powell and Pressburger gesture toward and add to Low’s list in their second hunting sequence when the montage of appearing heads culminates in an otherwise inexplicable shot of a map of Munich, using a series of juxtapositions to suggest that the conference turned out indeed to be another of Hitler’s

Nazi hunting exhibition.
trophies and that an English commitment to the logic of the hunt led in some inevitable and occult way to the disaster of appeasement and all that followed.

Taken together, the newsreel footage of Halifax in 1937, Low’s caricature, and Clive’s trophy room make a tacit case for a relation between a set of values—sportsmanship, fair play, and so on—and the folly of appeasement. They also suggest something important about the cultural limits of those values when they were brought face to face with Hitler and the threat of total war. One of the most awkward moments in Halifax’s visit came when he tried to engage the dictator in a conversation about the hunting exhibition. The vegetarian Hitler, it turned out, hated hunting: “I can’t see what there is in shooting; you go out armed with a highly perfected modern weapon and without risk to yourself kill a defenseless animal. Of course Göring tells me that the pleasure lies not in the killing, but in the comradely expedition in the open air. Very well. I merely reply: ‘If that’s the case, let’s spare ourselves all bother and make a comradely expedition to a slaughter-house where in the greatest comradeship we can together kill a cow in the open air.’” The moment was awkward because Hitler was a spoil-sport. Whereas Halifax was the consummate sportsman, seeking comradeship “in the open air,” Hitler took the trouble to call the whole thing stupid, to reveal as foolish the rules that had organized the hunt and a whole way of life. Taken by itself, Hitler’s distaste for hunting is a morbidly ironic bit of trivia; understood, as Low seems already to have done in 1937, as part of the failure of a larger civilizational project, it is rather indicative of a rejection of the rules of the game that Hitler represents. Having turned the defunct treaties of the past—Versailles and Locarno—into trophies, Hitler reveals himself as unbound by the traditional rules of the game, which in this case were embodied in the form of treaties that had ostensibly underwritten European political life. Dan Reiter writes: “In the 1930s, appeasers like Chamberlain put faith in the hope that a true settlement granting sufficient concessions to dissuade Hitler from going to war might be possible. Churchill vehemently disagreed. After Germany remilitarized the Rhineland in March 1936, in violation of the Versailles Treaty, Churchill remarked that ‘Herr Hitler has torn up all the Treaties.’” This is the difference that Low tried to capture in 1937 and that Powell and Pressburger sought to represent in 1943: the fragile, maybe false, but no less consequential difference between those who order life according to the rules of the game and those who deny the existence of rules altogether; as Lord Winster put it in “Stop Playing the Game!,” a 1942 piece for the *Evening Standard*: “Hitler does not play bowls, he plays bombs.”

*Colonel Blimp* thus casts a paradox internal to the British experience
of World War II as a historical opposition between two different kinds of war, the war that fully exhausted its violence when its self-consciously limited strategic and political goals were achieved and the war that found its strategic ends subordinate to violence as an end in itself, a war that could, however misguidedly, be thought of as some kind of game or gentlemanly adventure and a war that self-consciously suspended not only the rules of the game but also rules that had seemed to give a bourgeois European culture its coherence. Put differently, in working to represent a moment on the cusp of two opposed cultural responses to the idea and the practice of organized warfare, the film begins to make a complex case both for the difference between those two types of war and for the continuous violence that links them. The film both really acknowledges what circumstances made the Boer War and World Wars I and II different from one another and makes a quietly disturbing case that those differences might not survive scrutiny. In other words, where we might see the violence of total war as different in kind from other types of violence, Powell and Pressburger ask us to consider the possibility that violence—historical violence, original violence, human violence—does not change but instead finds different expressions in different wars; this is violence as a stable and recalcitrant content that is variously inflected by the different forms of war.

Sic Transit Candy

Colonel Blimp opens with a shot of an ersatz early modern tapestry, one Powell and Pressburger commissioned from the Royal College of Needlework; the image’s details activate a number of broadly familiar, chivalric codes: a central courtly figure, a pastoral landscape, and a coat of arms. Instead, though, of an anonymous knight, the image features a tricked-out version of Low’s familiar cartoon Blimp, sitting big-bellied and barefoot on a horse and lifting his lance proudly and ridiculously into the air. His coat of arms, buttressed on either side by Michael Powell’s Irish Setters, features the paraphernalia of his class: mustaches, a cricket bat, a glass of port. The insertion of these wry and trivial modern touches into the chivalric context of the tapestry does a number of things. It anticipates the quixotic nature of Clive’s commitment to the past as well as his doomed pursuit of his “feminine ideal,” the Dulcinea who drifts through his life as Edith, Barbara, and then, at last, Angela or, as she calls herself, “Johnny.” Its untimely mix of objects and styles is a compressed instance of the film’s larger effort to represent both life and history as a series of distinct, overlapping, related, and sometimes discordant layers. And, as it suggests inevitable conflicts between past and present values, it also imagines the possibility that the
history of European culture might best be understood as a continuous if serpentine line. Insofar as the film is, as I have suggested, concerned with the relation between the British past and a logic of total war that threatens to undo that past, the tapestry works both to suggest the long lifespan of courtly values in British and European life and another, darker story that calls those very values contrapuntally into question.

In evoking a specifically chivalric style, the tapestry suggests a set of more particular ideological connections between past and present; the image’s mix of ritualized play and real violence—war planes fly over cricket and rugby fields, tanks roll on toward foxglove—suggests a complicated set of relations between violence and civilization. The tapestry’s mix of natural imagery and modern violence offers in part a concentrated expression of a relation between war and pastoral that Kate McLoughlin takes as essential to some representations of war: “Intrusion and interaction, then, characterise the relationship between the bucolic and the bellicose. War is immanent in the rural, insofar as its sounds may penetrate the quietude at any moment, converting ready-made agricultural implements into weaponry. (The lurking land-mine is a perverted sort of immanence in the earth.) Erwin Panofsky, referring to Virgil, suggests that suffering creates a ‘dissonance’ in Arcady that must be ‘resolved,’ and yet it seems that such resolution is indefinitely deferred. Dissonance—the warlike—is ineradicable from Arcadia.” And just as William Empson famously cast the pastoral as a matter “of putting the complex into the simple,” so can we see Powell and
Pressburger’s tapestry as an effort to manage contradictions immanent to the experience of modern war, tensions that exist between the present and the past, play and violence, art and war. Leo Mellor sees something similar at work in accounts of the wartime “greening” of bomb sites, in various efforts to capture the pastoral ambiguities of “implausibly lush zones in the midst of London . . . that resulted from incendiary and high-explosive bomb attacks.” One might look for yet another version of pastoral in the propaganda films of Empson’s friend and sometimes collaborator, Humphrey Jennings. In more but mostly less motivated ways, his films *Words for Battle* (1941), *Listen to Britain* (1942), and *Fires Were Started* (1943) feature nearly identical shots of wind blowing through a tree’s leaves—Jennings’s related effort to capture the pagan and, perhaps, antinarrative energy of Empson’s pastoral on film.

The tapestry thus embodies the difficult and dialectical cultural logic that Empson had sought to capture in *Some Versions of Pastoral* and that Elias describes in *The Civilizing Process*, where the “sociogenesis” of courtly life was tied to the long, slow rise of modern capitalism, the increasing economic integration of an increasingly diverse Europe, and thus the greater and greater need for individuals to control their apparently native impulses toward aggression and violence. For Elias, an innate human need for violence was both the root cause of and the single greatest threat to the civilizing process. As he later wrote in “The Breakdown of Civilization,” what was maybe most disturbing about the violence unleashed by World War II was the fact that it stood as a practical repudiation of the idea of European culture as essentially progressive: “And in fact, people who as children had been brought up in the idea that their own, higher civilization was a part of their ‘nature’ or their ‘race,’ might very well have fallen into despair and been driven to the opposite extreme when, as adults, they noticed that this flattering belief was contradicted by events.”

The tapestry, in other words, presents us with a condensed version of a bind in *Colonel Blimp*: on the one hand, the image offers a neat emblem for the aesthetic repression of violence that Elias takes as essential to the civilizational development of a particular segment of European society; on the other hand, the image suggests that the civilizing process might contain within itself an immanent trace of its own destruction. Placing tanks and bombers in the midst of a pastoral representation of nature, chivalry, and play is to recall the terms of Panofsky’s great 1936 essay, “‘Et in Arcadia Ego’: Poussin and the Elegiac Tradition.” However, whereas earlier versions of the phrase and its pictorial representation had pointed to the inevitability of death—“Even in Arcady I, Death, hold sway”—in *Colonel Blimp* the ineluc-
table presence of war’s violence within the weave of the pastoral reveals rather the anxiety that, as opposed to an interruption in or an exception to a longer and progressive European history, war and violence are rather essential to human life at even its most civilized moments: even there, the tapestry seems to say, violence holds sway.

As opposed to presenting total war as something different in kind from an earlier type of combat, Powell and Pressburger’s tapestry and film seem rather to suggest that the violence of total war was in fact always already there and that a return of a violence that had been repressed but neither mastered nor destroyed was more or less inevitable within European culture. Instead of a new violence, total war was a deferred but apparently inevitable expression of an “original violence” that Huizinga and Elias saw as the motive force for the development of European civilization in the first place.

Things have now come to such a pass that the system of international law is no longer acknowledged, or observed, as the very basis of culture and civilized living. 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 behavior, 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.90

That this encounter with the civilizational tenacity of violence is managed within an ersatz courtly tapestry is all the more important given the film’s commitment to presenting its history of the twentieth century as a history of style. As the film moves through each of its three wars, it also shifts its use of cinematic technique, its soundtrack, its palate of colors, and its presentation of character. Moving from one act and one war to the next, the film’s colors become more muted, its spaces deeper and more complex, and its performances increasingly naturalistic. The overall arc of the film from the beginning to the middle of the twentieth century is, in that case, cast in distinctly stylistic terms. After the film’s opening in the future-present, its plot begins with the sharp contrasts and bright colors of 1902, moves through “the Khaki period” of World War I, to end back with a more or less recognizably realistic representation of 1942. In other words, the film seems to gesture from within toward a whole history of cinema, embedding in its own internal development a logic that moves us toward its lived present of cinematic style and total war.
There are a few ways to understand this. First, the film refers self-consciously to cinematic history (the technological difference between black-and-white and color) and, more specifically, to *The Wizard of Oz*’s (1939) shift from black-and-white to color in order to mark a passage from one to another world (they of course both return to and reverse this logic in *A Matter of Life and Death* [1946], where ordinary life on earth is presented in color and heaven appears in a silvery black and white); there are a number of direct references to *Oz* in *Colonel Blimp* (prior to his early attack, Spud jokes that he is off to see “the Wizard”—Candy’s code name—“because of the wonderful things he’s done”).91 Second, there’s an effort here to specify a more determinate relationship between cinema, memory, and history. Powell and Pressburger write in the notes to their script that they rely on these stylistic shifts because, “Sights, sounds, but above all, colours, make up the memories of a generation: more so in the case of the period with which we have dealt. 1902 was the commencement of the Edwardian era, full of charm, prosperity, spaciousness and leisure, to which it seemed there could never be an end.”92 The past is represented differently both because it really looked different and because the film tries to register the feeling of that difference between past and present as something in itself.

Powell and Pressburger were pioneers in the use of Technicolor, and, as we can see from *Colonel Blimp*, their use of color extended well beyond its capacity for spectacle; rather, because they believed that memory was itself a play between vision, sound, and color, a Technicolor film would be able to reproduce the force of memory and thus living history in a way few other mediums could. Neil Rattigan writes that in *Colonel Blimp* color literally makes “the past glow.”93 We can see this at work in the film’s middle “Khaki” section. After wandering through the wasteland of the front line, Clive enters a convent where he will once again encounter his romantic ideal, this time in the form of Barbara Wynne, a war nurse. The scene is striking because of how the red of the nurse’s uniforms, particularly the red of their red crosses, leaps from the screen and threads a hint of ecstatic possibility through the drab weave of World War I; red seems in fact to have leapt from the film’s first section into its second and to stage a hopeful confrontation between the stylized simplicity of 1902 and the horror of 1918. Color in this case is not simply a means of getting at the past; it is rather a way to hop ecstatically from one moment in time to another. It is, as Wordsworth says of his poetic “spots of time,” “a renovating virtue,” an untimely leap that brings the past into the present as something other than a memory. Indeed, the Technicolor prominence of those red crosses suggests another link between the film and a longer tradition of chivalry upon which
it depends; Clive appears here as a weary Redcrosse Knight in search of his lady and just emerged from a scene of despair where “old stockes and stubs of trees,/Whereon nor fruit nor leafe was ever seene,/Did hang upon the ragged rocky knees.”34 An electric splash of red thus connects the past and present of Clive’s life—it is a “renovating” short-circuit—while revealing a deeper connection between apparently incommensurate moments within English cultural history.

What’s most important here is what Powell and Pressburger have to say about the stylistic, the cultural, and the political force of the past. Colonel Blimp’s version of 1902 is brightly colored and marked with high contrasts, brilliant golds, and deep reds; its sound is the sound of a waltz that seems never to end; and its characters sound exaggerated single notes, including the braying soldier, the crusty career diplomat, the university wag, the brassy old aunt, and the German stiff-neck. While 1902 was, of course, different from what came later, Powell and Pressburger present its differences strategically. Like the tapestry, the style of the film’s first act seems to come not from “forty years ago” but rather from an entirely other age, an age described by Huizinga in The Waning of the Middle Ages: “To the world when it was half a thousand years younger, the outlines of all things seemed more clearly marked than to us. The contrast between suffering and joy, between adversity and happiness, appeared more striking.”35 The at once reduced and exaggerated palate of the film’s first act—particularly when read in relation to the tapestry and the film’s broad commitment to the residual virtues of chivalry, fair play, and cultural continuity—seems to evoke a set of values and images associated with an idea of the late Middle Ages that took on a special urgency between the wars and in the work of Huizinga, Elias, Marc Bloch, and others. In each of these cases, what was striking about the idea of the late Middle Ages was the fact that it seemed to have found a way not to avoid violence and aggression but rather to find managed forms—chivalry, games, more or less ordered forms of combat—in which to indulge or to express aggression while also minimizing its social consequence. Although undoubtedly a fantasy, the idea was that the late Middle Ages had found restricted, ritualized, and fragile social forms that let an earlier time have its violence without being completely consumed by its violence.

Colonel Blimp thus represents a more general interest in placing the present of total war in some kind of relation to a longer British and more broadly European history of war, violence, and society. As I will show in the next chapter, this is also an important aspect of Olivier’s Henry V (1944), a film that offers a modern cinematic representation of an early modern theatrical performance of an earlier modern battle. Looking both at that
film and at *Colonel Blimp*, we can see in the British cinema an effort to understand the violence of modern warfare in terms of a longer social history. We might, in other words, understand both films as part of a larger effort to represent the relations between past and present in terms both historical and ethical, an effort that Orson Welles associated with his own Vietnam-era take on the Henriad: “Even if the good old days never existed, the fact that we can conceive of such a world is, in fact, an affirmation of the human spirit. That the imagination of man is capable of creating the myth of a more open, more generous time is not a sign of our folly. Every country has its ‘Merrie England,’ a season of innocence, a dew-bright morning of the world. Shakespeare sings of that lost time in many of his plays, and Falstaff—that pot-ridden old rogue—is its perfect embodiment.”

A turn back to an idealized late medieval or early modern past was common in the interwar and war years: “The unprecedented horrors of the Great War may have stimulated a reaction against romanticism among some interwar modernists, but it also imparted a renewed life to the moribund arts and crafts tradition: the war was critical to the transformation of nineteenth-century romantic medievalism into twentieth-century medieval modernism.”

One can point to several important figures who saw a look back to the imagined medievalism of the later Middle Ages as necessary to understanding the violence of the twentieth century. To take just two figures I discuss in what follows, both Huizinga and Marc Bloch drew knowingly on an idea about the past in order to imagine a better future in the midst of the Nazi occupation: Huizinga died a prisoner after speaking out against the Nazis in 1942, and Bloch was tortured and shot as a member of the French Resistance in 1944.

*Medievalism*—not medieval—is the right word here: as opposed to a “real” Middle Ages, the figures I follow look back more or less self-consciously to the fantasy of a past (a “Merrie England”) that might, in its symbolic difference from the present, suggest a better or at least more manageable future. Contrary to expectations, however, the difference they try to capture is not (or at least not entirely) the result of a conservative or nostalgic wish to get back to a time prior to the related depredations of capitalist rationality, social dislocation, and total war. It is rather an effort to imagine a time that might have differently managed its relation to its own beliefs, and as a result, somehow managed both to have and to contain its ineluctable aggression.

The fantasy of a late medieval or early modern past thus represents a historiographical as opposed to a historical ideal. Steven Justice writes, “The conceptual power of ‘the middle ages’ as a historiographical category, which originated in the contexts of philological and literary as well as religious polemic, derived from its success installing in the histo-
riographical scheme a period of different, darker, historical subjectivity." What characterizes the imaginary other subjectivity of the past for some of the figures I look at is its imaginative capacity to fit what it takes as a natural human proclivity for violence into a barely but nonetheless still adequate framework of forms, ritual, and play, a capacity that was, perhaps, possible in the cinema where it was no longer possible in present life.

We might in that case understand the resonant work of Huizinga, Elias, Olivier, Welles, and Powell and Pressburger as part a larger effort to represent the relations between past and present in terms both historical and ethical. Several of Powell and Pressburger’s other films also fall within this tradition. The Edge of the World (1937), I Know Where I’m Going! (1945), and A Canterbury Tale (1944) each evoke an idealized past understood through forms of regional particularity in order both to identify what might be lost in war and to imagine what British culture could or should be like after the war.\[100\] A turn back to an idealized medievalism was indeed common in the interwar and war years. We might think of T. S. Eliot’s The Four Quartets (1942), where he briefly adopts a cod Chaucerian style in order to contemplate the relation between past and present in the midst of total war, seeing in the image of “man and woman / In daunsinge, signifying matrimonie” a rough pastoral figure for a cyclical time shot through with a pedal tone of death and decay: “Feet rising and falling. / Eating and drinking. Dung and death.”\[101\] We might think, too, of Virginia Woolf’s Between the Acts (1941), which offers a long, fragmentary, and gently ironic verse history of “Merry England” presented as part of an amateur village pageant staged in the midst of war: “This is a pageant, all may see / Drawn from our island history / England am I.”\[102\] In each of these cases, a renewed relation to an imaginary English past offered an alternative or contrapuntal history based—however naively—in what was pictured as the energetic, playful, childlike, and direct experience of the late Middle Ages.\[103\] Accounting for the interwar and wartime resurgence of the early modern pageant, Jed Esty writes, “The recovery of such forms marks an important departure from modernist primitivism; rather than model art (or life) on ethnographic data collected from the colonies, these English intellectuals increasingly sought inspiration in the island’s own imagined past.”\[104\] If the games, rituals, and beliefs attributed to the late Middle Ages could be imagined as the source for what was good about European culture—namely, that it had found a way to manage its innate taste for violence—then a return to those values might provide a way back from the more recent experience of culture’s wane in the face of war.\[105\]
A Very Common Type of Girl

I have argued that we need to see the achievement of *Colonel Blimp* in a few related ways. First, we need to take seriously the idea that Powell and Pressburger saw their film as a contribution not only to the war effort in general but also as a specific argument about the necessity and the costs of total war. While the confrontation between Clive and Spud is indeed a choice between an outmoded, “Blimpish” type of English sportsmanship and Spud’s new, effective, and necessary form of warfare, it also works to make us aware of what we risk as a result of that choice: a residual civilizational logic that Clive and Theo represent and that Elias, Huizinga, and others imagined as capable of managing or binding an essential human violence within the structure of ritual, chivalry, and play. In this way, Powell and Pressburger work to represent the paradox or dilemma that stood at the heart of the British experience of total war, the fact that English values would need to be suspended in order to protect and to preserve those same values, that “it takes a fascist to fight a fascist.” Second, and in a way that connects *Colonel Blimp* with Powell and Pressburger’s other films, it uses the presentation of historical difference in order both to reflect nostalgically on the passing of an age and to understand the nature of an original violence that underwrites all wars. Rather than seeing violence as an effect of this or that war, *Colonel Blimp* confronts a tendency toward violence that would seem to exist both before and beyond any particular war. What seems, in that case, to characterize total war is its especially unbound relation to a violence that earlier wars seemed somehow to manage within the twin contexts of international law and the ritualized violence of chivalric play. The film makes these arguments more at the level of form than of content; because reflections on the real and inevitable nature of violence would be difficult if not impossible to make in the midst of war, Powell and Pressburger use elements of film style—color, cinematography, different kinds of cut—to embody arguments that would be hard to make otherwise. Taken together, this is to propose that Powell and Pressburger use their film to develop a mode of immanent cinematic history suitable to the compressed and difficult experience of total war as well as to structural paradoxes that resulted from the idea of World War II as a war for national survival and an encounter with a national culpability that followed from Munich 1938. I want to turn now to another aspect of the film that both advances and complicates these related arguments, the strange love story that shadows and inflects Clive’s lifelong experience of war.

As already mentioned, Clive’s experience of his three wars trails three
lost-and-found encounters with his romantic ideal, a woman (the woman) who appears first in the form of Edith Hunter, a governess he meets in Berlin who goes on to marry his friend Theo. Realizing only too late that he is also in love with Edith, Clive goes on in subsequent wars to meet women who are uncannily like Edith (the suffragette): first, the nurse Barbara, whom he marries, and, then, after Barbara’s death, his young Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS) driver, Angela. In order to underscore this effect of romantic repetition within historical difference, Powell and Pressburger cast Deborah Kerr in the role of each of the three women. As a result, her face, her voice, and her considerable charisma run under the film and its wars like a pessimistic and inexplicably held note; an updated version of Goethe’s *Ewig-weibliche*, Kerr’s women represent the degree to which Candy’s life and personality are structured by the twinned reality and impossibility of desire. The romantic oddity of the device—Ian Christie calls it “aberrant”—is increased as a result of the frank notice that other characters take of it; Clive, after seeing Barbara for the first time, tells his man Murdoch about it:

CANDY: Last night, Murdoch, I saw a girl—a nurse straight from England . . .

I’ve never seen a more striking resemblance . . .

MURDOCH: She must have been a very common type of girl, sir—the young lady in Berlin, I mean.

CANDY: She was a most uncommon—what the devil d’you mean, Murdoch?

MURDOCH: There was that girl in the film, sir. You remember, you went nine times. And there was that girl in the group out of the Bystander! We lost it in the Big Push. And there’s . . .

In a way that runs against his apparent simplicity of character, Clive’s life has been organized not only by war but also around a series of encounters with representatives of an ideal that always finally escapes his grasp; as he puts it to Theo, “That’s just it, I never did get over [losing Edith]. Theo, this may sound a damn silly thing to say to you but I never got over it. You may say she was my ideal—if you were some sort of sickening long-haired poet—all my life I’ve been looking for a girl like her—so now you know.”

Clive’s doomed search after his ideal is, among other things, evidence of something surprisingly neurotic at the core of his otherwise blustery character, a “modern problem” that would appear to distance him from the stoic poise of the war hero or the one-dimensionality of Low’s cartoon. Instead, like Freud’s bourgeois patients or Matthew Arnold’s modern portrait of
“I never got over it.”
the antique Empedocles, Clive is sick with desire; as Arnold puts it, “What those who are familiar only with the great monuments of early Greek genius suppose to be its exclusive characteristics, have disappeared; the calm, the cheerfulness, the disinterested objectivity have disappeared: the dialogue of the mind with itself has commenced; modern problems have presented themselves; we hear already the doubts, we witness the discouragement, of Hamlet and of Faust.”¹⁰⁸ This type of character was a preoccupation with Powell and Pressburger, one that begins with Colonel Blimp: after Clive there is Thomas Colpepper, the darkly obsessive “Glue Man” of A Canterbury Tale (1944); Peter Carter, the brain-damaged, hallucinating poet-hero of A Matter of Life and Death (1947); Sammy Rice, the brilliant, alcoholic, amputee scientist of The Small Back Room (1952); and even Mark Lewis, the murdering man-child of Powell’s Peeping Tom (1960).

Clive’s strongest connection is, perhaps, to the titular hero of The Tales of Hoffman (1951). The repeated appearance of Hoffman’s ideal in one inaccessible form after the other—Olympia, Giulietta, and then Antonia—is at the opera’s and the film’s mysterious and tragic core. Although Powell and Pressburger chose to cast different actors in each of the three roles, Offenbach’s opera comes, in fact, closer to Colonel Blimp, typically casting a single soprano in the roles of all three women. Like Clive, Hoffman is doomed to repeat, to meet and lose the same woman, to come close to his ideal only to lose it to death, destruction, and the equally real and thus insulting desires of others. In Offenbach this repeated encounter between the realized ideal and its final impossibility is tragic because it reveals a destructive tension between the human capacity to imagine an ideal and the human incapacity to realize that ideal: “Hoffmann, a benevolent, optimistic pilgrim of desire, endlessly searching for a self through love, through fulfilling relationships with women, is at every step held back by the disorientations of socially constructed images of femininity. Olympia, Giulietta, Antonia are at once the film’s brilliant representations of his distorted fantasies and a vivid dramatization of its bleak conclusion about the impossibility of desire’s ultimate fulfillment.”¹⁰⁹ In each case, Powell and Pressburger’s characters are both motivated and undone by a phantasmic encounter with, desire for, and loss of an impossible ideal. They are all, in other words, neurotics in a precise psychoanalytic sense. Instead of seeing Clive as exceptional or pathological, though we should understand how this quality situates him exactly within the culture that raised him, a culture that Freud understood as essentially neurotic and that was in danger of passing away with the onset of total war: “If the development of civilization has such a far-reaching similarity to the development of the individual and if it employs
the same methods, may we not be justified in reaching the diagnosis that, under the influence of cultural urges, some civilizations, or some epochs of civilization—possibly the whole of mankind—have become ‘neurotic’? As I have argued, the games, rules, and rituals that Clive holds dear are all aspects of a civilizational imperative that Freud, Huizinga, and Elias associate with a particular moment in European culture, with a long civilizing process that has been rendered obsolete by the onrush of later modernity and total war. What is at stake in *Colonel Blimp* is not only the quality of that neurotic character but also the possibility that with the onset and experience of total war something even more modern and more terrifying has come into being, an unbound and untroubled relation to desire and aggression that, insofar as it bypasses the civilizing force of repression, can qualify only as psychotic.

**It Is Definitely Better**

Clive’s unexpected emergence as an obsessional neurotic or, better, as what Friedrich Schiller would call a *sentimental* as opposed to *naive* hero in Faust or Hamlet’s modern mold is, in fact, where the film’s two levels come together, where his status both as an increasingly out-of-touch old warrior and as a courtly lover searching, forever searching after his ideal inform one another. In other words, Clive’s neurotic search after his ideal is a part of the larger cultural imperative that he represents. His chivalric bearing, his Quixotic yearning, his broken faith that the rules of the game can limit the damage of war—all are aspects of the same bourgeois (or, one might say, the same neurotic) culture that produced Clive in the first place. The neurotic, we know, depends on repression. It is because the individual represses antisocial (but not immoral) desires—both sexual desire and the desire for violence—that the unconscious is formed and the psyche needs to manage itself via the meaningful production of symptoms. To be neurotic, in that case, is to be part of a culture that accepts limits on personal happiness in the service of a stable society. Put differently, seemingly incommensurate aspects of Clive’s character—his gentleman’s aggression, his sportsmanship, his romanticism, his bullheadedness, his tenderness—are all, in fact, characteristics that make sense within the terms of a culture structured around a sense of play as a more or less incomplete form of repression. *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* might be said to be tragic because it brings its main character into contact both with the civilizational ideal he represents and the limits of that ideal. Put differently, the “aberrance” of Clive’s doomed relation to his desire is a critical aberrance. Powell and Pressburger insert a neurotic excess or difference or eccentricity into the flatly epic figure of
David Low’s Blimp; flatly epic is, indeed, a good way to characterize one ban-
thetic aspect of the tapestry I discussed earlier. As a result, they point to the ideologi-
cal impoverishment of a view of history and life that would flatten its particularity, or eccentricity, into mere ideology or formalism. Another way to see Clive’s romantic longing is as an effect of his own sharp sense of the present’s relation to the past.

Clive’s attempt and indeed his need to connect 1942 to 1902 as linked “spots of time” is reflected in the museum-like quality of the room where he keeps both his animal heads and the picture of his dead wife Barbara. When asked by Theo why he has the picture next to his trophies, he says: “She wanted it. I call this my Den, you know. She knew I always used to come back here, we had a joke about it—all my stuff is here. It would be an awful gap without her.”112 In addition to its place as a figure for the related kinds of violence I described above, Clive’s Den is also a kind of memory palace, a space that links the past materially to the present via a network of more and less related objects. In this way it both stands in for the film’s larger historiographical project, its effort to link the past and present, and offers proof of the critical nature of a residually neurotic relation to war. Like some of Freud’s most famous patients, Clive “suffers mainly from reminiscences,” and it is his relation to the past that, in spite of the real necessity of total war, holds out some hope for civilization’s future. This is the main difference between Spud and Clive. Spud has repudiated the past and future in the service of winning a war in the present. That, I think, is what “brute force and ruddy ignorance” means: that in a war like World War II, in a war for national survival, one needs to bracket the past, to forget both how we got into war and the sources of ambivalence that might dissuade us from fighting. This is why the film recognizes the real and pressing need for Spud and his way of war. That said, if the film knows that we need men like Spud, it loves Clive Candy because of the courtly, civilized, and obsolete values he represents; what’s more, it wants him for what he and his searching, romantic, and neurotic desire represent: a future, the promise of which keeps us going in spite of all that is terrible and pressing about the present.

What Spud and his New Model Army represent isn’t in that case just another phase in the story of culture, but rather the bad negation of both culture and history. Insofar as Spud embraces violence and rejects the structuring order of the war game, he represents a denial of the limits that allowed people like Clive to channel their aggression—however incompletely—into forms of prosocial (or at least mostly non-antisocial) behavior. The film makes the case that Spud can embrace this attitude precisely because he doesn’t care about the past, because he has no idea what
things were like “forty years ago.” His methods are, as he says, “Nazi methods” because he denies—as Hitler denied before him—the past as well as the limiting, structuring force of its treaties, games, and rules. Without the game, which is to say without repression, Spud frees himself to have his full pleasure, to indulge his aggression, and to live out the asocial jouissance of the psychopath. William Plomer, writing with greater menace, made this side of Powell and Pressburger’s case even more directly: “Blimps who persist in being Blimps will perish, if they have not done so already; they are simply not built to compete, as we must, with Nazi energy, cunning and power of organization.”

And, because his unproblematic embrace of his own aggression is a structural condition that he shares with his war—a total war that denies the difference between things—he fits into this war culture in a way that the neurotic Clive could never fit in with his world; not fitting is, after all, what it means to be neurotic. In other words, the shared structural conditions of the psychopath and psychopathic war lead back—although in the style of a nightmare—to the full promise of epic as imagined by Lukács at the outset of The Theory of the Novel, a social world in which there is no dissonance or difference between world and self; Paul Saint-Amour paraphrases this view of modern epic as “the genre of organic national holism galvanized by war.” Clive’s aberrant, neurotic, and tragic, obsession stands as a critical and residual response to the psychopathic monoculture of total war.

Neil Rattigan argues that Spud’s disregard for the rules is evidence of
an underlying and maybe unconscious argument about class resentment in *Colonel Blimp*: “[i]t is his lower-class background that provides him with the perception that rules do not count in total war. A disrespect or simply ignorance of the need to observe the decencies—the rules of war, of social behavior—delineates Wilson as lower class.”

Read in this way, Spud’s aggression is more a structural effect of an antiquated socioeconomic system than a response to the particular conditions of total war. Spud’s rise is, however, not simply the story of a single delinquent, the “angry young men” of postwar films such as *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (1962) or *This Sporting Life* (1963). Spud’s rejection of a game, of a repression, of a civilization that relied, however unhappily, on the neurotic’s ability to translate desire into obsession is rather a version in miniature of the logical consequences internal to the concept of total war. In other words, *Colonel Blimp* is interested in how a seemingly necessary and total military strategy could also become a total way of life, a way of life that, because it denies and forgets that the historical and ontological differences on which European society had depended (past and present, war and politics, soldier and civilian, front and home front) demands the destruction of that other society and maybe society as such.

One can see this effort to capture an old and endangered particularity in the film’s representation of a gentlemen’s dinner party Clive throws immediately after World War I. Having invited Theo, just released from a POW camp and on his way back to Germany, Clive goes around the table introducing each of his other guests: “Colonel Hopwell, aide to the Governor of Gibraltar—Sir William Rendall, on the Viceroy’s staff—George Metcalf of Uganda—Sir John Bembridge, just back from Jamaica—Colonel Mannering, known to the press as the uncrowned king of Southern Arabia—Mr. Christopher Wynne, of Bradford, England, my father-in-law. Embodiment of all the solid virtues.” As Clive makes his introductions, overwhelming both Theo and his audience with names and titles, the camera lingers closely on each aged figure, working and waiting in every case to capture the specificity and, more, the hardening, expressive eccentricity of the individual face; some have mustaches, some are clean-shaven, some have small beards; two sport monocles and one has a small bandage on his forehead; another, a slightly shaggy dandy, wears a red rose on his lapel. The care with which the film registers the look and, more to the point, the character of each of these faces seems gratuitous because, although we have met two or three of them before, these are men we will never meet again; they are, despite this careful level of visual scrutiny, mostly the most minor of characters.
The dinner party.
That, however, is the point; held at the end of an epoch, Clive’s dinner party represents the last gasp of a culture of particularity on the verge of being overrun by the totalizing logic of total war. Of course, the colonial pedigree of so many of these men points, as I also suggested in the introduction, in another direction as well, toward the role that eccentricity and particularity played in and against the fact of empire. Casting “the uncrowned king of Southern Arabia” as a more or less lovable because embodied individual, Powell and Pressburger call canny attention to the play between what I refer to in the introduction as official and unofficial modes of eccentricity; at the same time that these faces assert the specificity of the British character as a value worth defending, they also reveal the degree to which eccentricity had also to be seen as an ideological answer to a larger and, as Orwell and others saw, damaging proximity between totalitarianism and empire. The dinner party is thus another example of wartime cinema’s late style, as a form of aesthetic eccentricity or stylistic excess that reveals contradictions structurally immanent to the British experience of total war. The loving care with which Powell and Pressburger attend to these aging faces alerts us to the fact that they represent both a set of values that the film holds dear and a political impasse that needs to be overcome in order to fight and to win the war. Cinematic eccentricity and particularity are thus posed paradoxically as values that need to be suspended in order to be preserved.

This all brings us back to the beginning, to the cut that is not a cut. As I argued earlier, key moments in Colonel Blimp use tracking shots to suggest movement in time or space where we might otherwise expect cuts. This use of a single, fluid shot where we might look for montage is important because it suggests two related but different arguments about the film’s relation to war. On the one hand, that one of these moments occurs at the climax of a duel, and because the film tacitly but consciously associates the duel with ideas and values connected with Clausewitzian, limited war, they would seem to seek to embody the logic of total war, a war that looks strategically to erase differences (cuts) between categories that older forms of war worked to maintain (differences between war and politics, soldier and civilian, front and home front, etc.). On the other hand, the fact that cuts are at both moments so obviously, so spectacularly absent suggests an attempt to make us feel, mourn, and, perhaps, reverse the drift away from an earlier model of war’s limited as opposed to total relation to life. We are now in a position to expand on this difference. The difference between the cut and the no-cut is not only the difference between limited and total war; it is also the difference between a society built on games, on the belief that a magic circle could be drawn around violence so as both to release and to
manage it, and a society that would reject the game and the compromise it offers as decadent, silly or weak.

Insofar as the cut is also a figure for the production of a lack that helps to organize the psychic life of the neurotic—it is the Oedipalizing cut of castration that makes one unhappy, social, and analyzable all at once—its absence would suggest something like the antisocial complacency of the psychopath. That is to say, finally, that the film’s two key representatives, Clive and Spud, are also figures for the larger social difference between the cut and the not-cut."\textsuperscript{117} Clive takes on the obsessional neurotic’s impossible and courtly responsibility to lay hold of the object of desire, a quest that takes the happily unhappy form of good sportsmanship, fair play, and true love; when asked by the exquisite Colonel Borg, referee of the duel and Swedish military attaché in Berlin, whether he would like to roll up his sword arm’s sleeve or to cut it, Clive opts to cut: “It is definitely better,” replies the Colonel. Spud, however, embraces torture, murder, and rape without self-consciousness—without conscience—in the service of a war that is psychotic because it must reshape the world in its image.

This, at last, is what \textit{The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp} is about. It is about the confrontation between an ideal—both an ideal woman and an ideal if flawed or only imaginary European civilization—and that ideal’s real and inevitable ethical limits. At the same time that Powell and Pressburger work in good faith to support a war that they understood as necessary, so do they encode in their film a set of thematic and formal moments that stand not as a criticism of the British effort against the Nazis, but rather as a tacit meditation on the nature and the violence of war. This is what makes \textit{Colonel Blimp} an authentic example of a really and oxymoronically democratic propaganda, a propaganda that could both persuade an audience to face hard truths about modern war and to reflect critically and intelligently on the violence, the waste, and the shame of war. The life, the culture, the play, and the repression that Clive Candy represents worked because they were fragile, tenuous, ultimately insufficient, and maybe only imaginary ways of managing a more “original violence.” Because, however, \textit{Colonel Blimp} shows us that violence, shows us the systems that seemed once to hold that violence in check, and, finally, shows us what the world could look like when those systems are simply abandoned, it demands that we both confront that violence directly and at least imagine what other system, what other world could or should take their place.