War Pictures

Kent Puckett

Published by Fordham University Press

Puckett, Kent.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/51040

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=1947422
Celia Johnson’s Face
Before and After Brief Encounter

encounter, n.: A meeting face to face; a meeting (of adversaries or opposing forces) in conflict; hence, a battle, skirmish, duel, etc.

—Oxford English Dictionary

I didn’t think such violent things could happen to ordinary people.

—Laura Jesson in Brief Encounter (1945)

Is Brief Encounter a war movie? Maybe, maybe not. Although Lean made his film during the war and released it right after, it is set just before and thus cannot represent the war directly. As Antonia Lant puts it, “Its diegesis is fastened both to that ‘so-called peace and civilization’ of the winter before the outbreak of war, and to the time of the audience’s present, that is, 1945.” Brief Encounter is thus not about the military, although a couple of thirsty soldiers show up to offer some much needed comic relief. Its main male characters—the husband, the lover, and the lover’s disapproving friend—are not in uniform, although Laura Jesson (Celia Johnson) and her husband, Fred (Cyril Raymond), idly imagine a naval career for their young son Bobbie. It is not about the Blitz, although Lean filmed exterior shots on the west coast of England in part to better observe the blackout. It is not about mourning, although its main character, Laura Jesson, wanders past a war memorial at a moment of poignant personal dejection. Although Lean himself talked about Brief Encounter in relation to the wartime rise of British cinematic realism, the film’s reception has mostly accepted the war’s absence from the film and steered clear of it as a significant context; with some important exceptions (most notably Lant’s essay) postwar critics focus instead on its old-fashioned sexual politics, its very English atmosphere of barely managed repression, and its considerable command of cinematic technique. So, although Brief Encounter is not about war because it is set just
before its beginning, it is also all about war insofar as the war, present in its absence, contributes to its tense, expectant, and mournful mood; if it seems that *Brief Encounter* is not about war, war is nonetheless all about—around, near, adjacent to—it.

The film’s complicated temporal relation to the war is reflected in its equally complicated narrative structure: the film begins at its end, six weeks after its protagonists first meet; it then flashes back to the start and makes its way back from that beginning to the end of the affair with which the film began. The film’s compressed play of before and after is thus another version of the self-consciously invovled narrative designs of both *Colonel Blimp* and *Henry V*, films that, as I’ve argued, put narrative and cinematic pressure on the difference between past and present in order to make difficult arguments about the experience of war. However, where those films deal in wide, obviously historical timespans (1902, 1918, and 1942; 1415, 1600, and 1944), the events of *Brief Encounter* take place less than a decade before the film’s time of release. That said: if only a few years separate *Brief Encounter*’s setting from its appearance, those years were filled with a violence that would have made the suburban plenty of Laura’s world seem like a paradise lost. “Lights are blazing, trains run on time, chocolate is purchased without coupons”: these are relatively trivial instances of what divided the setting of *Brief Encounter* from the time of its arrival in cinemas.² So, although its past would have looked uncannily like its present to audiences in 1945, references to the war and its effects would in fact have been as anachronistic to *Brief Encounter* as a wristwatch on a Roman gladiator. Despite all this, I want to argue that *Brief Encounter* is not only a war film but also Lean’s best war film, a war film that uses cinematic technique to make important and difficult arguments about war, arguments that are present throughout the film but especially in the film’s most characteristic shot: a recurring close-up of Celia Johnson’s face. In other words, I want to suggest that that film exploits technical aspects of cinema in order to think about the experience of war and the pressure that war puts on life before, during, and after. Once again, these techniques, arguments, and ideas are embodied with surprising and poignant economy in a shot of Celia Johnson’s face.

**Screen Memories**

That face: it is, after all, the beginning, middle, end, structural center, and emotional heart of *Brief Encounter*. In David Thomson’s words, “The film’s core is Laura’s aching experience, and that is how it hangs on Celia Johnson’s crushed gaze.”³ After accepting the role, Johnson wrote to her husband:
“It will be pretty unadulterated Johnson and when I am not being sad or anguished or renouncing I am narrating about it. So if they don’t have my beautiful face to look at, they will always have my mellifluous voice to listen to. Lucky people.”

Although she writes with characteristic irony, she was right—both about our good luck and about her huge centrality to the film. *Brief Encounter* is almost entirely structured around Celia Johnson’s face, her voice, and her character’s thoughts. Laura Jesson, the middle-aged woman whose chaste extramarital affair is the film’s subject, is not only the focus of *Brief Encounter*’s slight plot but also that plot’s apparent point of origin. The film is told mostly in flashback, as a memory unfurling within Laura’s mind: “In short, what we get, throughout the film, insists that it is Laura’s view of her brief liaison with Alec, how it was for her then, how it is for her now.”

The film begins at its end with Laura’s final meeting with Alec Harvey (Trevor Howard), the doctor with whom she has had her brief and doomed encounter. She then returns home to sit by the fire and her husband Fred and to mull silently over (and thus to narrate) the events of the previous few weeks: she meets a man when he helps remove “a piece of grit” from her eye; she falls in love with him and he falls in love with her; they realize that they can’t abandon their families and so they part; he goes to South Africa and she goes home. At this point, Laura emerges from her reverie and returns to the present, putting us back more or less where we began.

Lean signals the initial passage from the narrating present of Laura’s
living room to the narrated past of the film’s plot with a dissolve that momentarily brings the railway café—the site of the film’s most important past action—seemingly into the present of the Jessons’s living room. The sequence is technically daring for a number of reasons: it takes immediate and disorienting liberties with the film’s chronology, not only signaling—as it surreally projects a static living room into or onto a bustling train station—that we’ve entered the interior space of Laura’s memory but also suggesting that, under the right conditions, the past can overwhelm the present. The dissolve also briefly doubles Laura, letting us watch her (frame right) watch herself drinking tea (frame left). As we watch her watching herself, it seems either as if the present Laura—the back of her head cast in shadow and her face apparently illuminated by the reflected light of the remembered image—has taken a seat in the cinema alongside the movie-going audience or as if her head and eyes have themselves become a sort of projector, casting what ought to remain unseen—thought, memory, the past—onto the surface of the present. It is, writes Charles Barr, “precisely as if she were watching, or summoning up her own story on a cinema screen.”

Lean and the film’s cinematographer, Robert Krasker, manage the scene with a strangely insistent skill. The present Laura’s head is lit from above, which both helps to frame her and to produce the projective-memory effect I describe; because, however, the café’s overhead lamps provide a credible natural source of that light, past and present are, if only for a moment, brought impossibly into the same physical space. As if emitted from an
already dead star, the six-week-old light from the café somehow finds its way to her head and face in the present. The shot thus manages both to ignore and to observe one of the “sacred commandments” of cinematographic naturalism: that any light in a shot needs to come from an explicit or implicit but nonetheless physically tenable source. Insofar as it bleeds over from the past into the present, the shot’s light is an embodied if ephemeral form of anachronism; it is an example of what Gérard Genette calls *achrony*: “an event we must ultimately take to be dateless and ageless.” Cutting across the divide between past and present, the shot’s light makes an argument about the complication of past and present even as it falls out of the temporal order that otherwise organizes *Brief Encounter*.

The light is thus something like the cut that is not a cut (the no-cut) that I see at work in *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp*; and just as the cut’s absence allows *Colonel Blimp* to embody while it undermines the naturalized presentism of a total war culture, here the light calls attention to itself as cinematic technique and helps to reveal one of the stylistic seams that hold a film and an idea about history together. It is also something like Olivier’s decision to cast Robert Newton as Ancient Pistol in *Henry V*, a decision that accentuated the untimeliness of Shakespeare’s character and offered that character as an immanent and unruly alternative to the film’s otherwise “splendid” propaganda. Put differently, the shot allows the timelessness of cinematic technique as technique to erupt into the represented time of the film. More than just another instance of what some viewers took as Lean’s mania for technique, the shot is a strongly realized—even overdetermined—form of what Walter Benjamin referred to as the “dialectical image”: “It’s not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation.”

As we will see, this dialectical eruption or image is characteristic of *Brief Encounter* and its critical relation to cinema, history, and war.

**Face Time**

As a result of the complex, unstable, and pervasive tension between past and present that runs through the film, the close-ups of Celia Johnson that punctuate and bookend the film are called upon to do a tremendous amount of structural and emotional work, work that was lost on neither Lean nor Johnson. Johnson wrote to her husband, Peter Fleming: “I am scared stiff of the film and get first-night indijaggers before every shot but perhaps I’ll get over that. It is going to be most awfully difficult—you need to be a star of the silent screen because there’s such a lot of stuff with commentary over
it—it’s terribly difficult to do.”¹⁰ Lean saw Johnson’s often tacit but always communicative performance as exemplary: when you watched Johnson act, he said, you saw that good acting “is, in fact, thinking.”¹¹ Roger Manvell writes, “She looks quite ordinary until it is time for her to look like what she feels.”¹² The performance is all the more remarkable once one realizes that her voice-overs were recorded later and added to the film and that much of Brief Encounter is, in fact, Celia Johnson simply and silently sitting and thinking and feeling in front of a movie camera.

The shot is aesthetically assured. Johnson is sharply lit and held in shallow focus, a fact that draws attention to her face and allows the room behind and the round-backed chair on which she sits to dissolve into indistinct darkness. Her face is shadowed, pale, tired, and filmed in hard light without the softening effects of either makeup or lens diffusion; the viewer’s eye is drawn to that face’s “imperfections” (a mole, a creased forehead, a vein snaking across her temple) as well as to her huge, sad, deeply set, and downcast eyes. Her face appears at the end of a subtly deliberate tracking shot not unlike the one Olivier used to pull in toward the face of his ruminating king; as the camera slowly approaches, the lights behind Johnson dim almost imperceptibly, bringing her face, hair, shoulders, wide collar, and slightly labored breathing into greater relief. Because the shot’s lighting thus lingers over the minor details of her face, hair, and dress, it says that she is not only ordinary but also real. Lean in fact understood this as an especially British realism; he wrote in 1947 that “British audiences enjoyed” films like Brief Encounter because they “were about people like themselves—people they understood. But, above all, they were so ‘real.’”¹³ This desire for a “documentary realism” was, as Lean saw, partly a result of the war: “During the war . . . films were shot on location, actors abandoned theatrical for more natural mannerisms, and a newsreel-like style was employed to photograph the action. There was no doubt, according to Lean, that Brief Encounter was in the vanguard of films representing the new postwar realism.”¹⁴

Even so, some of the effects Lean achieves exceed the demands of the film’s putative realism, passing over into something more mannered and extreme. For instance, the low-key lighting style that Krasker employs throughout the film often appears more film noir than kitchen sink.¹⁵ A scene is lit in a low-key style when “the ration of key to fill light is great, creating areas of high contrast and rich, black shadows”; with low-key lighting, faces and foreground objects are brightly lit, while the background and its stuff remain in shadow. Indeed, classic accounts of noir’s visual style seem readymade for Brief Encounter: “the constant opposition of areas of light and dark . . . characterizes film noir cinematography. Small areas of light
seem on the verge of being completely overwhelmed by the darkness that now threatens them from all sides. Thus faces are shot low-key, interior sets are always dark.”  These terms apply to the shot I’ve been looking at as well as to many others in the film; and Brief Encounter’s stylistic debt to film noir goes beyond its handing of Celia Johnson’s face. Night shots of the train station where Laura and Alec meet seem better suited to the nightmare Vienna of The Third Man than to the suburbs. Lant writes, “As Laura scurries through the streets, Milford is transformed from a humdrum, daytime shopping center into a rain-slicked, nighttime no-man’s land.” At other points, the film opts for an almost expressionist visual style. A woman’s mouth is shot at an inappropriate scale and with apparently unmotivated, dreamlike intensity; objects like umbrellas and hats loom in the foreground with Hitchcockian menace and produce an effect of scalar imbalance that Siegfried Kracauer associated with American “terror films” immediately after the war: “People emotionally out of joint inhabit a realm ruled by bodily sensations and material stimulants, a real in which dumb objects loom monstrously high and become signal posts or stumbling blocks, enemies or allies. This obtrusiveness of inanimate objects is infallible evidence of an inherent concern with mental disintegration.” So, despite the fact that the film is without murders, gumshoes or femmes fatales, it frequently relies on the visual language of noir—in the words of David Thomson, “this women’s picture looks noir.”

An Ordinary Woman

There is an apparent disconnect between Brief Encounter’s content and its style. On the one hand, Coward’s script takes pains to stress the ordinariness of Laura and her life. She borrows her books from Boots, eats her lunch at the Kardomah, and listens to Rachmaninoff on BBC radio in the evening; she embodies, in other words, an experience that was modern but not modernist, middlebrow but not stupid, ordinary but not mundane. Self-identified as an “ordinary woman,” Laura is something quite other than the “problematic individuals” of film noir or the eccentrics that I’ve been tracking throughout this book: “It all started on an ordinary day in the most ordinary place in the world, the refreshment room at Milford junction.” On the other hand, the film toggles between an evenly lit cinematographic style appropriate to the ordinary world of Milford Junction and one that evokes the stylistic and psychological extremities of expressionism. Instead of pursuing a naturalistic or documentary transparency, Brief Encounter again and again calls attention to style as style. Why does the film handle its avowedly ordinary stuff with a style so extraordinary?
We might begin by looking at the film as a sort of technical exercise or essay, as Lean’s effort to use his film’s relatively slight plot as an occasion for experiment and the refinement of his still developing craft. The film was both praised and blamed early on for its apparent willingness to pursue technique for its own, inorganic sake. According to André Bazin, “Nothing could be more tightly structured, more carefully prepared, than Brief Encounter—nothing less conceivable without the most up-to-date studio resources, without clever and established actors.”21 In the eyes of Jean Queval, David Lean “seems to be only interested in those exceptional subject matters that flatter the super-technician.”22 David Thomson writes that “Lean easily gets overcalculated.”23 We might also make a more generous case and say simply that there is in fact enough of a thematic overlap between Brief Encounter and noir to motivate Lean’s style: although it “is not often listed among the noirs, . . . it is a film about traps, feeling guilty, and being imprisoned against your nature.”24 The film might be taken in other words, as a sort of domestic noir, a style of film that overlays the stylistic charge of film noir onto an ordinary but no less intense personal experience; Brief Encounter might, in that case, be taken as a gentler cousin to “noir weepies” like Mildred Pierce (1945), which Lant invokes as an appropriate historical and stylistic counterpart to Brief Encounter.25 We might also, as I have begun to suggest, look to ways in which the style of Brief Encounter is appropriate to a wartime content that its odd temporal structure must not allow.

The Great Hiatus

Brief Encounter is set just before the war but was released just after, which makes the film a strange kind of period piece, an oddly foreshortened historical film that looks back to a time before the war. What’s complicated about this is, after all, that Brief Encounter’s past is different from but still so very close to its present; with only a few years separating the film’s setting from its release, it would have been difficult for audiences in 1945 to gauge the historicity of its characters, its manners, or its fashions. Of course, the availability of rationed items would have struck viewers; one critic praised the film for its “extraordinary feat of projection . . . by setting the picture in pre-war days and providing—out of the rigors and shortages of post-war life—all the proper accoutrements of the past, including chocolate buns.”26 Some of Lean’s other attempts to mark the past as past are subtler: “The reason David put up with that outlandish peaked hat which Celia Johnson wears in the film was to signal both the date and the fact that she was meant to be provincial. ‘Now, of course, people say, “Oh, that hat. It dates the film.” Well, it was meant to.’”27 Lean, of course, misses the point here. When
people in the 1960s said that the hat “dates” *Brief Encounter*, they meant that it seems tied to the general time of the film’s release—a midcentury England that struck later viewers as improbably repressed—and not to its very particular setting in the years or months immediately preceding as opposed to those immediately following the war. For instance, in 1984 John Russell Taylor praised Lean’s film for its inadvertently ethnographic qualities: “At this distance of time *Brief Encounter* assumes another, rather surprising quality—that of a documentary insight into a vanished scene, a vanished way of life.” For Lean, however, the hat was not something that came from another age; it was rather a visual index of historical differences that were both minor and immense. It was the visual trace of an effort to make a film that could represent the brief but no less enormous historical difference between the before and the after of World War II.

After all, it was only the onset of the war that made “the winter of 1938–39” into such a distinct and coherent period, into what the philosopher of history Reinhart Kosseleck understands as a historical “event,” “a discernible unity capable of narration.” If, however, we need the event in order to narrate history, which is to say to organize history into a series of things that happen before and after other things, we also need a sense of before and after in order first to imagine the event. It is the event that allows us to narrate history. Events are history’s smallest unit of narrative measure and thus need to exist before they can be put into a sequence. In order to identify the event as smallest unity, however, one needs already to have a concept of before and after: “A minimum of ‘before’ and ‘after’ constitutes the significant unity that makes an event out of incidents.” You need the event before you can have before and after, and you need before and after before you can have the event. What leads us to this vicious circle is an important third term, the excluded middle—that which falls between before and after and makes the event possible.

We might look here to the psychoanalyst Jean Laplanche’s notion of “afterwardness.” In an effort to account for the apparent reversibility of psychic causality in Freud, for the fact that early experiences lead to later symptoms and that later knowledge can make earlier experiences differently significant or even freshly traumatic, Laplanche argues that what makes psychic life available to psychoanalytic interpretation is the structuring fact that “two scenes [are] linked by associative chains, but also clearly separated from each other by a temporal barrier which inscribes them in two different spheres of meaning.” In psychoanalysis, it is this temporal barrier, this period of structural latency that makes interpretation possible; not itself an event, the barrier that separates before and after is what allows psychic his-
tery to mean something; Lacan called the latency period “the source of the construction of [the subject’s] entire world.” For Benjamin, the narration of history requires a similar barrier: “The present determines where, in the object from the past, that object’s fore-history and after-history diverge so as to circumscribe its nucleus.”

In *Brief Encounter*, that temporal barrier or divergence—invisible but necessary to the making of sense—is the war. We might think here of F. R. Leavis’s habit of referring to World War I as “the Great Hiatus” or the title of David Jones’s 1937 long poem about his experience of World War I: *In Parenthesis.* Saint-Amour writes about the interwar years as just this kind of a middle, a parenthesis caught between the experience of one war and the anticipation of another: “in the immediate wake of the First World War, the dread of another massive conflict saturated the Anglo-European imagination, amounting to a proleptic mass traumatization, a pre-traumatic stress syndrome whose symptoms arose in response to a potentially oncoming rather than an already realized catastrophe.”

We might also think about the moment in *Colonel Blimp* when Clive learns that World War I has come to an end. He sits on a battlefield with his man Murdock and, as the distant shelling stops, birds begin to sing. Between the end of one sound and the beginning of the other, the world is held suspended in a brief but no less felt pause.

For Benjamin, this ability to think about the relation between the event, its before, and its after—to think, in other words, historiographically—was partly derived from the cinema: “The first stage in this undertaking will be to carry over the principle of montage into history. That is, to assemble large-scale constructions out of the smallest and most precisely cut components.” Cinema was, of course, more than a convenient analogy for Benjamin; at its best, cinema was for him an immanent form of critical thinking: “By close-ups of the things around us, by focusing on hidden details of familiar objects, by exploring commonplace milieus under the ingenious guidance of the camera, the film, on the one hand, extends our comprehension of the necessities which rule our lives; on the other hand, it manages to assure us of an immense and unexpected field of action.”

Insofar as cinema relies on the relation between “small components”—shots—and what comes between them—cuts—it is itself a concentrated mode of thinking about the interaction of events and what comes between them. Cinema, in other words, is not like the practice of history—it is the practice of history. This is, of course, to follow, as Benjamin did, the great Soviet theorists in putting montage at the heart of cinema; V. I. Pudovkin wrote, “the material in film-work consists of pieces of film, and...
position method is their joining together in a particular, creatively discovered order.” Benjamin’s contemporary Marc Bloch was thinking in similar terms about film and history in 1930: “Since life is nothing but movement, could we not consider that grasping history through the regressive method is akin to unrolling the last reel of a film from its end, expecting to find gaps in it, but intent on respecting its mobility?”

Bloch would revisit this figure just before he was killed by the Gestapo in 1944: “Here, as elsewhere, it is change which the historian is seeking to grasp. But in the film which he is examining, only the last picture remains quite clear. In order to reconstruct the faded features of the others, it behooves him first to unwind the spool in the opposite direction from that in which the pictures were taken.”

What changed between 1930 and 1944 was Bloch’s commitment to the image; whereas history had been like cinema in 1930, it simply was cinema in 1944. Insofar as both history and cinema depend on a difficult relation between only theoretically minimum units (historical events or cinematic shots) and what connects and separates them (the temporal barrier or latency period or the cinematic cut) it makes sense—as it made sense to Benjamin and Bloch—to think of cinema in general as a form of history and, more to the point, as a form of historiography.

This developing relation between cinema and historiography between and during the wars has important consequences for Brief Encounter. First, it helps us to better see how the film is about war; without the war as the excluded but nonetheless necessary middle that makes the difference between its past and present (the time of its setting and of its release), the film couldn’t make what stylistic sense it does. Second (and not paradoxically), because both the fact of that middle and the tenuousness of that difference are so foregrounded in the film, anachronism becomes a key aspect of the film’s structure at several levels, including plot, style, and dialogue. Lean, perhaps an editor before all else, understood cinema’s ability to manage time and made that ability one implicit subject of his films. In other words, the possibility of confusion between before and after in the film—what we might call the afterwardness of Brief Encounter—is what gives the film, as well as its characters and objects, its peculiar and powerful significance. It is, in other words, exactly along the line of a historical and cinematic divide between before and after that the film is a film importantly and critically about war.

**War Timing**
The war stands in its absence as the film’s structuring middle, as that which makes its stylistic negotiation of before and after possible. A noir style is in
that case both appropriate and inappropriate to the film; it is appropriate to the wartime moment of its production and inappropriate to its prewar setting. Like the impossibly naturalistic light source that leaps from Laura’s memory into the space of her present, style in Brief Encounter cuts across what should distinguish past and present. More than mere anachronism, the film’s appropriately inappropriate or inappropriately appropriate style is a sort of scandal, an eccentric disturbance that keeps the film from settling comfortably into either past or present. In this way, Brief Encounter is best read as a film about time and about the formative pressure that war exerts on the shared social experience of time.

David Lean got his start as an editor and several of his films bear traces of an editor’s central preoccupation with the cinematic management of time. This is especially true of Lean’s several war films: In Which We Serve (1942), This Happy Breed (1944), The Bridge on the River Kwai (1957), Lawrence of Arabia (1962), etc. Like Brief Encounter, these films are historical films, and Lean relies throughout on a cinematic concept of history. Instead of simply representing historical events, Lean treats history as if it were cinema, as if real relations between past, present, and future, between cause and effect, between intended and unintended consequences ought to be seen as aspects of a cinematic syntax: cut, dissolve, close-up, fade. As Antoine de Baecque puts it, “Special effects, framing, editing, Technicolor, superimposed images, slow motion, flashbacks, split screens, looks-to-camera . . . all these tools have a history . . . and all have also played a role in history.”41 Because Lean’s chosen type of history is military history, these issues appear with an especially sharpened focus; like filmmakers, war planners look to the past to understand the present and, indeed, to shape the future. This is, as we will see, something that Lean understood and that informs the structure of his war films and, somewhat more obliquely, the self-consciously anachronistic structure of Brief Encounter.

Take, for example, In Which We Serve (codirected by Lean and Noel Coward). The “in” of the film’s title, taken from The Book of Common Prayer’s “Forms of Prayer to be Used at Sea,” works on several related levels. It refers to the whole of the Royal Navy and thus its larger military purpose: “Be pleased to receive into thy almighty and most gracious protection the persons of us thy servants and the Fleet in which we serve.”42 It also refers to a particular ship, the HMS Torrin. The film opens with a single line of narration, read by Leslie Howard, who acts the part of the chorus in Henry V—“This is the story of a ship”—and archival newsreel footage of a ship under construction. Showing the corporate labor that goes into the Torrin’s construction helps to underline the film’s analogy between the ship and its
sailors and the ship of state and its citizens; in both cases, to be “in” something is to be part of an endeavor that trumps personal differences, an idea that the government was keen to convey in a time of total mobilization. The *Torrin* thus functions both as a representative of British naval might and as an enclosed space that lends the film a dramatic and political unity necessary to effective propaganda. Coward and Lean take pains to fill the ship with a cross-section of British society. After the ship is attacked and sunk by German planes, its survivors gather around a floating ring in order to await rescue. They represent a neatly inclusive range of socioeconomic types: there’s the upper-crusty Kinross, the middle-class Chief Petty Officer Hardy, and the working-class Ordinary Seaman Shorty Blake. United “in” the space of crisis, the film’s different characters both maintain the visible marks of their respective classes and transcend those differences in the service of a shared enterprise.\(^{43}\)

Once the sailors are gathered around the floating ring, the film begins to offer their individual stories in a series of flashbacks that radiate out from that realized narrative hub. Coward and Lean got the idea for the flashback structure from *Citizen Kane*, which Lean encouraged Coward to see: “from *Kane* [Coward] got the idea of the flashbacks. Quick as a knife, he took the narrative, cut it up, introduced this Carley float, which was a sort of raft all these ships carried, and he used the men clinging to the Carley float to jump from one part of the story to another.”\(^{44}\) Like spokes emanating from a wheel, these different lines of the past are brought together in the film to make an argument about the leveling social logic of total war: in a war that affects everyone, everyone’s story matters.

Politically effective, this radial device also creates an oddly suspended aesthetic effect; on the one hand, the cyclic structure of the flashbacks makes it difficult to track the film’s intersecting timelines. Is Shorty’s story exactly or only roughly contemporary with Kinross’s? Would it be possible to identify the shared social and historical space that these different stories inhabit? Indeed, the sailors’ memories occasionally lapse into a sort of metaleptic disorder where one character’s memories somehow originate within the diegetic frame of another character’s memory; as Bert Cardullo puts it, “although a flashback begins in the context of one person’s memories, it often ends in the middle of another’s.”\(^ {45}\) On the other hand, these ambiguities don’t matter much to the politics of *In Which We Serve*. No matter how different the experiences of its characters, the film always and necessarily returns to the shared national space and narrative present of the circular life raft. The point of the film is not to keep different stories straight; it is rather to convey a shared sense of the pressure that war exerts on individuals and
groups, a pressure that subordinates the idea of before or after to the larger feeling of being “in” something; “the interwoven flashbacks underline the film’s theme: in general, the unity of all England in the face of the Nazi threat during World War II.” Lean uses a cinematic technique embodied in the image of a circular raft to convey both the experience of and a possible psychic reaction to that state of political suspension.

We might also consider Lawrence of Arabia (1962) and its famous and impossibly long shot of Omar Sharif coming out of the desert as Sharif Ali. Lawrence, making his way to meet Prince Faisal in order to figure out “his intentions in Arabia,” stops with his Bedouin guide at a desert well. The two take a moment to fill canteens and drink before the guide spots a rider in the distance. At first, the rider appears as little more than a speck in the wavering eye of a desert mirage. Slow minutes pass between the actor’s first appearance as a dot on the horizon and the moment when he comes close enough to shoot Lawrence’s hapless guide, Tafas. The shot is justly famous both for its tensely dramatic effect and for its technical achievement. The cinematographer Freddie Young remembers, “We had Omar Sharif go practically out of sight until he was a little pinpoint in the distance and David told him to ride straight towards the camera, and we shot a thousand feet. Nobody had done it before and nobody had done it in color in 70mm.”

Ali’s emergence from a mirage also makes for one of Lawrence’s several subtle cinematic puns; a mirage is an illusion that results from the way light plays across space. It is, in other words, a lot like cinema, a fact not lost on Lean. The object of one of Lean’s most accomplished cinematic shots would, in that case, be the cinema itself. Lean makes a similar joke with another of the film’s most famous shots: our first view of the desert comes in the form of a bravura cut from a match that Lawrence blows out to an image of the
sun rising over the desert. This type of cut is called a match cut because it “matches” an object in one shot with a different but similarly positioned object in another, in this case the match’s flame with the rising sun. So, Lean uses a match cut with a match. (Powell and Pressburger use a similarly spectacular match cut from a falcon to a war plane at the beginning of *A Canterbury Tale*.) Lean goes on to underline his joke with an uncharacteristic and, I think, forced technical error; as the sun comes fully into view, a lens flare appears in the upper-left corner of the screen, an effect that runs against the aridly perfect visual style of the film as a whole. That the image of the sun’s rise is uncharacteristically marred by a lens flare underscores Lean’s broader interest in using cinema to capture cinema; a lens flare is, after all, one of the only ways a camera can take a picture of itself. As D. A. Miller says about the appearance of a flare in another conspicuously perfect film, “Psycho’s lens flare, to take this uniquely well-documented instance, purposely invites us to metacinematic reflection; it is a sort of cameo of the apparatus.”

Ali’s emergence from the mirage—agonizing in its length—thus establishes an idea about time, motion, and history on which the film draws again and again (Lean repeats the effect later with Lawrence’s long ride out of the Nefud with the fallen Gasim). Not only are we confronted on several occasions with what the play between space and time means for military strategy (Lawrence’s impossible march across the Nefud to take the Turkish stronghold at Aqaba, his trek across the Sinai Peninsula to alert the higher-ups in Cairo that Aqaba has fallen, his lone walk from Syria to Jerusalem), but the film also uses that experience of palpable duration to imply an idea about history. The film is filled with meditations on the making of history as experience, record, and ideological spectacle; this is especially clear when it comes to thinking about the tortured relation between particular tactics and European strategy in the Middle East; for, while the film would seem to be about World War I, it is more persuasively about later conflicts in the Middle East that had their origin with Lawrence’s “small beginning.” As Scott Anderson argues, the “small” acts, “hidden loyalties,” and “personal duels” of a few passionate men—a bookish, largely untrained British soldier (Lawrence), an oddball Prussian spy (Carl Prüfer), an American oilman (William Yale), and a Romanian Zionist (Aaron Aaronsohn)—“helped create the modern Middle East and, by extension, the world we live in today.” Indeed, characters in *Lawrence* are often compelled to argue for the durational and strategic elasticity of historical cause and effect when it comes to the world-historical significance of local events. When General Murray derides the Middle Eastern campaign as “a side-show of a side-show,” the
diplomat Dryden responds, “Big things have small beginnings, sir”; when asked how he will make the huge distance between Darra and Jerusalem, Lawrence responds, “in easy stages”; and, when he works to convince Ali to make the trip across the Nefud to take Aqaba, Lawrence points across the desert and says, “Aqaba is over there. It’s only a matter of going.” In each case, the film makes an embodied, step-by-step (or frame-by-frame) duration—time as it is projected into and across the reality of space—into a palpable and important aspect of war and history, into something like the palpable viscosity of events that Clausewitz refers to as “friction”:

The difficulties accumulate and end by producing a kind of friction that is inconceivable unless one has experienced war. Imagine a traveler who late in the day decides to cover two more stages before nightfall. Only four or five hours more, on a paved highway with relays of horses: it should be an easy trip. But at the next station he finds no fresh horses, or only poor ones; the country grows hilly, the road bad, night falls, and finally after many difficulties he is only too glad to reach a resting place with any kind of primitive accommodation. It is much the same in war.

The friction or resistance offered by the textured realism of space (a road, a field, a desert) congeals time, turning it into something gummy and real. It is the specifically cinematic reality of that time that preoccupies Lean in Lawrence of Arabia, a film that does as much as any to make one feel time as it hardens into official history. Because the film makes this process of ideological reduction palpable, it stands both as a modern epic and as a challenge to ideological work which makes modern epics epic. With this, Lawrence of Arabia emerges as something like the long works of interwar encyclopedic modernism that Paul Saint-Amour sees as pitted against the totality of epic: “Set beside such an epic premise, the fragmentariness and internal fissuring of long modernist fictions begin to look less like the flaws through which a longed-for totality seeped away and more like a critical refusal of epic’s all-too-vital political logic.” As opposed to relying on the fragment, though, Lawrence instead uses the self-conscious drag of its temporal style to render cinematic time into something clotted and palpable; Lean’s long long shots defamiliarize an experience of wartime and national history that the epic would seek to make natural and inevitable.

In Lawrence of Arabia and In Which We Serve, Lean uses formal devices—long takes in and of the desert in Lawrence, the radial flashbacks that emanate from the survivors’ ring in In Which We Serve—to embody different ideas about history and experience during wartime. One can find
similar figures in Lean’s other war films: the bridge as a figure for the collapse of instrumental into noninstrumental time in war in *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957); the lyric poem as figure for what would but finally can’t escape the ersatz totality of total war in *Doctor Zhivago* (1965); and the very idea of years “between the wars” as a figure for the retroactive narrative logic of national character in *This Happy Breed* (1944). Part of what makes these figures work is the fact that these films are so obviously about war. What, then, about *Brief Encounter*? What does its form, its style, its sense of cinematic technique have to say about war?

**The Bomber Always Gets Through**

*Brief Encounter* has a complicated relation to its war. Because of the temporal dissonance between its setting and its release, the film cannot be about war in any direct way. Like it or not, though, the war was all about—which is to say physically and psychologically around or proximate to, before, during, and after—*Brief Encounter*. Whatever the film’s content, it was the product of and was viewed in the immediate wake of a home front experience that had altered life in Britain and beyond; where it was made, how it was made, and how war-weary audiences who first saw it were conditioned by the material and psychological conditions of the home front. The experience of the home front during World War II was unlike that of previous wars. Because the war was understood as conceptually total and thus as a war in which states self-consciously committed the totality of their military, economic, and social resources to war, civilians were increasingly understood—and, more to the point, understood themselves—as acceptable targets of military violence. This situation was exacerbated by technical developments in aerial combat that further undermined the distinction between civilian and soldier. As Giulio Douhet, air war’s first theoretician, saw it in 1921, aerial combat would make all future wars total wars: “No longer can areas exist in which life can be lived in safety and tranquility, nor can the battlefield any longer be limited to actual combatants. On the contrary, the battlefield will be limited only by the boundaries of the nations at war, and all of their citizens will become combatants, since all of them will be exposed to the aerial offensives of the enemy. There will be no distinction any longer between soldiers and civilians.” With “Bomber” Harris and Curtis LeMay, the London Blitz, the Allied bombing of Lubeck, Munich, and Mainz, the fire-bombing of Japanese cities, and, at last, the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, World War II did all it could to realize the terrible promise of Douhet’s prediction. As a result, death, displacement, and deprivation became a part of normal civilian life in Europe and beyond: “only in Britain
and Germany did military losses finally outnumber the civilian death toll; in total more than 19 million non-combatants were killed across Europe."

The logic behind and justifications for aerial bombing shifted over the course of the war as planners became increasingly focused on the psychological and moral as opposed to the physical effects of destruction; whereas early British attacks on Germany focused on the destruction of military and then industrial targets, by October 30, 1940, Churchill both acknowledged and believed that “the civilian population around target areas must be made to feel the weight of war.” Arthur Harris, the head of Bomber Command, put it more directly: “It should be emphasized that the destruction of houses, public utilities, transport and lives, the creation of a refugee problem on an unprecedented scale, and the breakdown of morale both at home and at the battle fronts by fear of extended and intensified bombing, are accepted and intended aims of our bombing policy. They are not by-products of attempts to hit factories.” Later, it became clear that bombs were surprisingly inefficient when it came to killing individuals: “British planners had assumed that for every metric ton of high-explosive bombs dropped on a city, about seventy-two people would be killed or injured. The actual rate turned out to be only fifteen or twenty casualties per ton.” Strategy then shifted again as bombs were instead used to “de-house” urban populations; as one of Churchill’s advisors put it, “People don’t like to have their homes destroyed. [They] seem to mind it more than having their friends or even their relatives killed.” After the war, Fred Ikle, a RAND Corporation analyst studying the effects of the bombing, determined that a population wouldn’t become fully demoralized until “about 70 percent of a city’s homes were destroyed.” (Ikle would go on to help plan for the social and military consequences of a US-Soviet nuclear war.) As opposed to World War I—where what Paul Fussell refers to as the “ridiculous proximity” of a world more or less untouched by war heightened the ironic contrast between home and front—World War II’s home front wasn’t a place of respite removed from the violence of localized combat; during the Blitz, Mass Observation captured one “grizzled, elderly Cockney” declaring, “We’re in the front line! Me own home—it’s in the Front Line.”

As a result of this mix of factors, total war altered the look, feel, and sound—which is to say the felt reality—of everyday life in Europe and elsewhere. Massive military mobilization had altered the demographic make-up of whole populations. Bombs dropped night after night blocked roads, leveled buildings, altered the structure of cities, and changed the nature of the sky. Once more or less neutral, the sky had become a reminder of danger; as Orwell famously put it in 1941: "As I write, highly civilized human beings
are flying overhead, trying to kill me.”61 Aerial bombing seemed to alter and
indeed to pervert the very order of things: “And suddenly everything was
submerged in the milky light of the netherworld. A searchlight behind me
was sweeping the earth at ground level. Frightened, I turned around, and
then I saw that even nature had risen up in hatred against herself. Two
trunkless pines had broken through the peaceful trance of their existence
and turned into black wolves avidly leaping after the bloody sickle of the
moon, which was rising before them. Their eyes gleamed white and foam
dripped from their snarling mouths.”62

Less disastrous, but maybe more important to cinema were the blackouts
that anticipated and accompanied aerial bombing and for a time changed
the very meaning of light and dark: the home front was “given imaginary
unity—by the blackout ordered to defend Britain’s cities against aerial at-
tack. . . . As one military historian notes, ‘Blackout was one of the ways in
which the totality of this total war declared itself for it was universally
imposed in Germany, France, Italy, the UK and elsewhere.’”63 The war also
altered the European and British soundscape as bombs and planes—like
the Stuka Ju87 dive bomber and, later, the V-1 rocket—were designed to
maximize not only physical but also psychological damage. Marc Bloch
described their “strictly acoustic” effects during the Nazi invasion of France
in 1940: “Nobody who has ever heard the whistling scream made by dive-
bombers before releasing their load is ever likely to forget the experience.
It is not only that the strident din made by the machines terrifies the victim
by awakening in his mind associated images of death and destruction. In
itself, and by reason of what I may call its strictly acoustic qualities, it can
so work upon the nerves that they become wrought to a pitch of intoler-
able tension whence it is a very short step to panic.”64 The war’s effects on
the home front were, of course, materially devastating; life, property, and
mobility were lost on a grand scale. Less measurable but no less significant
were the ways it altered the physical, psychological, and sensory nature
of everyday life in Britain and Europe: the British psychoanalyst Edward
Glover reflected in 1940: “[T]he whole atmosphere of modern war is likely
to revive those unreasoning fears that the human race has inherited from
its remotest ancestors: gas masks that make us look like strange animals;
underground shelters; rumours and suspicions; enemies overhead and
unseen; wailing sirens; creaming air bombs, and vast explosions in the
night.”65 An effect of this alteration of reality was that the nature of realist
representation also changed; what rated as real in a world of total violence
and sensory extremity was different from what would or could have been
believed only a few years before—which brings me back to Brief Encounter.
New Sensations

How does *Brief Encounter* represent this reality, the reality of a world rewritten at an existential level by the experience of total war? Because the film is divided between the before of its setting and the after of its production and release, this question is doubly significant. In other words, if the home front experience of total war had indeed altered or at least added to the meaning of light, dark, sound, hunger, sleep, and so on, then a “realistic” portrayal of the recent past might need to project aspects of the postwar present onto the prewar past in order to be convincing. We need to remember that a twenty-year-old viewer of *Brief Encounter* in 1945 might have had difficulty remembering a world where the reciprocal meaning of light and dark hadn’t been affected by the necessity of blackout; what would constitute a realistic representation of the recent past to such a viewer? In this way, we might see *Brief Encounter*’s complicated representational management of past and present as a response to the traumatic discontinuity of war: “On an experiential level,” writes Eelco Runia, “discontinuity is the extent to which a particular event wasn’t supposed to happen, the extent, that is, to which the event was at odds with the worldview from which it emerged. Consequently, to come to terms with a traumatic event means to establish a worldview from which the traumatic event stops being ‘impossible.’”

As I have been suggesting, because the war had become part of what was real, the film had to rely upon that war for its structure, its style, its significance, and for the terms under which it succeeds or fails as an instance of cinematic realism. So, if it couldn’t refer directly to the war, it had nonetheless to rely on the war because war had become proof of something real that exceeded the experience of war itself; and as we’ve begun to see, because the film can’t represent the war and its world as content, it instead approaches the war and its effects as film style. In this way, *Brief Encounter* offers another example of what, in the introduction and following Adorno, I refer to as the late eccentricity of the British war film, as a resistance appearing both as an impacted style and in moments of aesthetic eccentricity or stylistic excess that gave paradoxical expression to a war that would not be represented directly.

We might look, for instance, to the film’s management of sound. One of the first sounds we hear is the whistle of the express train as it races through Milford Junction during the opening credits. The sound is insistent, shrill, loud, and something other than what one expects from a train; indeed, the sound is loud enough that it seems for a moment impossible to overtake and to drown out the film’s extradiegetic score. A species of what Gérard Genette refers to as metalepsis, the sound is similar to moments “when an author (or his reader) introduces himself into the fictive action of the
narrative or when a character in that fiction intrudes into the extradiegetic existence of the author or read . . . such intrusions disturb, to say the least, the distinction between levels." Insofar as the sound crosses over from the represented world of the film out into the world of the soundtrack and thus the world of the camera, the theater, and the audience, it does something similar to the light that crossed over from past to present in the sequence described above. In other words, because the sound exceeds its relation to any represented content, it instead announces itself as technique; as a result of its nervy sound and its place on the edge of the film’s diegetic frame, the whistle seems calculated both to index and to produce anxiety.

Indeed, the first instance of this whistle not only doesn’t sound much like a train but also doesn’t sound like other trains in *Brief Encounter*— with one important exception: toward the end of the film, Laura, bereft at having lost Alec, runs onto the train platform and nearly commits suicide. Lean adopts something close to a surrealist style here: he once again drops the lights behind Celia Johnson’s face as she thinks or, rather, panics in the face of a fresh and unspoken loss, the shift in contrast giving her face an expressionist emphasis; the sequence suggests that the relationship’s end leads nearly to a breakdown, a fact that appears to infect the camera, which responds with an odd, crazy tilt; finally, as Laura runs out to the platform’s edge, the film’s first whistle returns as a high-pitched externalization of the hysteria that once again nearly overtakes both Laura and *Brief Encounter*. The fact that the whistle is a late repetition of the film’s opening suggests a correspondence between mental breakdown and the limits of *Brief Encounter*’s cinematic form (what Thomson calls “the dysfunction between a stiff upper lip and a mind turning to jelly”); because its first appearance seems to break the film’s diegetic frame, its second appearance suggests a significant relation between the limits of aesthetic and psychological coherence.

Lean foregrounds the shrillness and the intensity of the train’s whistle in a way that underscores the degree to which the acoustic world had also been mobilized during the war; because the sound seems both at the film’s opening and at Laura’s moment of crisis to overwhelm the film’s soundtrack and, in some impossible sense, to drown out the whole of its world, it stands as a sensory equivalent to an experience that had traumatically undermined differences and distinctions that had once promised, however ineffectually, to keep war at bay. And like weapons that were designed to take military advantage of what Marc Bloch called their “strictly acoustic qualities,” Lean’s whistle recalls the degree to which the war had turned hearing into a form of practical psychological warfare. Harold Nicolson captured the overwhelming sound of the Blitz in his journal: “I have never heard such
a variety of sounds—the whistle of the descending bombs, the crash of anti-aircraft, the dull thud of walls collapsing, the sharp taps of incendiaries falling all around.”

Sidney Giliat does something similar—if somewhat clumsier—with *Green for Danger* (a 1947 film that again stars Trevor Howard). In many ways a classic procedural—there’s a murder, a locked room, and a mordantly funny detective—the film relies on the regular sound of “buzz bombs” to provide atmosphere and increase suspense; although they do that important work, they and the war are otherwise oddly extraneous to the film. Put differently, *Green for Danger* understands the war as a complicated but normal part of life, as a backdrop against which other, sometimes bad things happen; it thus counts on the same effect that the V-1 flying bomb’s designers did: that the psychological effects of the bomb and its sound could do as much damage as the bomb itself. Fritz Lang makes similar use of the Blitz-as-backdrop in his 1944 film noir *Ministry of Fear*, in which a stray bomb functions as little more than a convenient if especially violent plot device. In *Brief Encounter*, Lean’s use of the train’s whistle makes it into something more than an externalized sign of Laura’s heightened emotional state or a material symbol of the separation that the train will facilitate; rather, it suggests ways in which the acoustic world had been made significant as a means of creating internal and incapacitating states of anxiety, a fact that mirrors the war’s larger collapse of front and home front, outside and inside, soldier and civilian. What had been most personal—the senses and our private experience of them—had been brought forcibly into the public world of war. In each of these films, the sound of war has become an emotionally significant but nonetheless regular part of the real world and thus necessary material for a successfully realist representation.

**Lights Out**

I’ve already talked about how the film’s darkened palette might be interpreted as an effect of and response to Britain’s experience of blackout. In addition to the familiar emotional resonance of the film’s high-contrast look, its play between light and dark helps Lean to imagine an incomplete symbolic relation between war and its end. Although it was the case that the lights would come back on with war’s end, the new emotional and aesthetic stakes of the cinematic relation between light and dark would nonetheless retain some of its wartime significance. Take, for example, Lean’s first truly postwar film, *Great Expectations* (1946). Although the film’s first half follows Dickens’s novel fairly closely, it moves further and further from its source at it goes on. This is most striking at the film’s conclusion. Dickens’s novel
ends on a famously ambiguous and shadowy note: “I took her hand in mine, and we went out of the ruined place; and, as the morning mists had risen long ago when I first left the forge, so, the evening mists were rising now, and in all the broad expanse of tranquil light they showed to me, I saw no shadow of another parting from her.” In Dickens, the day is waning as Pip takes Estella’s hand, a fact that raises the darkling possibility that the lack of parting’s shadow has more to do with the failure of the light than with any real hope for the future. Lean, however, has Pip return to Satis House, which has been burned but not destroyed in the fire that kills Miss Havisham. Estella has taken over the house and, as she sits in Miss Havisham’s darkened rooms, seems ready to take her places as a lonely and bitter recluse. Pip runs to the window and tears down the heavy drapes that keep Satis House shrouded in darkness: “I have come back, Miss Havisham! I have come back—to let in the sunlight!” Light streams in through the windows, waking Estella from her ethical doze and encouraging her to take Pip’s hand and, presumably, to take it once again in marriage.

This conclusion makes tacit but unmistakable reference to the war’s end. First, Lean’s turn to Dickens for his first postwar film allows him to situate his cinema in a longer and victorious national tradition; the implied cultural continuity between England’s rich literary history and its contemporary cinema points to Britain’s longevity and survival, an idea that Olivier had explored during the war with *Henry V*. Second, Lean’s revision is important in and of itself; the absent presence of what Dickens had imagined as a fully ruined house would of course have reminded viewers of the many, many structures that had been bombed and burnt into rubble during the blitz. Because he both invokes and swerves from the available image of the bomb-site, Lean is able to engage in a complicated and allusive form of mourning as he simultaneously invokes and disavows the freighted and familiar image of the wartime ruin. More particularly, the tearing down of drapes would have been significant in itself to audiences who had lived through blackout and who would only recently have been able to remove the thick blackout curtains that kept indoor light from streaming out into the world. The shot thus directly aligns postwar liberation with the aesthetic promise of the cinema: as the light streams through Miss Havisham’s room, illuminating dust motes along the way, it would have evoked the light of a projector throwing its image onto the screen from behind and above the audience. Turning Satis House into both a memory of war and a movie theater, Lean aligns the promise of the immediate postwar period with the cinema itself.
This image of light streaming in *Great Expectations* is also a reference to several related scenes in *Brief Encounter*. On Thursdays Laura goes to the pictures and sits in a darkened cinema while light streams overhead and onto the screen. The cinema is Laura’s space of independence and freedom from the pull of home, husband, and children; it is an alternative to and an escape from everyday domestic demands. The cinema is also where she and Alec go together as they begin their courtship. The imagined films that they do or can see are all love stories: *Flames of Passion*, *The Loves of Cardinal Richelieu*, *Love in a Mist*. The cinema is thus a space of “high romance.” Indeed, the lines that she recalls from Keats’s sonnet “When I Have Fears” in order to help Fred with his crossword puzzle also refer to nearly cinematic effects of light and dark: “When I behold, upon the night’s starred face,/ Huge cloudy symbols of a high romance,/ And think that I may never live to trace/Their shadows, with the magic hand of chance.” Keats imagines the world as a play of shadow and light projected across a surface, that is, a magic lantern that would stand as a precursor to the cinema. As Laura indulges in a waking dream of a possible life with Alec—dancing, riding in a convertible, strolling on a cruise ship’s deck—her fantasies, middlebrow indices of high romance, seem to be cast like light onto the window of her train compartment; and, as discussed, Lean lights the moment when Laura begins to remember the past as if that past were projected from her mind onto a screen. Lean again and again aligns cinematic light with the possibility of escape. (Powell and Pressburger achieve a similar effect in *A Canterbury Tale*, where light streaming through a gap in Thomas Colpepper’s window is both a dangerous index of his guilt—he is the Glue Man!—and a figure for his hope for a British future that would organically depend on the British past, a link underscored by his use of a magic lantern in his lectures on local history.) In the case of both *Brief Encounter* and *Great Expectations*, cinematic light cutting through the darkness represents an escape from conditions associated with the war; it would have read both as a figure for the end of blackout and as a reminder that the cinema had been one of the few forms of entertainment—one of the few forms of escape—available to ordinary people during wartime.

However, whereas the heritage drift of *Great Expectations* makes the gesture feel sincere (if clumsy compared with the downbeat beauty of Dickens’ ending), *Brief Encounter* ultimately seems less sure about cinema as a form of therapy or escape. After all, most of the movies that the film invents for Laura to see or to think about seeing look pretty bad; the joke trailer Lean makes for *Flames of Passion* stirs violence, sex, exotic locales, and a leering
ape into an unsavory stew. To escape into a film like *Flames of Passion* is to deny reality; indeed, Lean hoped that films like these—canned, overblown, gauzy—had become less possible in Britain after the war:

The outbreak of war in 1939 introduced an entirely new phase in the history of films in this country. The British public, starved of almost all the other forms of escapism, flocked into the cinemas, and picture grosses beat all previous records. But in their everyday lives these same audiences were being brought face to face with reality: the life-and-death reality of the blitz. They knew what it was like to be frightened, and they knew that death came with a whistle and a roar, not with fifty violins and a heavenly choir. The Hollywood romances didn’t seem so convincing. The over-dressed stars were living in a dream world which had no connection with the reality of clothing coupons and blackout.72

*Brief Encounter* is in fact a film appropriate to this new sense of reality, which is to say that the experience of war put Lean and his cast and crew in a position to have a better grip on reality as such than filmmakers of the pre-war era. *Brief Encounter* thus complicates what it means to think of cinema as a form of escape (from war, from fear, from life); it also suggests that the war would remain an influence on cinema even after its conclusion. If the real became more real as a result of the war, then we shouldn’t imagine that the war can simply be left behind or burnt away with cinematic light like Dracula or the ghost of Miss Havisham. In other words, whereas *Great Expectations* seems to end hoping that the war and its darkness are truly over, *Brief Encounter* suggests that the difference between before and after war might, after all, be harder to maintain.

**Duck! Rabbit, Duck!**

We might think of another, better film that Laura and Alec see on one of their Thursdays. Appearing before the feature is an unnamed Donald Duck cartoon that represents one of the film’s few moments of unalloyed and guiltless pleasure; the screenplay describes them as they watch the film: “They are both laughing and are obviously very happy.”73 The cartoon—minor, antic, anarchic—seems to offer the couple a real escape that the hack melodrama of *Flames of Passion* could not; in 1947, Lean called Walt Disney “surely the most original movie-maker ever.”74 Insofar as cartoons are only light, color, and sound, they come close to an ideal of pure cinema, and in *Brief Encounter* they seem for a moment to stand in for cinema’s most liberating potential. “The Disney world,” writes Neal Gabler, “is a world out
of order: all traditional forms seem not to function. And yet the result is not a nightmare world of pity and terror, a tragic world, but a world of fun and fantasy.” Donald might, in this case, be taken as a figure of what Scott Bukatman calls “animatedness,” a concept I invoked in relation to Robert Newton’s Ancient Pistol; figures of animatedness—Ko-Ko the Clown, Gertie the Dinosaur, Daffy Duck—channel aggression into “mobile,” “kinetic,” “vital,” and “unruly” forms of resistance. “In some respects,” writes Gabler, “Donald Duck seemed to offer audiences both a vicarious liberation from the conventional behavior and morality to which they had to subscribe in their own lives and which the Duck clearly transgressed and, since he usually got his comeuppance, a vicarious revenge against the pretentious, unattractive, and ornery at a time when the entire world seemed to be roiling in anger and violence.” And just as the fictional director John Lloyd Sullivan comes to see Disney comedy as a source of authentic respite from real suffering at the end of Preston Sturges’s *Sullivan’s Travels* (1941), so does Lean seem to see in Donald Duck an authentic and therapeutic alternative to the constraints of Laura’s everyday life.

There is, though, something strange about the film’s otherwise exuberant response to the cartoon. At its conclusion, Laura admires Donald’s “dreadful energy and his blind frustrated rages.” Alec describes the cartoon in terms even more apocalyptic: “The stars can change in their courses, the universe go up in flames, and the world crash around us, but there will always be Donald Duck.” There is an element of violence and anxiety to *Brief*
Encounter’s understanding of the cartoon, a conscious blurring between light and dark that Great Expectations works more directly to differentiate. And, indeed, descriptions of Mickey and Donald as joyously and even a little dangerously ludic are more appropriate to the Disney cartoons of the thirties. By 1940, the meaning of Mickey Mouse had already begun to shift with Fantasia; whereas Mickey had been an anarchic and occasionally violent figure in 1928’s Plane Crazy and Steamboat Willie, over the next decade animators made his character increasingly cute (plumper with wider, more visible eyes) and more benign. Seen across the threshold of war, Mickey thus meant two very different things: plain craziness in the thirties followed by a cuddly return to order.

Donald Duck’s evolution is even more striking. Although he was also made to look cuter, unlike Mickey, he became no more human: “Ollie Johnston [a Disney animator] reminisced that in the shorts, as Mickey Mouse became more humanoid, Goofy and Donald became more preposterous and inhuman.” Donald also remained fundamentally angry, and in 1942 he became the most visible representative of Disney’s effort to assist the war effort: “Donald was deemed ... suitable for wartime conversion and thus was featured in a remarkable array of war-related films. ... The most notable of [these] efforts was ... produced for the War Department, ‘Der Fuehrer’s Face’ (1943), which won an Oscar for best short subject and may have been the single most popular propaganda short produced during the war.” In it, Donald dreams that he lives in Germany (“Nutzi Land”) and works as a sort of slave in a munitions factory; at one point, he stands at his conveyor belt and falls into a kind of hectic trance as he is obligated to “Heil Hitler” before an endless series of photos of “Der Fuehrer.” Although it is pretty shocking to see Donald Duck in a Nazi uniform (a fact that the Disney corporation tacitly acknowledged by keeping the cartoon out of circulation until 2004), in its context, “Der Fuehrer’s Face” worked to suggest a playful and distinctly American alternative to totalitarian thinking in several of its forms: Disney’s comic superabundance as an alternative to the fixed and official cultural forms of National Socialism, Donald’s “dreadful energy” as an eccentric alternative to the rationalization of the factory floor, and the aggressive minorness of the cartoon form in general as an alternative to the bad equivalencies of administered culture. In other words, whereas Donald Duck represented innocent if antic entertainment in the mid-1930s, by 1945 he would have been firmly associated in American and British imaginations with the war; and although the language that Laura and Alec use—dreadful energy, crashing worlds, the universe in flames—would have seemed inappropriate to the duck of the mid-1930s, it would have been perfectly
appropriate to the duck who had thrown tomatoes at Hitler and—painted as he often was on the nose of both bombers and bombs—rode firebombs to earth as they fell on Tokyo and Dresden.81

Both appropriate and inappropriate, the cartoon reflects a logic that runs throughout Brief Encounter. The single figure of Donald Duck is, in other words, significant in two incommensurate ways. In the context of the 1930s, he represents a space of play, an escape from everyday life into a ludic world of possibility. As such, he seems to offer Laura and Alec their purest moments of pleasure; their affair, a brief escape from everyday life into a space of play, is like the cartoon—delicious, free, ephemeral. In the context of 1945, however, Donald Duck’s “dreadful energy” could have conjured the more dreadful energy of bombs, guns, and war. What’s important here is the fact that both versions of the cartoon are simultaneously at work in Brief Encounter; Donald thus appears as another version of Wittgenstein’s “duck-rabbit” (a Donald Duck Rabbit): although the anarchic innocence of the prewar period and the sharper violence of the postwar period are both aspects of his image, they remain at odds because they are of different times. The temporally divided structure of Brief Encounter means that we have to take Donald as another gestalt figure, which, like the light that Lean streams in from the past to the present or like a noir style that is at once appropriate and inappropriate to the film’s content, functions differently as it shifts from one historical context to the other and thus points to the specificity of both. Donald Duck is, in other words, an embodied form of critique in
Brief Encounter, a figure that resists that which would keep prewar and postwar worldviews separate. His “dreadful energy” needs in that case to be understood in three ways: there is the 1930s “dreadful energy” of pure play; there is the 1940s “dreadful energy” of the war and its violence; and there is the third “dreadful energy,” the energy of that which would exceed either historical context, an energy (reminiscent, perhaps, of Empson’s version of the pastoral) that threatens critically to unbind a history that would keep the past separate from the present in order to keep the war in its place.

All by Myself

Donald Duck, the anachronistic darkness of noir, a light that streams from out of the past into the present: all of these are figures of a kind of untimeliness that appears everywhere in Brief Encounter. There are many more. Think of Lean’s famous use of Rachmaninoff. Although its familiarity has made it hard really to hear what the Piano Concerto no. 2 is doing in the film, it is in fact another of these in-between gestures. We are, of course, meant to understand that Laura’s admiration for the Second Concerto holds Laura suspended between her innate aesthetic sense and her limited cultural access, between her good taste and few opportunities to satisfy it. Rachmaninoff indeed felt himself to be a figure trapped between moments. Long seen as both a kitschy classicist and a forward-thinking modernist, in 1939 Rachmaninoff was a man out of time: “I feel like a ghost wandering in a world grown alien. I cannot cast out the old way of writing, and I cannot acquire the new. I have made intense effort to feel the musical manner of today, but it will not come to me.”

This in-betweenness was already there in Rachmaninoff’s musical thinking in 1900 when he composed the Second Concerto; it is, I think, most audible in a tension between Rachmaninoff’s melodies, which tend to go for big and maybe obvious effects (it is, after all, intensely hummable), and his harmonies, which are pianistic, knotty, close, and ambiguous. The piece thus changes tone and key frequently, giving Lean an opportunity to toggle quickly between the high romance of the melody and the contrapuntal uneasiness of its harmonic setting; like the duck, the light, and the dark, Brief Encounter’s Rachmaninoff means two different and incommensurate things at once.

We might think of another of the film’s songs. One day, as Laura walks through Milford Junction in the first flush of love, she hears music: “The sun was out and everybody looked more cheerful than usual. There was a barrel organ at the corner by Harris’s. It was playing ‘Let the Great Big World Keep Turning.’ ” The song catches her ear for a number of reasons. Of course, its lyric is one that anticipates the film’s doomed love affair, “Let the great big
world keep turning/Nevermind if I’ve got you.” There is, however, more: “Let the Great Big World Keep Turning” was one of several popular numbers written for the 1916 musical The Bing Boys Are Here. The Bing Boys, which follows a pair of countrified brothers—Oliver and Lucifer Bing—as they make their way amidst the lures of London, played for much of 1916 and featured the music hall great George Robey as Lucifer. Although The Bing Boys does not refer directly to its war, its success was nonetheless tied up with wartime experience, both in the trenches and on the home front:

A tank commander asked Robey for Bing Boys posters to decorate his tank “next time we go into action”; and [the producer Oswold] Stoll received hundreds of requests from “France, Salonika, and Mesopotamia” for the one representing Robey and Lester “each with a girl on their knees.” The show was alleged to “put a new vitality into trench-tired boys,” which received an unconsidered twist in Wyndham Lewis’s short story “The War Baby” where a subaltern and his girl, going to the Alhambra fed on war-wine and kisses, found that “Robey, with his primitive genius, flattered the mood of the evening.”

The “primitive genius” of Robey and The Bing Boys thus was not only a temporary escape from war but also a sort of critical response to it. In other words, if World War I seemed to begin in an atmosphere of willfully unreflective sincerity, the music hall represented an endangered form of comic truth-telling; in 1922 and after the death of Marie Lloyd, T. S. Eliot would wonder “why that directness, frankness and ferocious humor which survive in her, and in Nellie Wallace and George Robey and a few others, should be extinct, should be odious to the British public, in precisely those forms of art in which they are most needed, and which, in fact, they used to flourish.”

(Hitchcock makes a similar reference to the radical and residual honesty of the music hall in The 39 Steps with the figure of Mr. Memory, a man who not only remembers everything—the past as plenum—but also cannot tell a lie; he must as a result die along with his art at the film’s end.) That bits of that very British and nearly extinct past come to Laura as she drifts through her day makes sense in the context of the film’s wartime interest in understanding the relation between past and present; like Rachmaninoff and Donald Duck, the tune is a bit of foreign matter, a cultural survival seemingly indigestible to and out of sync with the world of Brief Encounter. And, as we know, Robey’s portrayal of Falstaff does something similar in Olivier’s Henry V and thus introduces yet another level of intertextual and historical complexity into those few notes of music; they manage, if
we listen closely enough, to evoke World War I, the decline of music hall, the “ferocious humor” of George Robey, Robey’s appearance as Falstaff in the previous year’s *Henry V*, and, indeed, Falstaff himself as a figure of carnival resistance. And, like Olivier and Robey’s Falstaff, what the notes can mean seem entirely to exceed one or the other structure put in place to contain them.

The invocation of British music hall also helps to account for one of the film’s larger generic discontinuities. Much of the film’s comic relief comes in the form of interactions between Myrtle and Albert, the flirting, bickering couple who work at the train station and represent a bawdy, proletarian alternative to Laura and Alec’s tasteful encounter. Critics have tended to see their performance as a sharp and awkward intrusion into the film’s otherwise muted, middle-class realism: “The only weaknesses are the synthetic Cockneys in the synthetic station buffet . . . , the comedy of the lower orders once more rendered in caricature.”

Joyce Carey and Stanley Holloway do play their roles with a broad gestural relish that seems at odds with the film’s overall quiet: “Albert! Now look at me Banburys—all over the floor!” If, however, they can seem like too much—even Lean found them “embarrassing”—they perform an important function: they return a nearly extinct and maybe wholly imaginary “directness, frankness, and ferocious humor” to a world that seems to have lost precisely these qualities. Like “Let the Great Big World Keep Turning,” they are another form of comic survival, another untimely presence that puts the time of *Brief Encounter* briefly and critically at odds with itself; and because that comedy could be understood in 1945 as well as 1916 to be an effect of and reaction to the political and social demands of wartime, its return marks another point at which *Brief Encounter* tacitly argues for its own complicated relation to war and its aftermath.

**Violent Things**

Released immediately after the war and mixing the memories of war time and a time before war, *Brief Encounter* makes an oblique case for violence’s presence in everyday life: “I didn’t think,” Laura muses, “such violent things could happen to ordinary people.” Audiences in 1945 would surely have been able to identify with her feeling of surprise and resignation in the face of this new and terrible discovery; after all, years of total war had acquainted many ordinary people with “violent things,” a fact that breaks into the film partly in the form of several morbidly funny tonal shifts. As Laura and Fred discuss whether they should take their children to the zoo or to the pantomime, Fred jokes that they should take them to neither: “We’ll
thrash them both soundly, lock them up in the attic, and go to the pictures by ourselves.”88 Later, when Alec invites himself along to the cinema with Laura, he offers an off-color explanation for why he’s not wanted back at the hospital: “Between ourselves, I killed two patients by accident this morning. The matron is very displeased with me. I— I simply daren’t go back.”89 And late in the film, Laura overhears Myrtle gossiping with her employee Beryl about her ex-husband: “You can’t expect me to be cook, housekeeper, and charlady all rolled into one during the day, and a loving wife in the evening just because you feel like it. Oh, dear, no. There are just as good fish in the sea, I said, as ever came out of it and I packed my boxes then and there and left him.” When Beryl asks what happened next, Myrtle responds coolly: “Dead as a doornail inside three years.”90 These are, of course, just jokes—however, they also gesture toward an idea that neither the characters nor the film can acknowledge directly: that life really would be easier without patients, without children, without husbands, without other people. A more serious example: as Laura’s talkative acquaintance, Dolly Messiter, rattles away, Laura thinks, “I wish you’d stop talking. I wish you’d stop prying and trying to find things out. I wish you were dead—no I don’t mean that. That was silly and unkind. But I wish you’d stop talking.”91 Jokes, off-color remarks, stray thoughts: as Freud taught us, all these point to what might be working beneath the only apparently still waters of everyday sociality. Or, as Alec’s friend, Stephen Lynn puts it after nearly walking in on Alec and Laura in the midst of their inevitably thwarted assignation: “You know, my dear Alec, you have hidden depths that I never even suspected.”92

This suspicion—that the surface of ordinary life conceals hidden depths—connects Brief Encounter with a number of other films that deal more obviously with the insinuation of violence into the ordinary. The best example—and one possible source for Lean’s explicit focus on the “ordinary”—is probably Hitchcock’s Shadow of a Doubt (1943). There, the unexpected appearance of a family’s beloved Uncle Charlie in bucolic Santa Rosa, CA, leads to the revelation that he is in fact the “Merry Widow Murderer,” a cold-blooded serial killer on the run. If, though, we would see him as an extraordinary and alien intrusion into an otherwise ordinary existence, his famous speech to his niece (also Charlie) makes a different case:

You’re just an ordinary little girl, living in an ordinary little town. You wake up every morning of your life and you know perfectly well that there’s nothing in the world to trouble you. You go through your ordinary little day, and at night you sleep your untroubled ordinary little sleep, filled with peaceful stupid dreams. And I brought you nightmares... Do you know the world is
a foul sty? Do you know, if you rip off the fronts of houses, you’d find swine? The world’s a hell. What does it matter what happens in it?

As played by Joseph Cotten, Uncle Charlie is handsome, upright, and charming. He is welcomed into the Santa Rosa community, invited to dinners, and asked to make toasts and give speeches to ladies’ clubs. The real ease with which he blends in with the ordinary people of Santa Rosa suggests that, in the end, his violence might not be an exception to the rule; indeed, his apparently telepathic connection with his young niece—the “ordinary little girl”—suggests that he has, in fact, been a part of the ordinary all along. As is often the case in Hitchcock, the ever-present possibility of violence disrupting the lives of ordinary people suggests indeed that mayhem, murder, and violence, or at least their possibility, are not the exception but rather the rule. Insofar as Brief Encounter is also built on the knowledge that violent things happen to ordinary people, it is a quiet but appropriate cousin to films such as Shadow of a Doubt and Orson Welles’s The Stranger (1946), the melodramas of Douglas Sirk and Nicholas Ray, and, in time, the rotten Americana of David Lynch.

Unknown and Yet Well Known
That said, there are also other, more specific moments of unease that gesture less obliquely toward the historical catastrophe that occupies Brief Encounter’s tacit structural center. There are, for instance, the film’s several quiet gestures toward military life: the appearance of the two drunk and disorderly soldiers in Myrtle Baghot’s cafe, Laura’s conversation with Fred about a naval career for their young son, and her largely unmotivated nighttime visit to a World War I memorial. Understanding the difference between the time of the film’s setting and its release makes one realize that those soldiers will indeed see combat, that young Bobbie might someday fight and die in a war, and that men like Fred and Alec may yet be called upon to serve. Seeing these possibilities alongside the war memorial makes the tragic aspect of the film’s temporality all too clear: although the film’s characters dream about the future at the time of the film’s prewar setting, by 1945, the time of the film’s release, things would have been different. Some or all of these men and women could be dead, their homes destroyed, their families—which the film does so much to protect—scattered, displaced, or ruined. In this way, the war memorial offers a sort of before-and-after mourning; like the war itself, the war dead are part of what the film both relies on and occludes.

This sense of the fragility of things, of a fraught compromise that might always stand between the seeming calm of ordinary everyday life and an
extraordinary violence that always stands either just outside or, in fact, at its very core, gives us a better sense of Brief Encounter’s more and less coded relation to war. In addition to the historical allusions, the quiet but clear symbols, and the points of cultivated formal ambivalence, there is this basic truth to the film: that having an affair, that wanting things that exceed or undermine the apparent stability of the everyday is always a matter of assessing the relation between liberty and security. As Antonia Lant writes, the personal and logistical pressures that war had put on romantic relationships, the idea of family, and the responsibilities of mothers were part of “the history to which David Lean’s Brief Encounter inevitably belonged as it presented a mother’s choice between emotional and sexual fulfillment outside marriage, and obligation to her husband and family: a choice between risk and security.”93 On the one hand, as is the case with both Colonel Blimp and Henry V, the film can thus be read as a personal argument for the national need to suspend freedom, pleasure, and risk in the name of security, to see that war’s lesson was that a supreme crisis meant that values associated with Clive Candy, Falstaff, and a certain idea of England—irony, chivalry, humor—had to be given over and at least temporarily forgotten in the face of an ultimate crisis, a fight for national survival. On the other hand, each of these films also suggests that the choice between freedom and security might be a false one and that, if the violence and loss associated with risk is not necessarily opposed to the security of the everyday and instead lurks somewhere at its core, we need to think twice before choosing security over freedom in the name of avoiding violence because violence is perhaps an aspect of security in even its most ordinary forms. This knowledge—that freedom is hard and security might not save us—doesn’t make things easier either for Laura or for Britain; but, in the nature of all knowledge, its seemingly insuperable difficulty and the awful responsibility it places on those who know better makes it no less vital and no less true.

Close-Ups
I’ve already made the case that Celia Johnson’s face is the undeniable structural and stylistic center of Brief Encounter: It bookends and contains the flashbacks that make up most of the film’s plot; it is a concentrated example of the film’s whole cinematographic style; and it sets and sustains the film’s emotional tone. I have yet to state, however, what this image meant before, after, and in the midst of war: what does Celia Johnson’s face mean? In Painting with Light (1949), a handbook that otherwise offers few absolute rules, the cinematographer John Alton writes: “feminine close-ups or portraits should always be beautiful. In films they are the jewels of the
picture, in stills, the decorations of the desk or home. A picture can be beautiful, yet have mood and feeling too. Therefore, even in scenes which call for mood, for special feeling, it is the rendition of feminine beauty we strive for and attain by keeping the key low." Limited direct light, professional make-up, lens diffusion: these are the tools typically used to beautify women’s faces in classic Hollywood cinema. They are also the techniques that Brief Encounter studiously avoids; Johnson’s face is highly key-lit, it is presented more or less without makeup; and its eccentricities—a vein, or a mole—are thrown into relief. Although no one would deny the beauty of Celia Johnson’s face, that beauty comes in a form that seems, once again, more appropriate to another kind of film. So, what does this particular and particularized face mean?

It seems clear that Lean was in part thinking about Carl Theodor Dreyer’s La Passion de Jeanne d’Arc (1928). Lean would have seen Dreyer’s early film as well as 1943’s Day of Wrath, both films that, as Dreyer told Roger Manvell soon after the war, depend on the centrality of the face: “I watch the face,’ he says; ‘it is the face that matters’. . . Close-shots are the essence of Dreyer’s technique; his camera works on the faces of his characters.” One can feel Dreyer’s influence on Brief Encounter, particularly in Lean’s effort to capture Johnson’s abstracted, yet focused stare inside and into the past. Indeed, the implicit association between Johnson and Renée Jeanne Falconetti (the actor who played Dreyer’s Jeanne) continued to be felt after Brief Encounter. Johnson’s next major role was Saint Joan in a 1948 Old Vic production of Shaw’s play. Director John Burrell must have had Brief Encounter in mind when he cast Johnson (she tended before Brief Encounter to play light comedy, so playing Joan represented a distinct departure). There is, in that case, an odd circuit of influence at work here: Dreyer influences Lean, who films Johnson as if she were Joan; Shaw’s Saint Joan reminds Burgess of Dreyer’s La Passion de Jeanne d’Arc, which, in turn, reminds him of Brief Encounter, which encourages him to cast Celia Johnson as Joan. In a way that begins to feel familiar, the faces of Jeanne d’Arc and Laura Jesson seem threaded together in a strangely complex play of before and after.

As in Brief Encounter, Dreyer’s close-ups exploit an uncomfortable tension between the cool precision of his film style and the almost unbearable emotional intensity of Falconetti’s performance; as Bazin puts it, “Herein lies the rich paradox and inexhaustible lesson of this film: that the extreme spiritual purification is freed through the scrupulous realism of the camera as a microscope.” Aside from its intensity and beauty, what most distinguishes Dreyer’s close-ups of Falconetti’s face are their resistance to a conventional cinematic economy of shot/reverse shot: “Dreyer avoids the shot-reverse
shot procedure which would maintain a real relation between each face and the other. . . . He prefers to isolate each face in a close-up which is only partly filled, so that the position to the right or to the left directly induces a virtual conjunction which no longer needs to pass through the real connection between people.”

When the camera looks at Falconetti, she seems to look past or through it. This is evidence of the film’s commitment to the difficult reality of the spiritual; the film uses Jeanne’s intense focus on something beyond the frame not only to suggest something about her faith but also to force the viewer to confront belief as a real—or even realist—encounter with what cannot be represented. In order to complete the cinematic circuit of these shots, a viewer (or a camera) would need believe in (or at least suspend disbelief in) the ineffable object of Jeanne’s attention; it is because of this spiritual realism that Deleuze takes *La Passion de Jeanne d’Arc* as a precociously modern film, as a film in which “subjectivity, then, takes on a new sense, which is no longer motor or material, but temporal and spiritual: that which ‘is added’ to matter, not what distends it.”

What makes Dreyer’s modernity “precocious” for both Bazin and Deleuze is that it comes before 1945, before the devastation and loss that came to light at the end and immediately after the war with revelations about the camps and the Holocaust. This is what motivates both Deleuze’s analytic move from the movement-image to the time-image and, more recently, Antoine de Baecque’s account of “the modern turn” in cinema, “which,” for him, “grew out of an attitude of critical assimilation of the inheritance of
the past: consisting both of the fact of the existence of the extermination camps, as seen in the striking footage of 1945, and of a history of cinema whose affiliations ... were no longer straightforward and no longer consisted of direct genealogical lineages.”99 Central to de Baecque’s “modern turn” is a recurring shot of a staring face that seems both to see the enormity of history and atrocity directly and to offer history as something that, embodied in the single human face, needs to look back: “History itself is staring at us.”100 As a result, de Baecque follows both Bazin and Deleuze in seeing the war as a turning point in the history of cinema; because of its role as witness to the opening of the camps in 1945, the cinema became essentially connected with a new capacity and a new responsibility, one that he sees at work in the postwar look-to-camera close-up. While one could simply say that the films to which he refers—Welles’s *The Stranger* (1946), Bergman’s *Summer with Monika* (1953), Rossellini’s *Journey to Italy* (1953), and Resnais’s *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959)—also owe a debt to Dreyer’s work with Falconetti, there’s more at stake here. (One could, of course, add to de Baecque’s list: the concluding still of Jean-Pierre Léaud in *Les 400 coups*, the mad stare of mother/Norman at the end of *Psycho*, the painted eyes of the Greek statues in *Contempt*, Julianne Moore gazing at her reflection in *Safe*, and so on.) Rossellini, Bergman, Resnais, and others thus adopt the structure of Dreyer’s spiritual realism, of Jeanne’s look into the infinite, in order to develop a historical cinema capable of witnessing the enormity of real and material events and traumas that nonetheless resist aesthetic representation; the postwar encounter with the enormity of what happened during World War II takes the form of a disenchanted but structurally intact version of Dreyer’s mysticism, a look that retains the intensity, the distance, and the eloquence of Dreyer’s Jeanne in the absence of spiritual guarantees.

To take another example: Carol Reed’s *The Third Man* (1949) pursues in a darker, less ambivalent way many of the themes that I’ve been looking at over the course of this book. And, like *Henry V* and *Brief Encounter*, it engages directly—far more so—with the difficulty of living in a postwar period that seems unable to distance itself from war. The design of the film, its sharp and strange camera angles, its lingering interest—real because of the intensity of its care and surreal because of the nature of its object—in the alien landscape of occupied, bombed-out Vienna, its queasy mix of comedy, tragedy, and something altogether less legible: all these come together to make an argument about the enormous pressure that war puts on the experience of history as meaningful. As Carol Reed puts it in his arch opening monologue, “I never knew the old Vienna before the war with its Strauss music, its glamor, and easy charm.”101 In the immedi-
ate postwar period, then has little or nothing to do with now. This frank disconnect between past and present is there in the film’s fraught relation to an especially fraught moment in cinematic history. As I mentioned in relation to Colonel Blimp’s no-cut, the war period represented for both Bazin and Deleuze a moment when filmmakers turned away from the founding logic of montage to depth-of-field cinematography. For Bazin, in particular, the sustained and deep shot appeared better able than the cut to address the deepening moral and historical crises of life during and after wartime. De Baecque points to Bazin’s commitment to “the sequence shot and the pan shot, which, by avoiding any cut in the take, and thus the pitfalls of editing, are the most ethical formal acts of cinema, in that they appear to be a mechanical copy of the real... the least manipulated and least manipula-ble image that can render reality visible, and especially its supreme ordeal: the corpse, the work of death.”102 (As de Baecque also points out, Hitchcock made a similar argument when he advised cameramen to use “slow pans, with the camera moving right and left on a tripod to capture” the whole truth of the Holocaust for Sidney Bernstein’s unfinished 1945 documentary about the opening of the camps; because people wouldn’t want to believe what they were seeing, they would, he thought, see the cut as evidence of exaggeration or fabrication.)

It makes sense in that case that The Third Man divides its style between two different modes. On the one hand, and this is signaled by Welles’s deferred presence, Reed and Robert Krasker (who, once again, was cinematographer for Brief Encounter and, uncharacteristically, Henry V) rely on deep, static shots of the interiors and exteriors of Vienna, shots that give the eye opportunity to try to comprehend the degree to which the old world has been physically altered by war. Although Reed was, contrary to some accounts, wholly responsible for the look of the film, it does owe much to the example of Welles, whom Bazin and Deleuze saw as representative of the mid-century move away from montage. On the other hand, Reed does rely on an exaggerated set of cuts at a few key moments, namely two chase scenes through bombed-out Vienna and especially Harry Lime’s last frantic run through the sewers. Although that last scene is brilliantly and frenetically cut, its parts don’t add up to something more, a fact that puts Reed’s film at odds with classic accounts of montage as a synthetic logic. Indeed, as opposed to offering some larger idea about the scene’s topography, the cuts seem rather to divide and redivide space in a way that resists consolidation, leaving the city and the film in fragments. Put in different terms, Reed’s cuts result in a form of montage that gestures toward but ultimately bypasses the hopes of Pudovkin and Eisenstein for a rigorously overtonal
montage, a montage that would produce a third idea out of the formal or thematic tension between two shots. That third idea, the soul of an older, more optimistic, more politically possible cinema is revealed in the chase scene as hopelessly residual, as a trace or stylistic specter that lingers on after its use had been obliterated by events. Montage’s overtontal third idea haunts the film like Plato’s third man, the recursively ghostly figure one needs in order to relate the real to the ideal, the no-thing or no-one that is nonetheless required for other things to make sense: “Who is this third who always walks beside me?” After the war, montage was the third man.

More pertinent here are a number of shots that anticipate the hollowed-out stares to which de Baecque points in Resnais and Rossellini and that recall Celia Johnson’s earlier staring face, a face that seems to look significantly and intently at nothing. In the first shot, the caretaker at Harry Lime’s apartment turns away from a window after promising to meet Holly Martins and to give him evidence about Lime’s death. As he turns, he appears to see and stare in surprise at someone or something. Reed holds the shot of the man’s still face for a few agonizing extra beats. Although we never see what he sees, we can tell that the object of his gaze means him no good; and, indeed, he turns up dead a few scenes later. Even more significant is a shot of Holly Martins staring into the crib of one of Harry’s infant victims, a child that is disastrously affected by a mix of meningitis and Lime’s tainted penicillin. Once again, Reed withholds the object of Martins’ gaze, leaving the horror of the child’s suffering to our already primed imaginations. Although an earlier montage dramatizes Calloway’s careful, bit-by-bit presentation of evidence that makes the case for Harry’s guilt, it is an all-at-once sight of someone’s suffering that ultimately convinces Martins to act. And it is the sight of him seeing what we cannot see that is meant to make undeniable his responsibility to do something, indeed, his responsibility to kill his friend Harry. Welles’s presence in the film implies a connection between this half-withheld moment and a scene in Welles’s own 1946 film, The Stranger, where a young wife is compelled to watch footage from the concentration camps in order to convince her that her husband is, in fact, a Nazi in disguise. Welles’s dramatic use of witnessing is far less subtle than Reed’s, but, as he later told Peter Bogdanovich, “I do think that, every time you can get the public to look at any footage of a concentration camp, under any excuse at all, it’s a step forward.” Although Reed pointedly withholds the sight of death, he gives us, as Lean did four years earlier, a look at someone looking significantly at something.

Brief Encounter comes after the mystical innocence of Dreyer and before the weary cynicism of Reed (as well as Rossellini, Bergman, and Resnais); it
might seem in that case to lack either the gravity or the historical position to see what they were able to and, indeed, had no choice but to see. *Brief Encounter* is thus influenced by the “modern turn” that one can begin to trace in the more forward-thinking corners of noir, in the early films of Italian neorealism, in the “spiritual realism” of Dreyer; and, yet, it appears crucially before the distribution of the camp footage that, for de Baecque and others, fundamentally changed cinema’s formal meaning as a medium as well as its ethical relation to history. If, in that case, Lean’s shot seems to put his film in the middle of a larger tradition of films that foreground cinema’s special capacity for looking at history, what is it that *Brief Encounter*, Laura Jessson, and Celia Johnson are looking at? What are we looking at when we look at her looking? Or, to put it in the larger terms of my argument, what, after all this, is *Brief Encounter* about?

**A Brief Something**

*Brief Encounter* was not the title of the play Noël Coward produced in 1936; back then, it was called *Still Life*. While that title worked for Coward’s play and while a “still life” is sort of like a “brief encounter,” it nonetheless felt wrong for the film Lean had in mind: “‘There was a terrific hunt for the title,’ said David. ‘I remember Noël saying, “We’ve got to think of a good title for this.” It was obviously going to be a small film. “A brief something—something short.” Noël, Gladys Calthrop and I had various guesses, all bad, and it was Gladys Calthrop who suggested *Brief Encounter*.’”

105 Why *Brief Encounter* instead of *Still Life*? For one, the painterly connotations of “still life” might run against the stylized medium specificity of *Brief Encounter*. Indeed, the film has, as I’ve been suggesting, a special concern with the idea of duration and, more particularly, in the different ways in which cinema can convey the passage of time. There’s another suggestive aspect to the title; although “encounter” can refer to the “fact of meeting with (a person or thing), esp. undesignedly or casually,” its primary sense is a “meeting face to face; a meeting (of adversaries or opposing forces) in conflict; hence, a battle, skirmish, duel, etc.” What is a *Blitzkrieg* if not a brief encounter? That said, while I’m of course interested in the possibility that Lean, Coward, and Calthrop would have stumbled upon a title that could also be applied without alteration to a film explicitly about World War II, what’s more important here is the idea of an encounter as a necessarily fraught face-to-face meeting. As I have argued, what both distinguishes the film’s signature shot of Celia Johnson’s face and connects it to the Dreyer before and the Reed after is the fact that it is a shot of a woman seemingly looking at nothing; another way to put it is to say that each of these films and *Brief Encounter*
rely on one half of a classic shot/reverse shot sequence, which, according to David Bordwell, “in its prototypical form . . . [is] predicated on a two-person, face-to-face encounter.”

If shot/reverse shot is in fact tied to the “two-person, face-to-face encounter,” the half shot/reverse shot sequence we get with the lone, looking face is something like a “shave and a haircut” without the “two bits”; in other words, the felt formal integrity of the anticipated whole makes what’s ultimately missing as palpable in its absence as the feeling of a phantom limb. My question then can be framed in these terms: if Brief Encounter offers us one half of a shot/reverse shot sequence, if it suggests through its form an absent or unrepresentable content, what would that content be? I’ll conclude by offering four readings of what’s on the other side of Celia Johnson’s brief cinematic encounter. The first is my most conventional and thus my most abbreviated reading. Brief Encounter is a love story, a fact that has gone slightly missing in the pages that have come before. As Laura sits by the fire and thinks about the previous weeks, she thinks of Alec, her lost lover, and of the future she could have had but renounces for her husband and children. In this way, the shot draws on one of the most familiar uses of the matched eyeline reverse shot in classic Hollywood cinema; bringing men and women together within the conventional and thus comforting rhythm of shot and reverse shot allows us to imagine the couple as a form; and, indeed, most of the film’s uses of the sequence feature Laura and Alec in the midst of their courtship, their conversations, and their final separation. A formal figure for the melancholy and thwarted outcome of their brief encounter, the absent reverse shot is a way of suggesting the degree to which Alec, the lost amorous object, continues to inform and to structure Laura’s thoughts and feelings; and, insofar as the film suggests that Laura will be able to return to an ordinary life with her family, it relies on the shot to turn melancholia into socially productive mourning. In these terms, we could see the shot as a clever but ultimately minor variation on the classic vernacular.

Scared of Your Wife, Soldier?

My second reading follows the first, but with an important, ideological difference. We could assume that Lean is using the shot/reverse shot sequence to suggest something about the real presence of the couple as a social form, which, because it is a form, can be efficiently expressed in the stuff of film content and film style. Instead of seeing the lover Alec as the shot’s lost object, however, we might instead see Lean as offering a larger postwar analysis of the couple. If a completed shot/reverse shot sequence is an effi-
cient cinematic equivalent to the complementary heteronormative couple, a broken shot/reverse shot sequence could give shape and affective force to that couple’s failure. *Brief Encounter*, one of the first films in England to deal directly with ordinary middle-class adultery, could, in other words, be taken as a comment on the postwar fate of companionate marriage. Celia Johnson’s face—melancholy, beautiful, singular—might in that case be all that’s left of the couple.

In the second half of the forties, marriage in Britain seemed to have become one of the war’s unintended casualties. Husbands had been separated from wives for months and years, and newspaper correspondence columns were filled with requests for advice and consolation from men and women who worried that one, the other, or both would have been changed beyond recognition: “The *Daily Mirror* received so many inquiries from worried servicemen approaching demobilization that it ran an article—‘Scared of your wife, soldier?’”¹⁰⁷ This fact coupled with the physical and psychological pressures of war led to a generalized social anxiety about the institutional stability of marriage: “Nothing like it has ever been seen in our social history before . . . [it is] a modern matrimonial landslide.”¹⁰⁸ There was, of course, some real reason to worry insofar as divorce and adultery became more regular or at least more visible facts of British life. Carol Smart writes, “in 1946 the divorce rate reached a peak of 41,704 petitions, a level it was not to reach again until 1967”; and Alan Allport adds, “two-thirds of the record number of divorce petitions in 1946 and 1947 cited adultery as the cause for the marriage’s breakdown.”¹⁰⁹

That said, the public response to that demographic shift might be better understood as a form of “moral panic.”¹¹⁰ Kenneth Howard imagined in his *Sex Problems of the Returning Soldier* (1945) that the war had damaged the sexual confidence of British husbands:

> He is constantly on the alert for any sign in letters from home of waning affection or other sentiments. Every possible shade of meaning is read into the most innocent sentences . . . he is apt to be surly and suspicious, to imagine that someone is trying to usurp his place. His awareness of his own sexual desires and temptations and his own possible weakness add to his suspicions . . . remember that nothing makes anxiety more acute and more intolerable than a feeling of helplessness, an inability to “do something about it.”¹¹¹

More luridly, the war’s end led to more popular if largely unfounded fantasies of bigamy, violence, and murder: “In the eighteen months that followed
the end of the war in Europe, scarcely a Sunday went by without at least one story in the News of the World about a returning serviceman killing or assaulting his errant wife or her lover—or, in a few cases, being preemptively killed by them before he could act himself. As Allport goes on to argue, these “crimes passionnels” captured the imagination not because they were all that common—they in fact were not—but rather because they spoke, however incoherently, to a feeling that the gender and sexual relations that had underwritten marriage in Britain had been altered—maybe irreparably—by the social and military demands of total war. Brief Encounter has thus to be understood in relation to the larger terms of this panic. Shortly after the film’s release, Lean was accosted by “a rather horsy” man: “I would like to express my disapproval of you. I am exercising the greatest restraint in not hitting you. . . . You showed that lady—Celia Johnson I think is her name—considering being unfaithful to her husband. Do you realize, sir, that if Celia Johnson could contemplate being unfaithful to her husband, my wife could contemplate being unfaithful to me?”

In part, these anxieties were the result of shifts in women’s participation in and authority over social and economic life on the home front; this was the case both within the frame of the family where women were often the only authority figures left as well as within the larger civilian workforce and, indeed, the military itself: “The Second World War led to a labour shortage of immense proportions. Women were the obvious reserve of non-combatant labour, either by transfer from industries not considered essential for the war effort or from inactivity. They were encouraged, and then coerced, into industry and into the Auxiliary Services in ever-increasing numbers between 1940 and 1943.” Historian Mark Mazower writes, “the war itself had profoundly altered traditional gender roles, disrupting family ties and providing women with new tasks and challenges outside as well as inside the home.” Although historians differ on the long-term social and economic effects of women’s increased role in the wartime workforce in Britain, it is nonetheless clear that the shift contributed to immediate postwar anxieties about what had been imagined as a “normal” family. Lant writes, “Mothers (and fathers) lost children through evacuation, drafting, enemy action, and by being forced, by the difficulty of daily conditions as a single parent, to give them away for fostering.” How, it was asked, could the family return to normal when total mobilization had altered the very coordinates of normal life?

These worries were expressed both in returning British soldiers’ concerns about being out of place in a Britain that had changed almost beyond recognition and in the disappointment of women who were encouraged
to return to traditional roles after the war; for instance, women who were dismissed from mixed-gender antiaircraft batteries felt betrayed: “The government, the army and the ATS [Auxiliary Territorial Service] did their best to dampen the liberating effects of the mixed battery experience. Women were channelled back into acceptable female roles. One gunner recalled how, ‘When the war was over and things began to run down, life got very dull. Girls who had been part of anti-aircraft gun teams were redirected into jobs as storewomen on our depot and lost their rank and quite understandably were resentful.’” Of course, a lot of propaganda was directed toward mitigating these effects, and it is along these lines that one can see a difference between wartime and postwar British cinema.

For instance, *In Which We Serve* worked partly to manage anxiety about the increased presence of women in the workforce and the resulting changes in gender and sexual relations by taking pains to imagine different modes of sociality for men and women during wartime. One can see this in a set-piece speech that Alix, Captain Kinross’s wife (also played by Celia Johnson), gives at Christmas dinner:

What we will deal with is the most important disillusion of all, that is, that wherever [a wife] goes there is always in her life a permanent and undefeated rival—her husband’s ship—whether it be a battleship or a sloop, a submarine or a destroyer, it holds first place in his heart. It comes before wife, home, children, everything. Some of us try to fight this and get badly mauled in the process. Others, like myself, resign themselves to the inevitable. . . . It’s extraordinary that anyone could be so fond and so proud of their most implacable enemy, this ship. God Bless this ship and all who sail in her.

On the one hand, Alix displays an unusual sort of social authority; as she offers her toast from the head of the table, she stands in for the film’s several strong female figures, characters who are represented both as surviving and managing the home front while the men are away. On the other hand, she accepts a diminished role within the family, accepting that there are things—ideals, identities, ships, and crews—that take precedence over the couple. The film thus offers a case for a set of social values that had been redefined—bent but not broken—by the shifting priorities of total mobilization. Another aspect of this project appears in a later scene when the Torrin stops to pick up a group of men stranded and wounded at Dunkirk. Battered and bloody, they gather in the ship as Shorty (John Mills) makes his way through the crowd feeding men cocoa and biscuits by hand when they are too wounded to do so themselves. The scene is remarkable for the
unproblematic, unanxious way in which it represents homosocial intimacy and caring between men. As previously mentioned, *In Which We Serve* directs its propaganda toward a particular end, the effort to imagine a Britain that might transcend socioeconomic, ethnic, and gender differences in the service of total war. As a result, the film imagines a version of life both in and out of the military that comes close to a kind of utopia, a fact apparent in the unselfconsciously loving atmosphere of the Torrin in particular and *In Which We Serve* in general. The question, of course, is whether this utopian vision—in part a temporal effect, as I suggested earlier, of being in war—can outlast the war itself.

Taken as a postwar film, *Brief Encounter* and its highly strung atmosphere suggest both a desire to return to things as they were (or as some wished they had been) and an anxious knowledge that such a return is impossible. This is partly visible in the increasingly sneaky nature of Alec and Laura’s relationship. The film is, as others have suggested, suffused with a sense of guilt that seems often to border on paranoia. On her way out of the cinema with Alec, Laura says, “We crept out before the end, rather furtively, as though we were committing a crime. The usherette at the door looked at us with stony contempt.” Later, as she considers her thwarted rendezvous with Alec in Stephen Lynn’s apartment, she comes across a policeman; passing him, she thinks: “I walked away—trying to look casual—knowing that he was watching me. I felt like a criminal.” In both cases what feels like judgment is more likely guilt internalized. In other words, whereas Lean’s earlier film approached sociability and its possibilities with a charming looseness, *Brief Encounter* sees the social world as darkly repressive. In the words of Richard Dyer, “This sense of guilt, shame and unhappiness is all-pervasive.”

Second, whereas *In Which We Serve* could represent a caring intimacy between men without anxiety, *Brief Encounter* features a deeply uncomfortable exchange between men. After taking Laura back to a borrowed flat, Alec is interrupted by the early return of his friend and the flat’s owner, Stephen. Laura escapes out the back before he enters, but leaves her scarf behind, which Stephen finds; he then scolds Alec with curious intensity:

I am the one who should apologize for having returned so inopportune—
it is quite obvious to me that you were interviewing a patient privately—
women are frequently neurotic creatures, and the hospital atmosphere upsets
them. From the rather undignified scuffling I heard when I came into the hall,
I gather that she beat a hurried retreat down the backstairs. I’m surprised
at this farcical streak in your nature, Alec—such carryings-on were quite
unnecessary—after all, we have known each other for years and I am the most broad-minded of men.\(^{125}\)

As many have noted, aspects of the scene—the shared apartment, Stephen’s disappointment, his hurt—suggests that Stephen and Alec are or were more than friends. However, as opposed to *In Which We Serve’s* open displays of homosocial care, *Brief Encounter* represents Stephen’s attachment to Alec as something strange and slightly toxic. Alec: “You’re very angry, aren’t you?” Stephen: “No, Alec: not angry. Just disappointed.”\(^{126}\) The conversation is one of the few moments in the film that is not focalized through Laura’s character; she runs out the back before he enters the room and thus never even gets to look at him. His appearance is, in other words, *impossible* insofar as the whole of the film’s plot is meant to be the retroactive working of Laura’s memory; it is thus either a narrative lapse on Lean’s part or a fantasy on Laura’s. In either case, Stephen’s desire (whether for Alec or against Laura) is presented as something structurally liminal and needlessly symptomatic. As opposed to the war film’s effort to encourage new modes of sociability and care under the sign of total mobilization, the postwar film works incompletely and anxiously at the level of form and content to police relations that had been treated or at least imagined in more open terms during wartime.\(^{127}\)

One way, in that case, to see Lean’s broken shot/reverse shot sequence is to take it as a form in miniature of a traditional couple that has been put under threat by the social fallout of total war. Changed gender roles, prolonged absence, and the trauma of war posed all manner of threats to a normative ideological structure that seemed somehow inappropriate to the postwar world. The other side of that new world is, at least at moments, marked by panic, guilt, paranoia, and repression; indeed, this reading would take usual complaints about *Brief Encounter*—it is prudish, repressed, in denial—to a sort of logical extreme. The broken shot/reverse shot sequence, in that case, would be a stand-in for the broken couple, and the lone, melancholy shot of Celia Johnson’s face would be a figure for the ruin of that couple once ordinary life had been altered, opened, and then closed up once again by the physical and social violence of total war. This leads me to a third, more allegorical reading of the shot.

**You’ve Been a Long Way Away**

While we should, indeed, see Lean’s truncated sequence as a reflection on the instability of social relations between men and women after the war, there’s more going on here; although the film participates in or perhaps draws on postwar anxieties about sex, it also exceeds them and offers a
critical take both on what’s become of desire after the costly freedom of wartime and on the experience of war and its aftermath. Some of what’s additionally at stake here comes across in the film’s last lines. After reliving the whole of her short affair with Alec, Laura wakes up to find that Fred has been watching her with more attention and perspicuity than we would have expected from her kind, genial, and apparently dull husband. He comes to her side as she weeps and asks, “Whatever your dream was—it wasn’t a very happy one, was it?” After she responds, “no,” he gets the film’s last word: “You’ve been a long way away . . . thank you for coming back to me.”

The lines signal Laura’s second and final return to the family; she’s already returned in body, but, having worked through the previous weeks in memory—having, in other words, more or less mourned Alec—she returns now in heart and mind. The words are also curious because it’s hard to say just what Fred means. Does he know what she’s been thinking about? Has he seen it—as we have—projected across her face? If Fred somehow knows what’s going on—if he somehow knows what we know—then he is not simply an unromantic foil for the passionate Alec. The film can then suggest that Laura loses less by returning home; indeed, what she gains at the film’s last moment is renewed respect for her husband’s character and intelligence. Finally surprising Laura with a perceptiveness equal to her own, Fred’s last lines might at last turn Brief Encounter into something akin to Cavell’s comedies of remarriage, mature films that get the couple “back together, together again.”

One contemporary critic “admired Cyril Raymond’s performance as ‘the homely husband’ precisely because he had ‘masculine’ control enough to listen to Laura’s tale without revealing that he had heard it: he ‘suspected more than his emotions showed.’” If, however, he doesn’t know and is instead just the same sweet, dull Fred, then the return home is less satisfying and no less melancholy; the marriage will continue but only in the shadow of Laura’s structuring dissatisfaction. That Lean leaves this moment in a state of suspension is another moment at which it declares its quiet relation to the more obviously ambiguous ambiguities of classic art-house cinema.

There is, however, something else slightly off about Fred’s last words. Why is it that he casts Laura’s waking from her reverie as a return from “a long way away”? What distance does he imagine? And how has she come home? What’s odd here is how appropriate these lines would sound if they had been spoken to a soldier coming home from the war. Indeed, one way to make sense of the film’s last lines and the singular shot of Celia Johnson’s face is to see Brief Encounter as a phantasmatic inversion of another dimly imagined film, one in which Laura is not the almost adulterous wife, but...
rather the soldier husband just come home; the film might, in other words, be read as a sort of contrapuntal dream of war, an effort to cloak a latent story of violence and loss in the manifest garb of an “ordinary” woman’s brief affair: “I didn’t think such violent things could happen to ordinary people.” That is, in the nature of good and democratic propaganda, Lean’s film could be understood as an understated but not unavailable story of a soldier’s homecoming, of return and repair after the trauma of war.

There are several aspects of the film that support the notion that Laura stands in for a soldier just returned from war. She travels by train from one station to the next. And her drift past a war memorial at a moment of emotional need, an unfeminine cigarette in hand, suggests a just buried and poignant emotional relation to the war. Most telling, though, is her face, which resembles other notable moments of cinematic witness; indeed, her blank yet full middle-distance stare seems to conjure the obscure transparency of a look at war: “The eyes had grown larger and transparent, as they appear in icons. The cold, meanly divisive window glass was shattered, and through the wide openings the infinite behind man wafted unhindered into the endlessness before him and hallowed his countenance for the passage beyond time. Let us cast this visage as a constellation into the sky, to remind us of our last chance before everything turns into a faceless mass.”

Hans Erich Nossack’s comparison of people looking at war with religious icons anticipates Alexander Nemerov’s discussion of the icons that appear in Val Lewton’s home front films: “Icons do not tell stories but rather aspire to put us in the presence of the being they represent. Instead of deep spaces permeated by far-flung actions, they give us a flattened space, virtually a non-space in which static figures solemnly demand the viewer’s direct engagement.” Nemerov’s description also doubles as a good reading of Celia Johnson’s face, a face that looks out from the shallow space of a close-up and demands from the half-space of a shot without its reverse shot that someone or something else look back. Indeed, her look not only suggests that the enormity of war might be best represented in the faraway stare of a woman looking at nothing but also resembles looks that were often associated with the soldier’s experience of war trauma or, as the earlier war had it, shell shock. Laura’s hollow stare into an objectless middle distance, in that case, should be understood in relation to the film’s other blatantly symptomatic moments: she falls suddenly into both laughing and crying jags; she has unexplained headaches and fainting spells; and, most suggestively, her situation brings her to the very brink of self-destruction: “I meant to do it, Fred, I really meant to do it—I stood there trembling—right on the edge.”

If, in other words, we treat Brief Encounter as a sort of dream, as an effort
to represent the war via a series of condensations and displacements, we can see Laura as a representative of a historically specific psychological response to war. In World War I the psychological effects of combat were treated as shell shock, an amphibious diagnosis that refused to decide whether soldiers’ trauma had a physical or psychic origin. By the time of World War II, however, the rise of a specifically British psychoanalysis had led to a surer, if still problematic consensus that war indeed affected men’s minds. At best, this understanding led to progressive efforts like the development of a group-therapy technique at Northfield Military Hospital; at worst, it led to a further demonization of war trauma, as in the case of the RAF’s blanket diagnosis, LMF, or “lack of moral fibre.” In any case, once seen in this context, Laura’s response to the affair resembles symptoms reported by soldiers returning home—“fatigue, headache, depression, anxiety, and difficulty sleeping.” More to the point, Laura’s post-affair disposition seems to rhyme in both form and content with the experience of coming home. One soldier, Lieutenant George Chippington, wrote of war’s end as if it indeed were the end of an especially intense love affair: “After so many years of the excitements and dangers of the campaign and the sufferings and privations . . . the sudden full stop to all purposeful activity out of its very emptiness, has created an overpowering sense of isolation. I am now as it were a mere spectator doomed forever to stand off-stage while others act out the drama in which I no longer have a role.” Another, Lieutenant H. C. F. Harwood, wrote, “I have never felt like committing suicide in my life, but at that moment I can truthfully say that I came very near to it.” “I meant to do it, Fred, I really meant to do it.”

Laura’s place in the one half of the shot/reverse shot shot sequence that I have been describing does in fact suggest a profound isolation, a sense of being cut off from the world of the family and the community as a result of a knowledge that she has but cannot communicate; although Chippington’s secret is the special experience of combat and Laura’s an affair that she cannot share with her husband, the effect is the same: both are exiled from the social as a result of what they have come to know but cannot communicate. The soldier’s experience of being doomed to watch the world from the distant and passive perspective of the spectator is Laura’s experience as it is conveyed both by her structural relation to the story of Brief Encounter and, more evocatively, by her face, by a recurring shot of Celia Johnson’s face that allows us to watch someone else watching something of which she can no longer be a part. This helps to account for the power of this shot; to see Celia Johnson’s large, melancholy eyes looking at what she can neither have nor forget is to see in barely distorted form what would have been all
too familiar to audiences in 1945; as one returning soldier puts it, “My eyes were those of a captive on the run, expressing a suspicious fear as if being hunted.” Or, as Laura puts it, “I felt like a criminal.”

**A Bit of Grit**

The face of Celia Johnson thus variously reflects the psychic and social traumas of wartime. In one reading, the shot offers a diagnosis of British society after the war. Because of displacements and necessary shifts in the distribution of gendered labor, an old (and always incomplete) understanding of companionate marriage was no longer tenable. Johnson’s long look at the blank space where another ought to be is in this way an eloquent, conservative, and ultimately melancholy response to a world fundamentally altered by war. In another reading, the shot offers a formal description or embodiment of a historically specific version of war trauma. Unlike the previous war, World War II put psychic life, emotional experience, and memory at the heart of its diagnostic accounts of war and its effects. In this case, the wide, sad eyes of Celia Johnson represent—as if filtered through the distorting but revealing logic of the dream—what it would look like to look at someone looking at war. If war is too much to look at directly, looking at someone else looking and suffering might be the next best thing. Both readings are, I think, right; and both treat the shot as a more or less distorted representation of the historically specific content of the postwar and home front experiences of World War II. However, still more can be said about Johnson’s performance and about *Brief Encounter*; for example, how this shot not only reflects a particular historical experience but also challenges cinema’s potentially critical relation to history and to war. In other words, *Brief Encounter*’s signature shot is perhaps best read as an embodied argument about cinema in history and about cinema as a particularly powerful form of historical reckoning.

What does Celia Johnson in fact see when she looks off into space in *Brief Encounter*? One deceptively simple answer is that she sees a camera. To make this film, Celia Johnson spent many hours looking directly at a camera, and the resulting shots make up, I maintain, the film’s emotional and structural core. This centrality and the difficulty of her performance were not lost on Johnson and Lean and his crew. Johnson, as I mentioned, claimed to be terrified by the camera’s singular attention, and Lean was amazed by her ability to think on camera. One of the film’s cameramen reported: “You can do anything with her. Stick lamps under her nose, she’s got such technique, nothing bothers her.” It is telling that Johnson’s “technique” is understood as a sort of resistance to the emotional imposition—
the bother—of the camera. The Mitchell 35mm camera that Lean used for *Brief Encounter* is an imposing thing, made even more so by the need to encase it in its large, matte-black sound-dampening “blimp.” And, because Johnson was not made-up and filmed without diffusion, the feeling of the camera’s close and heavy scrutiny would have been all the more palpable. The camera is not simply a recording device in *Brief Encounter*. It is rather an important and material—if implicit—part of the film’s emotional field; insofar as it could or did cause her bother, which she in turn had to suppress, the camera effectively becomes a part of Celia Johnson’s face.

The film thematizes the eruption of the apparatus—as camera, as film style, as cinematic technique—into the fiction of the film several times over the course of the film. For instance, Laura meets Alec when she gets a bit of grit in her eye, a fact that calls material attention to the eye as lens as well as bodily organ; the vicarious discomfort one feels at the sight of Alec dragging his handkerchief across her eye rhymes with the awkwardness of being reminded from within the illusion of a film that lights, cameras, and members of a film crew are all present “behind” the image. The bit of grit returns later in the film in one of its most famous scenes. Early in their courtship, Alec tells Laura about his “special pigeon,” the research area that he hopes to pursue in addition to his work as a general practitioner: “my specialty is pneumoconiosis. . . . [The] slow process of fibrosis of the lung due to the inhalation of particles of dust.”139 He goes on to list different particulates—coal dust, metal dust, stone dust—that can compromise the body’s tenuous natural integrity. What we are supposed to understand throughout this conversation, however, is that while they speak of inhaling bits of grit, they are in fact acknowledging their attraction to each other. Whereas the first appearance of grit calls attention to the eye as a physical instrument and thus to the cinematic apparatus, in the case of the second, the self-consciously euphemistic nature of their conversation—where grit stands for the material force of sexual desire—calls attention to the film’s reliance on artifice and writerly technique. At both levels, the bit of grit emerges as a figure for the eruption of technique as a sort of matter into the thematic space of the film.

Most striking in this regard is the scene of Laura and Alec’s last encounter; in the midst of their final conversation, they are interrupted by Laura’s talkative acquaintance Dolly Messiter (which brings us back to the film’s opening scene and the film almost to a close). In order to represent Laura’s feelings of disappointment and abstraction, Lean shifts from a high-key to low-key lighting style, bathing her face in increasingly harsh direct light while allowing the fill to dim and the background to fade into darkness.
The moment is notable both for its ultimate effect and for the fact that one can follow the lights dimming as an obviously contrived process: “When I was directing *Brief Encounter* we experimented with an extreme technique of emphasis. In the closing scenes of the picture, when Celia Johnson is sitting in the railroad station and listening to the train that is taking her lover away for the last time, we took down the lights of the room behind her and even faded out the voice of the woman talking to her, so that all the emphasis was on her face and the sound of the departing train.”

In a sense, the cinematographic change of emphasis is a culmination of the film’s visual logic, a shift from the film’s putative domestic realism to an exaggerated chiaroscuro more appropriate to *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* or *The Third Man*; it is, in other words, late visual proof of a stylization that had been at work all along.

Lean then follows with something even more radical. After Alec leaves and Laura understands that he is not coming back, the camera—focused again on Johnson’s face—slowly but spectacularly tilts in sympathy with Laura’s own feeling of falling apart. Lean slowly rotates the camera clockwise, which produces the effect of the world turning in a counterclockwise direction. In the background we hear the sound of the approaching express, a high, wavering noise that seems once again almost to leap out of the film’s frame. The effect is potent because it doesn’t feel limited to Laura’s experience of the moment; rather it feels like Laura’s anxiety has somehow bled out from the fiction of the film and infected the camera, the actor, and A bit of grit.
the audience. It is a moment of emotional intensity powerful enough to tear the barrier that would keep the world of *Brief Encounter* separate from our own: “the camera tilts over, making her seem drunk or distraught as she goes to meet [the express]. It’s a calculated effect, and Lean easily gets overcalculated—but in this case the vibrato works just because the image seems to be willed by the actress.”

This brings me to my final reading of Celia Johnson’s face and *Brief Encounter*. Whereas Dreyer and Reed used the broken shot/reverse shot sequence to suggest the presence of something too big for cinema—the spiritual realist experience of the divine, the enormity of history itself—Lean does something different but no less ecstatic. The *almost “overcalculated”* encounter between the camera and Johnson’s face instead calls attention to the necessary split between actor and character, between the face of Laura Jesson as she gazes abstractly into the recent past and the face of Johnson as she looks almost directly into the camera’s lens. This split—made palpable at moments like the one I just described—is the film’s most concentrated embodiment of the historiographical logic described in this book. Insofar as the split makes visible the actor playing Laura Jesson, it also smuggles in that actor’s very few previous film roles—Alix Kinross, the wife of a Naval captain whose ship is sunk in *In Which We Serve*; and Ethel Gibbons, a woman we see live and suffer through two world wars in *This Happy Breed*. Like the unmotivated and uncanny reappearance of the color red in each of *Colonel Blimp*’s three acts, the face of Johnson cuts across Lean’s early
films, creating points of impacted and uncanny stylistic overlap that in turn call attention to the historically compressed nature of wartime itself: “It is,” writes Greil Marcus, “a curving time made by the way actors carry roles with them through the careers, each role, if the actors can burn at the core, bleeding into every other.”

What we see when we see the face of Celia Johnson is both the face of Laura Jesson and the face of an actor who looked at a camera that had previously looked at her while she was looking at the experience, the costs, and the waste of war.

The doubled logic of the shot thus forces us to confront a formal and temporal divide between the time of the film’s action—its setting in the before of the late 1930s, and its appearance on screens in 1945. More precisely, because the staring face of Johnson is felt at moments like these to be in both places or times at once, it properly exists as a critical or historiographical comment on the relation between the past and the present. As Lant writes, the film seems to know that “the recent past of Britain was hard to formulate, for its heritage of rationing, illegitimate births, strikes, and urban destruction and its memories of death and partings were still very much of the present.”

In the most material of ways, the war’s past refused to stay put. What makes Johnson’s face a figure for the tragic perspective discussed here is not only that it stands as a tacit witness to the waste of war but also that it acknowledges the violence of the past as always possible in the present, that violent things do indeed happen to ordinary people, and that the only way maybe to prevent or mitigate violence in the future is to admit as much now.