The national health: Pat Jackson's *White Corridors*

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WHITE CORRIDORS, a hospital drama first shown in June 1951, belongs to the small class of fictional films that deny themselves a musical score. Even the brief passages that top and tail the film, heard over the initial credits and the final image, were added against the wish of its director, Pat Jackson. Jackson had spent the first ten years of his career in documentary, joining the GPO Unit in the mid-1930s and staying on throughout the war after its rebranding as Crown, and the denial of music is clearly part of a strategy for giving a sense of documentary-like reality to the fictional material of *White Corridors*.

There is a certain paradox here, in that actual documentaries, like newsreels, normally slap on music liberally. To take two submarine-centred features, released almost simultaneously in 1943, Gainsborough's fictional *We Dive at Dawn*, in which Anthony Asquith directs a cast of familiar professionals headed by John Mills and Eric Portman, has virtually no music, while Crown's 'story-documentary', *Close Quarters*, whose cast are all acting out their real-life naval roles, has a full-scale score by Gordon Jacob. Other films in this celebrated wartime genre have even more prominent and powerful scores, by Vaughan Williams for *Coastal Command* (1942), by William Alwyn for *Fires were Started* (1943) and by Clifton Parker for Jackson's own *Western Approaches* (1945). One can rationalise this by saying that documentary has enough markers of authenticity already at the level of dramatic and visual construction, and a corresponding need for the bonus of

I had the not untypical experience of being taken to a lot of worthy British films by parents and teachers in the 1950s, and then reacting against them when the riches of non-British cinema were opened up, notably by *Movie* magazine, in the 1960s. Since then I have progressively overcome the *Movie* conditioning in the course of writing books on *Ealing Studios* (1977, new edition, Cameron & Hollis, 1999), *English Hitchcock* (Cameron & Hollis, 1999) and *Vertigo* (BFI, 2002). I co-scripted, with Stephen Frears, the British programme in the BFI/Channel 4 series on the centenary of cinema, *Typically British* (1996). Current projects include a study of Pat Jackson in the Manchester University Press series about British directors. *Charles Barr*

music to give it extra shape and impact; and that the fiction film, conversely, can create enough momentum through its own dramatic and visual structures to 'afford' the lack of a score, and to turn this lack into a positive and compensatory marker of realism.

The absence of a score does not of course *make* the film in any way more real, but it is evidence of the kind of project that *White Corridors* represents: that of sustaining, in the changing post-war world, something of the impetus of the realist British cinema of wartime. The critical consensus of the 1940s may have given excessive weight to this realist trend, at the expense of the less austere cinema of, for instance, Powell and Pressburger and Gainsborough melodrama, but there was, indubitably, a significant coming together of feature and documentary at various levels, leading on the one hand to 'story-documentaries' of increased ambition and accessibility, and on the other to a cycle of fiction films, such as *Millions Like Us* (1943), that were rooted in contemporary realities and acknowledged a specific documentary influence.¹ The pairing of *We Dive at Dawn* and *Close Quarters* is a good instance of this crossover, or, as it was often termed, 'marriage', between the two modes.

At the end of the war, the story-documentary lost the support of sponsors and exhibitors with startling rapidity. *Western Approaches* was the last of the feature-length Crown products to get wide distribution. It earned Pat Jackson a Hollywood contract, but he postponed taking it up in order to fight for the survival of this mode of film-making. In a paper written in 1945 and submitted to the Rank Organisation in early 1946, he lists the key films, and argues that

A country with such a record of achievement in any field of activity cannot now afford, through lack of foresight, to allow that activity to disappear. Yet just as the documentary method of story telling is reaching full maturity, just as it has broken down so much prejudice from both the public and the commercial industry, just as it has found its most persuasive method of putting Britain and her people on the screen – this type of film is in danger of disappearing from the cinemas altogether.²

There was no response, and Jackson soon went to MGM, where he was to direct just one film (*Shadow on the Wall*, 1949 – the first time he worked with actors) before returning to England in 1950. Meanwhile, his associates from Crown had gone in various directions. Some stayed on with the Unit, struggling with little success in the bleaker post-war climate; of the others, Harry Watt (director of *Target for Tonight*, 1941) had already gone to Ealing, and Jack Lee (*Close Quarters*) would likewise soon go into feature films, but only Watt's *The Overlanders* in 1946 has any real continuity with the big idea of wartime. The anticlimax of the post-war career of Humphrey Jennings is

well-known, and symptomatic. What might he have done as a genuine follow-up to *Fires were Started*? Even if he had not died in an accident in Greece in 1950, we might never have had an answer.

This context makes the achievement of *White Corridors* all the more striking. The absence of a musical score does not render it austere; it was a popular success at the time, and was thought worth re-releasing in 1963, when I recall watching it in an Irish suburban cinema among a packed and attentive afternoon audience. There are three main ways, in addition to the soundtrack strategy, in which it recalls the wartime marriage or crossover between fiction and documentary:

- 1 *The use of non-professionals, alongside experienced actors.* A talismanic role is played by H.F. Hills, a ship's officer whom Jackson had used in a small but important part at the end of *Western Approaches*. Unlike Fred Griffiths, whose casting in *Fires were Started* launched a long career as a character actor, Hills had nothing more to do with films until Jackson summoned him again to play the hospital porter; the film opens with his walk through the dawn streets to begin his stint at the reception desk. Like another non-professional cast as a Scottish ward sister, Grace Gavin, he blends in seamlessly. A third in this category is the boy whose illness constitutes a central thread in the story; compared with most of the stage-school child actors of the time, Brand Inglis is notably fresh and affecting.
- 2 *The instructional mode.* Basil Radford plays a confused gentleman who is just back from abroad and doesn't understand the workings of the new National Health Service. The porter patiently talks him – and us, if we need to know – through the procedures for getting onto a doctor's list and obtaining an NHS card. His cluster of comic-relief scenes add up to something very reminiscent of the short films of wartime in which the instructional pill is sugared by humour, for instance those of Richard Massingham – right down to the payoff where he breaks an ankle and is admitted as a casualty, thus bypassing the bureaucracy. On the inside of the hospital, we go through a comparable learning process via the experience of a nursing recruit (Petula Clark) who is finding her way around on her first day (compare the structural roles of the new fireman, Barratt, in *Fires were Started*, and the new recruit to the Fleet Air Arm in Ealing's *For Those in Peril*, 1944). Overall, the film works to familiarise us with the workings of an NHS hospital – and this shades into a third kind of echo of the big wartime films.

- 3 *Celebration of a public service and of the team that delivers it.* This had been a main impulse behind the highest-profile documentaries, from *Night Mail* and its postal workers to the dramatisations of the work of the various wartime service units. With the end of the war, the demand for such films had, as we have seen, tailed off, to the dismay of the left-leaning documentary loyalists who hoped that a Labour government would make imaginative use of them to promote its social agenda. Instead, Labour acquiesced in the contraction of official film sponsorship and in the marginalisation of the Crown Unit, which led to its abolition by the incoming Conservative government in 1952. The achievement of *White Corridors* is to find both an appropriate topical subject in the NHS and an absorbing way of dramatising it as a commercial project. In this, it can be compared with the police drama *The Blue Lamp* (1950), made by the most public-spirited and documentary-influenced of the commercial companies, Ealing, at the end of a few years of uncertainty as it cast around for a post-war identity. The two films even share a screenwriter in Jan Read, credited along with three others for *The Blue Lamp*, and with Pat Jackson for *White Corridors*. Important as *The Blue Lamp* is, *White Corridors* is bolder, less cosy, more adult.

Jackson's first wartime assignment was a short film released in November 1940, *Health in War*, an early example of the type of documentary that takes the enforced changes of the time as the foundation for a better future. In the words of the commentary, it shows how 'the voluntary and municipal hospitals were linked together into one national health service'. The lower-case initials are correct here, but the film is recording, and in a small way contributing to, the momentum that will lead to the creation of an upper-case National Health Service. After *Western Approaches*, Jackson spent six months preparing a film about the Beveridge Report – the weighty blueprint for a new system, NHS included, that would create security 'from the cradle to the grave', published in 1942 and widely discussed – but the project never got beyond script stage.³ *White Corridors* can be seen as an unofficial sequel both to *Health in War* and to the unrealised Beveridge film. It is based, appropriately enough, on a novel of wartime: *Yeoman's Hospital* by Helen Ashton, published in 1944 and set in December 1943.⁴ That hospital struggles along, financed by a combination of public money, private subscription and 'provident scheme' contributions, but state control is already in the air. The film updates the book unobtrusively into the world of the NHS, where finance is still tight but provision is free. The novel covers a period of twenty-four hours, which the film expands into a few days.

Health in War, while acknowledging 'the evils of the past', was typical of official documentary in its upbeat rhetoric about present and future, backed by sunny imagery. 'Whatever it is, no hospital, even in the danger area, will fail to give you attention if your case is urgent.' 'Here come the finest surgeons in the country, to give their skills to all the people.' We see white coats, gleaming instruments, wise and caring faces, and country settings. *White Corridors* honours the ideals while being honest about the obstacles, both material and human.⁵ This is urban austerity England: white coats grow shabby, new equipment has to be fought for. Surgeons are fallible.

'No hospital ... will fail to give you attention if your case is urgent.' The narrative weaves together a number of ongoing cases with two new admissions who get a contrasting quality of care. A woman arrives in casualty at an inconvenient time, with head pains; the young doctor on duty, Dick Groom (Jack Watling), is impatient to get away, examines her cursorily, and sends her away with some pills. Later she is found unconscious, and others diagnose a cerebral abscess. This episode is taken from the book; the other casualty admission is – like the Basil Radford character – new. A boy with a poisoned hand, Tommy Briggs, is brought in by his anxious mother, and both are received by doctors and nurses alike with warm care and concern. Ironically, it is the woman with a cerebral abscess who lives, saved by an emergency operation, and the boy who dies, since he turns out to be resistant to penicillin.

These two stories, absorbing in themselves, allow the main plot issues to be carried forward and resolved. The film combines its strong documentary elements with the kind of tight construction that is characteristic of 'classical Hollywood', leaving no loose ends, and interweaving the public life of the hospital with the personal life of its doctor protagonists. Gavin Lambert, the new young editor of *Sight and Sound*, was an outspoken critic of the mainstream British cinema of the time, and had recently caused great offence by his scathing attack on *The Blue Lamp*, but he praised *White Corridors* for its 'rare professionalism', suggesting that this might owe something to Jackson's experience in Hollywood.⁶ Lambert was referring to directorial style and handling of actors, but the economy of the scripting deserves equally to be called professional, and it may be significant that Jan Read had likewise spent time after the war in Hollywood, working with Fritz Lang.⁷

Sophie Dean (Googie Withers) is a surgeon attracted by the offer of a glamorous job in London. Two things make her hesitate to leave, her attachment to a colleague, Neil Marriner (James Donald), and the prospect of a secure staff appointment at Yeoman's; but her rival for the appointment, Dick Groom, has strong support on the relevant committee, led by his

surgeon father (Godfrey Tearle). When Dick mishandles the abscess case, it is Sophie who finds the woman unconscious, makes a correct diagnosis, and saves her life, which leads Dick's father to transfer his support to her. Meanwhile, Neil has been absorbed in his research on penicillin-resistant cases, developing the kind of serum that might have saved Tommy Briggs, had it been fully tested and approved for use. In taking a blood sample from Tommy, he has, by a careless – and plausibly 'Freudian' – slip of the needle, infected himself; and when, predictably, he in turn fails to respond to orthodox treatment, he urges Sophie to inject him with the unauthorised experimental serum, even though both realise that his death would then result in criminal charges against her. His decline, and the devastating death of Tommy, decide her; she injects the serum, he lives, and she will stay on at Yeoman's Hospital, presumably to be given promotion and to marry Neil.

Summarised thus, the drama may sound neat to the point of glibness (Lambert qualified his praise by referring to 'material that is basically synthetic'), but it is realised with subtlety and conviction, and a historical perspective leads one to respect and value it all the more strongly, centred as it is on two types that were soon virtually to disappear from British films: the visionary researcher, and the strong female professional.

The film seems to foreshadow the drastic 1950s narrowing down of the role of women in an earlier dialogue scene, in which Sophie insists to Neil that 'I'm not a careerist, honestly I'm not. I'd like to do some good in the world if I can, but I'd much rather you were the big success'. Her final decision to stay in the provinces could be read, like so many last-minute British film decisions of the *Billy Liar* kind, as abject, subordinating herself to him; but she is not exactly embracing domesticity, and can continue, like him, to 'do some good in the world', even if she is no longer going for 'big success' in London. It is a delicate balance, and the long-held final shot of her walk down the corridor, away from the camera into long shot, has complex connotations, like the identically constructed and equally portentous one of Midge (Barbara Bel Geddes) walking down the hospital corridor and out of *Vertigo*. It represents Sophie's absorption into the provincial hospital, Google Withers ending her last decent British film role, after playing a series of impressively forceful 1940s women, notably for post-war Ealing, and the figure of the strong professional woman walking out of British cinema.

'I'd much rather you were the big success.' In the event, her male opposite number does not have much of a future either in British films, and this applies, likewise, both to the type and to the actor. The frustration of the inventor, played by Alec Guinness, of the miracle new fabric in Ealing's *The Man in the White Suit* (Mackendrick, 1951) acts as a prescient comic diagnosis

of the imminent loss of this spirit of inventiveness, a loss which goes strikingly in parallel with the attenuation of female ambition.⁸ The passionately committed aircraft designer of Anthony Asquith's *The Net*, released at the start of 1953, is the last of a line. Like Neil Marriner, he is played by James Donald, an actor with a remarkable ability to combine sardonically detached humour with idealistic commitment to the goals of scientific enquiry.⁹ Googie Withers and James Donald are the most expressive possible casting for *White Corridors*, and their playing brings to mind the comment made by Lindsay Anderson on a film with which it has certain affinities, *The Small Back Room* (Powell and Pressburger, 1949), that the relationship there between David Farrar and Kathleen Byron is, in contrast to so much screen artificiality, 'recognizably one between a man and a woman'.¹⁰

One of the consistent pleasures of *White Corridors* is, indeed, its shrewd casting. Around this admirable central pair there circulates an evocative range of familiar and unfamiliar faces. The pre-war, pre-welfare state mind-set is neatly represented not only in the cameo of confusion by Basil Radford, an actor identified forever with his role as half of the reactionary Charters–Caldicott team in *The Lady Vanishes* (Hitchcock, 1938), but also in two senior committee members whom Sophie and Neil have to contend with, played by men whose career goes right back into the dark ages of British cinema: Godfrey Tearle as the older Dr Groom, and Henry Edwards as Brewster, the local magnate whose daughter is set to make a dynastic marriage to Groom's son. Edwards was a leading star and director of silent films from 1914 onwards, while Tearle's Romeo was filmed as early as 1908.¹¹ This professional back story helps to give the two men a formidable 'weight', and to give corresponding weight to their gradual reorientation – Groom's especially, as he comes to recognise both his own failing powers and his son's unworthiness, and acknowledges Sophie's superior claim to the vacant post. The son, and the nurse whose affections he trifles with, are Jack Watling and Moira Lister, both giving a hint of depth to their familiar personae, callow and flighty respectively. The new nurse is Petula Clark, poised between her child and adult careers, and coping well with some rigorously extended vulnerable close-ups as she listens to important advice, or watches the off-screen unbandaging of a mutilated face. Further down the cast list, reliable character players like Jean Anderson (as a nurse) and Megs Jenkins (Tommy's mother) mix with the various non-professionals already referred to, and with faces that we see briefly here but that will later be familiar: the Brewster daughter is Dagmar Wynter, soon to be Dana in Hollywood, and waiting-room patients include Dandy Nichols and Patrick Troughton, stars of the future TV series *Till Death Us Do Part* and *Doctor Who*.

Many films of the time inevitably have some kind of comparable mix, but *White Corridors*, through a combination of luck and judgment, has an especially charismatic and precisely chosen range, and is distinctive both in its integration of non-professionals and in the artful way it deploys them all in the service of a story about gradual, unspectacular, but significant change. To return to Godfrey Tearle: not only will he play a comparable role soon afterwards in a film of comparable stature, *Mandy* (Mackendrick, 1952, for Ealing), but it was his role as the elderly aircraft gunner in *One of Our Aircraft is Missing* (1942), and his relations with the younger crew members, that inspired its makers, Powell and Pressburger, to go on to explore further the theme of continuity and change between generations in *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* (1943); and Tearle's Dr Groom, like his grandfather in *Mandy*, has affinities with Blimp, both in his obstinacy and in his final graceful concessions.¹² *White Corridors* can, then, be linked with equal plausibility both to wartime documentary and to the war films of a team who positioned themselves in explicit opposition to documentary; two important streams come together that revive the wartime story/documentary 'marriage' in a particularly fresh and apparently promising way.

But the promise was scarcely fulfilled. Powell and Pressburger, whose great achievements were made possible by finance from Rank, had left the company when it began to adopt a policy of greater caution and closer control; ironically, the trigger for this was the management's hostile reception of *The Red Shoes* (1948), which became their greatest commercial success.¹³ Something comparable now happened to Pat Jackson. Despite the commercial and critical success of *White Corridors*, the film made the Rank Organisation uneasy, with its lack of a score and its reluctance to compromise:

When Arthur Rank saw the film he was flattering about it and said, 'I congratulate you, Mr. Jackson, it's a nice film, but I don't think the little boy ought to die. I think you should retake that.' I replied, 'Mr. Rank, if the boy doesn't die, you haven't got a film.' He didn't know what I was talking about. I realized he hadn't a clue about drama, how it is conceived and constructed. This applied to his right-hand and left-hand men. The death knell of British cinema was starting to be rung.¹⁴

Pat Jackson resisted the offer of a Rank contract, anxious to maintain control over his own projects, but in the rigid duopoly conditions of the 1950s it was not easy to negotiate an independent career. As *Film Dope* magazine put it, 'The battleship-grey decade of the 1950s ... was the era of the company man, and Pat Jackson had the misfortune to turn up at the wrong time and with the wrong kind of temperament.' Like Powell, he came to see himself as the victim of a Rank 'vendetta' and his work for the rest of

the decade and beyond was, on the whole, similarly unfulfilling.¹⁵ Though Gavin Lambert wrote that ‘*White Corridors* should set a new standard for popular entertainment in films of this country’, there was no real successor to it, from Jackson or anyone else, except, to some extent, in television. But that is a story of the 1960s.

Notes

- 1 For an insider’s account of this process, from one who was active during the war both as a critic and as a film producer, see Basil Wright, *The Long View: An International History of Cinema* (Secker & Warburg, 1974), pp. 199–200. Among the terms he uses are ‘rapprochement’ and ‘shot-gun wedding’.
- 2 ‘Crisis in Documentary’, unpub. six-page typescript, originally dated 16 April 1945; I am grateful to Pat Jackson for supplying me with a copy.
- 3 Jackson refers to the Beveridge script, ‘Now or Never’, in an interview for *Film Dope* 27 (July 1983), p. 4.
- 4 Helen Ashton, *Yeoman’s Hospital* (Collins, 1944). A prefatory note (p. 10) indicates that ‘the whole action takes place during twenty-four hours in December, 1943’, and the completion of the text (p. 248) is dated with equal precision as ‘Feb. 1944’.
- 5 For a sourly hostile presentation of the National Health Service reforms, in a comparable popular narrative format, see Nevil Shute’s novel *The Far Country* (Heinemann, 1952). Though this forms a minor strand of the novel, and deals more with general practice than with hospitals, it has considerable weight in motivating the heroine’s, and the novel’s, preference for post-war Australia over England. A classic account of the establishment of the NHS, by means of legislation passed in July 1948, is given in an essay by Peter Jenkins, ‘Bevan’s Fight with the BMA [British Medical Association]’, in Michael Sissons and Philip French (eds), *Age of Austerity: 1945–1951* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1963).
- 6 Gavin Lambert, review of *White Corridors* in *Sight and Sound* 21, 1 (August–September 1951), p. 20.
- 7 Read’s work as an ‘assistant’ to Lang, immediately after the war, is referred to in Patrick McGilligan, *Fritz Lang: The Nature of the Beast* (St. Martin’s Press, 1997), pp. 347–8.
- 8 It could be argued that, just as repressed sexuality is released in the Dracula films at the end of the decade, so the repressed spirit of scientific enquiry finds its way into the figure of Dr Frankenstein.
- 9 For a fuller discussion of this actor and of the values he represents, see my essay ‘Madness, Madness: The Brief Stardom of James Donald’, in Bruce Babington (ed.), *British Stars and Stardom: From Alma Taylor to Sean Connery* (Manchester University Press, 2001), pp. 236–54.
- 10 Lindsay Anderson, ‘British Cinema: The Descending Spiral’ in *Sequence* 7 (Spring 1949), p. 9. Farrar’s bomb expert is a similar flawed and sardonic visionary, ready to put himself in danger in the cause of advancing knowledge and saving life; Kathleen Byron overcomes frustrations to commit herself to him at the end. In both films, the experts have to choke back their irritation with ignorant but influential visitors to their workplace, and the obstacles to rational progress are conveyed in lucidly staged committee meetings. *The Small Back Room* is, like *White Corridors*, based on a wartime novel, though the subject matter meant that updating it was not an option. In visual texture, the films are at opposite extremes, of white and of noir.
- 11 On Tearle, see Rachael Low, *The History of the British Film: 1906–1914* (Allen & Unwin, 1948), p. 117, and on Edwards, Rachael Low, *The History of the British Film: 1914–18* (Allen & Unwin, 1950), p. 79 and many other references.

- 12 On the genesis of *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp*, see Michael Powell, *A Life in Movies* (Heinemann, 1986), p. 399. On the generational conflict in *Mandy*, and, indeed, on the other Ealing material referred to earlier, see the third edition of my *Ealing Studios* (Cameron & Hollis/University of California Press, 1999).
- 13 Powell, *A Life in the Movies*, pp. 653–4 and 670.
- 14 *Film Dope* (July 1983), p. 8.
- 15 *Film Dope* (July 1983), editorial introduction to interview with Pat Jackson, p. 1.