



**SIGHT AND SOUND GREATEST FILMS OF ALL TIME 2022: 78=**

# A Matter of Life and Death

**SPOILER WARNING** The following notes give away some of the plot.

A most peculiar and potent cocktail of romance, theology, global bridge-building and national tub-thumping, this thoughtful drama about one pilot's deferred mortality remains, if nothing else, a definitive monument to the power of Technicolor. The vivid imagery and the cineliterate style(s) deployed by a creative team at the top of their game express the film's intricate worldview. It searingly conveys a world grappling with uncharted new places, trying to pick up the pieces after unimaginable calamity.

**James Healy, *Sight and Sound*, Winter 2022-23**

Michael Powell's experience of working on *The Thief of Bagdad* (1940) had given him a strong taste for spectacle and fantasy; but between *A Matter of Life and Death*'s conception and realisation, *A Canterbury Tale* (1944) had met with hostile incomprehension, no doubt partly because its allegorical dimension was subordinated to a nominal realism. Powell drew the conclusion that fantasy needed to be clearly signalled and 'justified' by a framework of recognisable conventions. And as a lifelong Kipling enthusiast, he would have known the First World War story 'On the Gate', which portrays heaven's administration hard pressed by the flood of casualties resulting from the war.' The story's basic technique is to mask its religious and moral concerns in a gruff version of military-colonial parlance, with a minimum of narrative incident, set in a fantastic empyrean which combines Renaissance marble and Victoria Station against a celestial backdrop, pointing towards the modernised heaven of *A Matter of Life and Death*. As in the film, irreverent jokes undercut solemnity and sentimentality, while anachronisms, such as a 'recorder [sparking] furiously a broken run of S.O.S.s', mingle with images drawn from traditional Christian and mythological iconography. Here, in effect, is an early version of *AMOLAD*'s bureaucratic, yet still awesome, vision.

However much *AMOLAD* was re-written and researched to 'ground' its fantasy, few viewers have doubted that it still carries a poetic, if not mystical, message. A clue to this intended dimension of the film appears as an epigraph to the shooting script: 'There is a music wherever there is a harmony, order or proportion; and thus far we may maintain the Music of the Spheres; for those well-ordered motions, and regular paces, though they give no sound unto the ear, yet to the understanding they strike a note most full of harmony.' This is from *Religio Medici*, a meditation by the 17th-century physician and essayist Sir Thomas Browne, whose writings combined Christian piety, vaulting imagination and classical erudition. His influential essay views man as a microcosm of the universe and stresses the importance of toleration and respect for other nations – all highly relevant to *AMOLAD* – but even more significant is its uniquely visionary quality. 'I love to lose my selfe in a mystery to pursue my reason to an *oh altitudo*', confessed Browne, and much of his writings' resonance is due to a sturdy Anglicanism clothed in a rhetoric which frankly admits the lure of Neo-Platonic and hermetic mysticism.

The quotation from Browne sanctions an interpretation of Dr Frank Reeves (Roger Livesey) as a source of both medical and metaphysical wisdom, a mediator between two worlds. A neurologist, apparently of some distinction, a seer and a connoisseur of literature: like a Renaissance magus, he bestrides the outer and inner worlds. When he arrives in heaven after a fatal crash, his first guide is the author of *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Like a visual epigraph, Bunyan serves to trigger a series of associations, recalling that Peter (David Niven) identifies himself as a pilgrim in the opening scene by quoting Raleigh: 'Give me my scallop shell of quiet... /And thus I'll take my pilgrimage.'

The Archers had already tackled the theme of modern 'pilgrimage' in *A Canterbury Tale*, in which their latter-day pilgrims, far removed from Chaucer's motley band, were united by a common search for values and new bearings, made possible by the upheaval of the war. They spoke of it in later life as part of a 'crusade against materialism'; and this is clearly the spirit that motivates the hero and eventually the heroine of *'I Know Where I'm Going!'*. Peter Carter seems to be cast in the same mould, when he announces his belief that the next world 'starts where this one leaves off. Or where this one could leave off if we'd listened to Plato and Aristotle and Jesus, with all our little earthly problems solved, but with greater ones worth the solving.'

Peter's 'next world' is a projection of his ideals: a place where injustice and prejudice can be challenged and set right; where love can overrule law. Like Bunyan's pilgrim, Christian, he has suffered yet persevered in his search for 'salvation'. He has been tempted to give in – though it is a heavenly messenger who has tempted him – but thanks to his advocate Dr Reeves, endorsed by Bunyan himself – he wins through.

*The Pilgrim's Progress* may also illuminate the film's most striking visual motif: the giant escalator that links earth and heaven. In the second part of Bunyan's allegory, the pilgrim's wife Christiana sees the same vision that Jacob has in Genesis 28, when he dreams of 'a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven; and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it'. One of four inspirational images shown to Christiana and her family as they journey to the Celestial City, it is a scene traditionally visualised in the work's illustrated editions. In the same nonconformist visionary tradition as Bunyan, William Blake pictured in one of the plates of his series *The Gates of Paradise* a ladder rising from the earth to the crescent moon, with a figure setting out on it, watched by others, and the caption 'I want! I want'.

Pressburger's first draft stops before Reeves's death, with the line 'My dear friend, here on Earth, I'm your defending counsel', and no indication as to how the subsequent parallel between operation on earth and appeal in heaven would be elaborated. In terms of poetic imagery, the rose bearing June's tear – described by Reeves as 'our only real evidence' seems highly significant. Could this be another reference, conscious or otherwise, to Blake? Less to the 'Sick Rose' of the *Songs of Experience* than to Blake's microcosm-macrocosm mysticism: 'To see... Heaven in a Wild Flower/Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand.'

Like the silver rose in Hoffmanstahl's and Strauss's *Der Rosenkavalier*, the evidential rose of *AMOLAD* is a complex symbol, combining the erotic, the sacramental and the metaphysical. Plucked from the Conductor's buttonhole, it bears June's tear from the 'real' coloured world to the etiolated grey of the other world: a visible token of her love to set against prejudice, rhetoric, law;

and also an emblem of transformation, as colour drains from it before our eyes, evoking the mysterious traditions of alchemy and Rosicrucianism that stand behind the film's pageantry.

The idea of 'going ahead' is of course established in the New Testament and in the journey narrative of *The Pilgrim's Progress*. But the 20s and 30s saw a number of new theories of time as in some way manipulable, which proved highly popular and provide the immediate background to *AMOLAD*'s 'cool' or agnostic mysticism, as expressed by the Conductor's 'What is time? A mere trifle.' The most pervasive of these was *An Experiment with Time* (1927) by a former aircraft designer, J.W. Dunne, in which he outlined a theory of the possibility of precognition through dream-recording based upon a spatial conception of time. Dunne influenced a series of plays by J. B. Priestley in which time is treated as multiple or conditional. Characters are shown the consequences of their actions, and these maybe undone or revised. In a distinct echo of this schema, Peter not only 'wins' the right to live, but is allotted a fixed time with June.

*AMOLAD* was indeed an 'original' script, but one also shaped by many influences and traditions, cultural, religious and scientific. It can no more be contained by reference to its 'commission' by the Ministry of Information than can, say, Spenser's *Faerie Queen* or Shakespeare's history plays in terms of Tudor propaganda.

**Extracted from Ian Christie, *A Matter of Life and Death* (BFI, 2000)**

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#### **A MATTER OF LIFE AND DEATH**

*Directed by:* Michael Powell, Emeric Pressburger  
*A production of* The Archers  
*Produced by:* Michael Powell, Emeric Pressburger  
*Assistant Producer:* George Busby  
*Unit Manager:* Robert C. Foord  
*Assistant Director:* Parry Jones Jr  
*Written by:* Michael Powell, Emeric Pressburger  
*Photographed by:* Jack Cardiff  
*Colour Control:* Natalie Kalmus  
*Associate:* Joan Bridge  
*Camera Operator:* Geoffrey Unsworth  
*Motor Bike Shots:* Michael Chorlton  
*Chief Electrician:* William Wall  
*Special Effects:* Douglas Woolsey, Henry Harris, Technicolor Ltd  
*Additional Effects:* Percy Day  
*Editor:* Reginald Mills  
*Liaison Editor:* John Seabourne Jr.  
*Production Designed by:* Alfred Jünge  
*Assistant Art Director:* Arthur Lawson  
*Draughtsmen:* William Hutchinson, Don Picton, William Kellner  
*Costumes:* Hein Heckroth  
*Make-up:* George Blackler  
*Hair Styles:* Ida Mills  
*Music Composed by:* Allan Gray  
*Conducted by:* Walter Goehr  
*Assistant Music Conductor:* W.L. Williamson  
*Sound Recorder:* C.C. Stevens  
  
*uncredited*  
*Production Companies:* Independent Producers, J. Arthur Rank Film Productions  
*2nd Assistant Director:* Paul Kelly  
*3rd Assistant Directors:* Patrick Marsden, Lawrence G. Knight  
*Continuity:* Bunny Parsons  
*Assistant Continuity:* Ainslie l'Evine  
*2nd Camera Operator:* Christopher Challis  
*Focus Puller:* Eric Besche  
*Clapper Loader:* Dick Allport  
*Stills:* Eric Gray  
*Additional Effects:* George Blackwell, Stanley Grant

*Back Projection:* Jack Whitehead  
*Assistant Editor:* Dave Powell  
*Sound Camera Operator:* Harold Rowland  
*Sound Maintenance:* Roy Day  
*Dubbing Sound Camera:* Peter T. Davies  
*Boom Operator:* David Hildyar  
*Boom Assistants:* G. Sanders, Michael Colomb  
*Dubbing Crew:* Desmond Dew, Alan Whatley  
*Pre-dubbing:* John Dennis  
*Table Tennis Trainer/Adviser:* Alan Brook  
*Operating Theatre Technical Adviser:* Captain Bernard Kaplan

#### **Cast**

David Niven (*Peter David Carter*)  
Roger Livesey (*Dr Frank Reeves*)  
Raymond Massey (*Abraham Farlan*)  
Kim Hunter (*June*)  
Marius Goring (*Conductor 71*)  
Abraham Sofaer (*the judge/the surgeon*)  
Robert Coote (*Bob Trubshaw*)  
Joan Maude (*chief recorder*)  
Kathleen Byron (*an officer angel*)  
Bonar Colleano (*an American pilot*)  
Richard Attenborough (*an English pilot*)  
Robert Atkins (*the vicar*)  
Bob Roberts (*Dr Gaertler*)  
Edwin Max (*Dr McEwen*)  
Betty Potter (*Mrs Tucker*)  
  
*uncredited*  
Robert Arden (*GI*)  
Wally Patch (*ARP warden*)  
Abraham Sofaer (*surgeon*)  
Roger Snowdon (*James Monahan, Irishman*)  
Tommy Duggan (*Patrick Aloysius Mahoney, policeman*)  
Wendy Thompson (*nurse*)  
Joan Verney (*girl*)

UK 1946  
104 mins

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## SIGHT AND SOUND GREATEST FILMS OF ALL TIME 2022

### **A Matter of Life and Death**

Thu 12 Jan 20:40; Sun 22 Jan 11:30

### **Chungking Express (Chung Him sam lam)**

Thu 12 Jan 20:45; Tue 17 Jan 20:50; Sat 21 Jan 14:15

### **Modern Times**

Fri 13 Jan 17:45; Sun 22 Jan 13:10

### **Metropolis**

Sun 15 Jan 14:40; Mon 30 Jan 16:30 BFI IMAX

### **Once Upon a Time in the West (C'era una volta il West)**

Sun 15 Jan 16:15 BFI IMAX

### **A Brighter Summer Day (Guling jie shaonian sha ren shijian)**

Mon 16 Jan 18:30; Sat 28 Jan 16:00

### **Ugetsu Monogatari**

Tue 17 Jan 20:30

### **Imitation of Life**

Wed 18 Jan 20:30; Wed 25 Jan 14:30; Sun 29 Jan 12:30

### **Parasite (Gisaengchung)**

Wed 18 Jan 17:30 BFI IMAX

### **The Spirit of the Beehive (El espíritu de la colmena)**

Thu 19 Jan 18:00; Sat 28 Jan 13:50

### **Pierrot le Fou**

Thu 19 Jan 20:30

### **The Leopard (Il gattopardo)**

Fri 20 Jan 14:00

### **Sansho the Bailiff (Sansho Dayu)**

Fri 20 Jan 17:45; Thu 26 Jan 17:50

### **Madame de...**

Fri 20 Jan 18:10 (+ intro by Ruby McGuigan, Cultural Programme Manager)

### **Blue Velvet**

Fri 20 Jan 20:35; Tue 24 Jan 21:00 BFI IMAX

### **Sátántangó**

Sat 21 Jan 13:30

### **Celine and Julie Go Boating (Céline et Julie vont en bateau)**

Sat 21 Jan 17:00

### **The Shining**

Sat 21 Jan 20:30 BFI IMAX

### **My Neighbour Totoro (Tonari no Totoro)**

Sun 22 Jan 10:00 BFI IMAX; Sat 28 Jan 13:40

### **Spirited Away (Sen to Chihiro no Kamikakushi)**

Sun 22 Jan 12:30 BFI IMAX

### **Yi Yi (A One and a Two...)**

Sun 22 Jan 14:00 (+ intro by Hyun Jin Cho, Film Programmer, BFI Festivals)

### **L'avventura (The Adventure)**

Sun 22 Jan 15:20; Mon 30 Jan 20:15

### **Journey to Italy (Viaggio in Italia)**

Mon 23 Jan 14:30; Fri 27 Jan 20:50

### **The Gleaners and I (Les glaneurs et la glaneuse) + La Jetée**

Mon 23 Jan 18:10

### **The Red Shoes**

Tue 24 Jan 18:05

### **Andrei Rublev**

Thu 26 Jan 18:40; Sun 29 Jan 17:20

### **Sunset Boulevard**

Fri 27 Jan 14:30; Mon 30 Jan 17:50

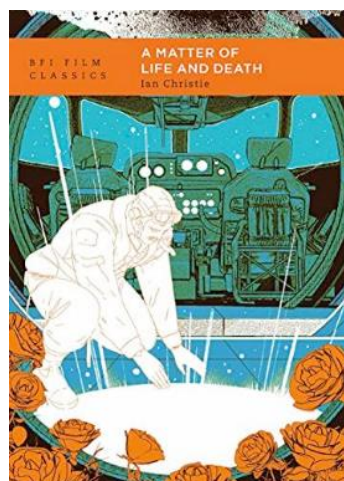
### **The General**

Sun 29 Jan 15:10

### **Touki-Bouki**

Tue 31 Jan 17:40

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