

What Cannot Be Said: “Silent Dust” (1949) and the Malevolent Veteran

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“Silent Dust”, released in February 1949, was one of a group of films that explored the problems of the returning Second World War veteran. Although the maladjusted veteran is a feature of all major wars, it assumes an added significance in this instance because the Second World War, in Britain and America at least, is conventionally understood “almost universally as honourable and noble, fought with right and justice exclusively on the Allied side”.¹ Angus Calder has argued that the dominant narrative constructed about the Second World War in Britain was what he terms the “myth of the Blitz”, a heroic myth of courage, endurance and pulling together. This myth, through its perpetuation in an enormous array of cultural practices – notably a cycle of combat films in the 1950s such as “The Dam Busters” (1955) and “Reach for the Sky” (1956) – became the accepted view and was almost impossible to dislodge.² It was a myth that was officially ratified in the British state’s commemoration of the war and, like all dominant discourses, served to marginalise alternative constructions of the conflict, particularly those that represent it as a traumatic and possibly brutalising experience. By analysing “Silent Dust” in detail and in relation to its social and cultural context, I hope to recover this repressed narrative and restore it to its rightful place as an important discourse about the Second World War.

1. Synopsis and Production Personnel

“Silent Dust” is set in a small village in rural England. The action takes place three years after the war has ended, as Robert Rawley, a wealthy, self-made industrialist, now blind, is eagerly anticipating the ceremonial opening of the sports pavilion he has commissioned to honour the memory of his son, Lieutenant Simon Rawley, who fell in February 1945. However, his preparations provoke disquiet. Joan, his former secretary and now his second wife, is frightened that their marriage is beginning to disintegrate under the strain of

¹ David Cesarani, *Lacking in Conviction: British War Crimes Policy and National Memory of the Second World War*, in: Martin Evans/Ken Lunn (eds.), *War and Memory in the Twentieth Century*, Oxford 1997, pp. 27-36, here pp. 27-28.

² Angus Calder, *The Myth of the Blitz*, London 1991.

Rawley’s obsession with his son’s death. Lord Clandon, the local squire now living in genteel poverty, requests that the pavilion be rededicated to all the local lads who have fallen in the war, including Clandon’s own son. Simon’s wife, Angela, who has been asked to return in order to be present at the opening, is also critical and reveals that she has secretly remarried an army doctor, Captain Maxwell Oliver, Lord Clandon’s nephew. However, everything is thrown into disarray when Simon returns, having faked his own death in order to escape from the pressures of combat life and turned to criminality. He is now on the run, having killed the driver of a car he stole. The police, unaware of the identity of the murderer, are searching the district for a man with a scar on his cheek. Simon tries to blackmail his family into giving him money to escape arrest, but when his father refuses and the two struggle, Simon falls to his death from the first floor balcony.

“Silent Dust” was a modest first feature, with a limited production budget but a strong cast. The film’s guiding force was probably the Moscow-born Nat Bronsten, an ambitious independent producer who had made three films which explore wartime dislocation³ and who was clearly drawn to dark, hard-hitting, topical films that were relatively inexpensive to produce. The key creative personnel, director Lance Comfort, cinematographer Wilkie Cooper, production designer C.P. Norman and composer Georges Auric had all worked on similar films, which explains the stylistic accomplishment and sure-footedness of “Silent Dust”. It also owes much to Michael Pertwee’s incisive screenplay, an adaptation of his own 1948 play “The Paragon” (written with his father Roland).

2. Problems of Mourning

On one level, “Silent Dust” dramatises a contemporary debate about mourning. How are the dead to be remembered, and yet a new society forged? How are private grief and public mourning to be reconciled? What form should this public grieving take? Rawley’s decision to create an imposing pavilion to his son’s memory has been made in order to fill the void in his own life, as a substitute for his shattered dynastic aspirations, and as a proclamation that, despite being born in a Leeds tenement, he is as good as his supposed betters. As Rawley (Stephen Murray) reveals to Lord Clandon (Sir Seymour Hicks): “For generations you’ve been tin gods round here and it goes against the grain when a mongrel like myself marches in... I was planning to start a family that would have rivalled any in England. My son was a fine man. He would have been a great one. A stray bullet wiped that out. His name won’t die so easily.”

³ “They Made Me a Fugitive” (1947), “Dancing with Crime” (1947) and “Obsession” (1948).

Earlier he had revealed to Joan (Beatrice Campbell) that the pavilion “is only the beginning. One day I’ll build something worthy of him”. However, the epigraph quotation from Thomas Gray’s “Elegy in a Country Churchyard” (from which the film takes its title) has already adverted to the self-deluding nature of earthly monuments:

Can storied urn or animated bust
Back to the mansion call the fleeting breath?
Can honour’s voice provoke the silent dust,
Or flatt’ry soothe the dull cold earth of death?

Clandon sees Rawley’s actions as ostentatious and insensitive, exhibiting a disdain for the village lads whose lives are just as important and for whom Clandon feels the aristocracy’s traditional *noblesse oblige* as opposed to the egotistical self-importance of the *arriviste* – Rawley only moved into the district in 1944. But if these deeply entrenched class antagonisms of British society continued to be played out in the war’s aftermath by an older generation still gripped by the war, the newly married couple, Angela (Sally Gray) and Max Oliver (Derek Farr), represent the modern, progressive middle class anxious to forget the war. Having worked in Berlin to reconstruct a shattered Germany, the couple have the potential to forge a new, egalitarian community, the longed-for New Jerusalem, in post-war Britain.

3. The Returning Veteran

The returning veteran was an important figure in post-war British society, as it was elsewhere in Europe and America.⁴ From as early as 1941, medical experts had predicted that many servicemen would experience profound difficulties in returning to civilian life with the term “war trauma” entering into wide circulation, replacing the older term “shell shocked”. The weight of medical opinion caused various government initiatives to be pursued: rehabilitation centres, forms of outreach and the wider dissemination of psychologists and psychiatrists. The traumatised veteran acted, in many ways, as a test case for a society that was, after the Beveridge Report of 1943, evolving into a welfare state, tolerant and humane, with a significantly increased depth and breadth of responsibility towards its citizens, “from the cradle to the grave”, one which was therefore committed to reassimilating its “damaged” men, including deserters.

⁴ For a discussion of Britain and France see Marilyn Butler, *Film and Community: Britain and France*, London 2004, pp. 98-124.

However, this compassionate awareness of the returning veteran’s difficulties existed side-by-side with a widespread perception that saw the maladjusted combatant as the locus for an array of anxieties about post-war social dislocation, including a fear of widespread criminality fuelled by the frequently reported rise in crime rates occasioned by the black market. In this construction, the maladjusted veteran became not a misunderstood victim but a monster, one who had been trained by the state in the arts of survival and killing, with deserters, estimated to number between 15,000 and 20,000, forming a potential criminal army, outside the normal social and legal controls.⁵ An influential article in “Picture Post”, entitled “The Problem of the Demobbed Officer”, delineated a range of troubles experienced by returning officers, and concluded that a disaffected middle class was “always easy game for political exploitation. Hitlerism, for instance, grew out of the dispossessed middle classes of Germany after 1918.”⁶

In “Silent Dust”, the veteran’s return creates chaos. As Jay Winter has argued, the figure who returns from the “dead” is a powerful trope that always destabilises the world of the “living”, making a hideous mockery of the processes of mourning that have taken place.⁷ In this case, not only Rawley’s hubristic monumentality, but Angela’s attempts to renew her life are thrown into disarray by Simon’s return. Herbert Wilcox’s “Piccadilly Incident”, in which the returnee was a woman, Sydney Box’s “The Years Between” and Michael Balcon’s “The Captive Heart”, all released in 1946, also used this trope, but in these cases the returning veteran is an honourable character. In “Silent Dust”, however, Simon is revealed to be a deserter, thief, blackmailer and murderer, who faked his own death in order to disguise his cowardice. He has now become an outcast whose sinister, clandestine return is superbly evoked by Cooper’s chiaroscuro lighting and fluid camerawork, which combines with Comfort’s use of low angles, distorted and unsettling compositions and jarring cuts – particularly to extreme close-ups of Simon’s frightened eyes peering through the darkness – and Auric’s ominous score, to create the shadowy, fearful world that Simon now inhabits. “Silent Dust’s” visual style is recognisably that of *film noir* which characteristically used expressionist chiaroscuro to create an unstable and threatening *mise-en-scène* in which characters move in and out of deep shadows, producing an alienated and paranoid universe. This style effectively redefined the crime film as the psychological thriller.⁸

⁵ See M-O 2491 (May 1947) Deserters, Mass-Observation Archive, University of Sussex.

⁶ Sydney Jacobson, The Problem of the Demobbed Officer, in: *Picture Post*, 26.1.1946, pp. 19-20.

⁷ Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History*, Cambridge 1995, pp. 15-28.

⁸ For further discussion see my *Film Noir*, Harlow 2002.

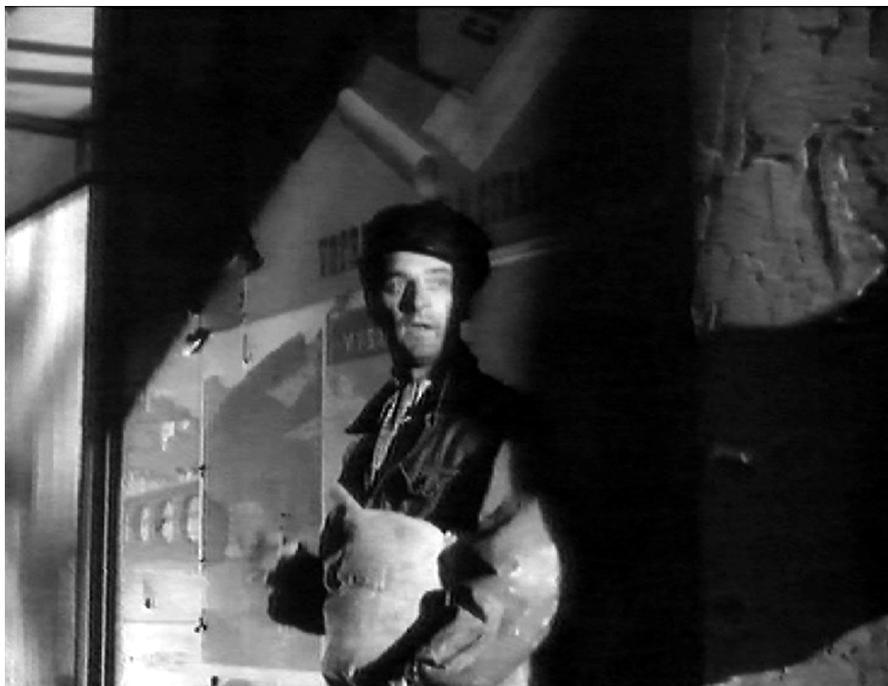


Returning from the dead: Simon contiously approaches his father's new home.

C.P. Norman's grand design of the magnificent (and brightly lit) entrance hall and stairway of Rawley's well-appointed mansion where much of the action takes place, provides a striking contrast with the narrow corridors and shallow alcoves of the kitchen and servant's quarters through which Simon inches his way as he moves stealthily around unfamiliar territory. As Simon gradually penetrates further into the house, he stops to laugh derisively at his portrait on the wall in the standard pose of the gentleman-officer. As he does so, his father opens the door, causing a shaft of light to reveal an ugly, livid scar on his cheek, a marker of his criminality, not the honourable scar of battle. Simon does not reveal himself to his father, but when discovered by Angela, resumes the malicious, manipulative bantering that had been her torment before he joined the army, sadistically enjoying her confusion, fear and outrage as he tries to blackmail both her and Max into giving him money. He candidly confesses: "I never wanted to join up. I was frightened. If I'd had the guts, I'd have been a conchie. Oh, I was a hero when there was no danger about, but when it came to the real thing, I was scared stiff."

Like Simon, Nigel Patrick superbly exudes the louche, cynical charm and malicious quick-wittedness that had been a feature of his screen persona,

notably as the spiv Bar Gorman in “Noose” (1948). To his stepmother Joan, he is able to pose as a victim, but in a second memorable sequence, Simon’s honeyed, self-excusing narrative to Joan is completely undercut by what we see, in flashback, actually occurred. As the events unfold – including stealing vehicles and brutally killing a lorry driver in order to assume his identity, dealing in contraband goods – we come to understand that the war has provided Simon with a wonderful opportunity to exercise the violent and vicious aspects of his nature that had been suppressed in civilian life. He uses his considerable intelligence, quick-wittedness and charm not only to evade capture, but to enjoy a well-heeled lifestyle. In the concluding scene in the Café de Bruxelles, another well-executed design by Norman, Simon cynically robs the nightclub singer (Maria Var) he has befriended before making an abrupt exit in the confusion after a bomb has fallen, crashing through a plate-glass window from which he receives his facial wound, after he has been recognised by one of his former men. Simon’s flashback dramatises what I have termed the “other war”, the venal and corrupt war fought by opportunists and criminals, a war utterly at odds with the official viewpoint of an honourable struggle to overthrow fascism.⁹



The deserter on the run: Simon slips into a sidestreet to avoid detection.

4. Denouement and the Problems of Closure

The father-son relationship is at the heart of “*Silent Dust*”, and the film builds steadily towards their meeting. In an innovative sequence, Cooper recreates the world as perceived by a blind man by using a negative image on the film-stock, which gradually gives way to a positive one as Rawley painstakingly pieces together the strange occurrences and odd behaviour which have puzzled him during that day. As he comes to understand what it is that the others have gone to such lengths to conceal from him, he finally forms an image of his son’s return, first in his military pose with dignified mien, but then as the outcast, with a monstrous scar on his cheek.



Simon in his father’s imagination: the scar has assumed monstrous proportions.

It is a moment of clear-sightedness that allows Rawley to regain his appreciation of Joan. “I’ve suddenly realised how lucky I am”, he murmurs in a moving moment as he gently caresses Joan’s face and asks her to tell Clandon that the pavilion will be rededicated to all those who fell. Rawley’s blindness is a

⁹ See Andrew Spicer, The “other war”: subversive images of the Second World War in service comedies, in: Stephen Caunce et al. (eds.), *Relocating Britishness*, Manchester 2004, pp. 167-182.

metaphor for his refusal to acknowledge his son's true character, and his awakening from his delusion prepares for the final confrontation between father and son. When they meet, Rawley still expects Simon to behave honourably, to commit suicide like a gentleman and to save the family name. True to his character, Simon refuses and tries to wheedle his father into giving him, if not money, then the chance to escape, before trying to physically overpower him. In the ensuing struggle, Simon falls to his death like a modern Lucifer. At this point Lord Clandon, representing a decaying but still morally active aristocracy, intervenes to suggest to Rawley that all likenesses of Simon are removed from the house, and therefore, when the police find the corpse of the man with the scar on his face, it will be that of the unknown murderer for whom they have been searching the district.

Thus Simon's death seems to provide “Silent Dust” with a point of closure. It frees Angela to continue her marriage to Max, clearly an honourable man with a responsible profession, and frees Rawley from the terrible burden of his son's memory without bringing dishonour to the family name. The final image – a game of cricket played on the square in front of the pavilion – is an evocative representation of traditional English pastoral, a ‘timeless’ image of a society restored to a harmonious order in which the wounds that the war has inflicted on this community have been healed. And yet this closure is achieved only by removing all trace of the *real* Simon and perpetuating the fiction of the gallant officer who fell honourably in battle. Therefore it is a closure shot through with a devastating irony, one that insists that the peace, the restoration of order and stability and the hopes for a ‘New Jerusalem’, can only be achieved by erasing the unacceptable forces that were released in wartime, and by obliterating all knowledge and remembrance of the ‘other war’ and the malevolent figures it produced. The central action of the film presents that terrifying thought – usually suppressed but present in a number of these *noirs* including “Cage of Gold” (1950), “Cloudburst” (1950), “The Deep Blue Sea” (1955), “A Prize of Gold” (1956) in which Patrick played a similar role, and “Libel” (1959) – that the *wrong* men survived the war, the ones who would have been better dead.

5. Reception and Aftermath

Many of these disturbing *noirs*, notably “They Made Me a Fugitive”, were attacked by critics, by the British Board of Film Censors which tried to prevent their development, and even at ministerial level. In the House of Commons in June 1948 Harold Wilson, Secretary to the Board of Trade Secretary who therefore had special responsibility for the film industry, commented: “We are getting tired of some of the gangster, sadistic and psychological films of which we seem to have so many, of diseased minds, schizophrenia, amnesia... I

should like to see more films which genuinely show our way of life, and I am not aware... That amnesia and schizophrenia are stock parts of our social life.”¹⁰ In this critical and political animus, we can detect a genuine fear that the war has created something monstrous whose representation, even acknowledgement, must be both condemned and suppressed.

By February 1949 when “Silent Dust” was released, the critical temperature had cooled and it did not suffer the vituperative moral outrage that had greeted “They Made Me a Fugitive” eighteen months earlier. But although “Silent Dust” received mainly favourable reviews, they tended to be somewhat condescending: “a competent piece of British film-carpentry”.¹¹ However, one reviewer recorded that even though he “went expecting to scoff at a little-trumpeted British film made on a meagre budget by an independent producer”, he found himself “gripped by the story, the direction and the 18-carat acting”.¹² Even without much pre-publicity, or a showcase release in London’s West End, “Silent Dust” was listed in “Kinematograph Weekly’s” annual round-up of films that did good, if not outstanding business at the box-office, showing that it had succeeded in reaching a wide audience despite little promotion. Clearly at this point, there was a widespread interest in the darker side of the war, before the combat films of the 1950s reconstructed the war as the triumph of a virtuous and self-sacrificing middle class. With their success came the eclipse of the *noirs*, and “Silent Dust” subsequently attracted little interest, suffering, until very recently, from the condescension of a highly selective historiography of British cinema.¹³ Even now it is not widely accessible for viewing, last screened on British television fifteen years ago and is not available on videocassette. However, it seems appropriate to disinter it here and to give this intelligent and even courageous film its due as part of a powerful body of films whose existence, for a time, contested the myth of the Blitz by exploring the disturbing repercussions of the unspeakable “other war” that had created the malevolent veteran.¹⁴

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¹⁰ Hansard, 5th series, vol. 452, column 775, 17.6.1948, quoted in Charles Barr, Introduction: Amnesia and Schizophrenia, in: idem (ed.), *All Our Yesterdays*, London 1986, p. 14.

¹¹ C.A. Lejeune, in: *Observer*, 6.2.1949.

¹² Anon., in: *News of the World*, 6.2.1949.

¹³ The exception is Brian McFarlane, *Lance Comfort*, Manchester 1999, pp. 89-94.

¹⁴ The author would like to thank Joyce Woolridge for preparing the images.