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Michael Giltz

Freelance writer

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Movies: "Blimp" Is Back! British Gem Is Beautifully Restored

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THE LIFE AND DEATH OF COLONEL BLIMP ***

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FILM FORUM

MOMA: TO SAVE AND PROJECT 9TH MOMA INTERNATIONAL FESTIVAL OF FILM PRESERVATION

I suppose every great filmmaker is unique in some way - otherwise they wouldn't be truly great. But the British team of Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger is so unusual, it almost beggars belief. Many of their best films are such odd ducks, such weird conglomerations of genres and tone, that they almost seem to create their own new categories film by film. *A Matter Of Life And*

Death aka Stairway To Heaven is a strange concoction of fancy and fantasy and World War II and romance. It may be my favorite film of theirs and you'll simply find nothing like it before or since. *The Red Shoes* is a visually erotic feast that delivers a little girl's dream of being a ballerina combined with very adult concerns. *Black Narcissus* is a fairy tale crossed with sexy nuns locked in feverish desire with a soupcon about the fading British empire. One could go on, but clearly their very best films are strikingly different.

This is certainly true for *The Life and Death Of Colonel Blimp*, a movie I was eager to see in its restored state. The film [opens for a two week run at Film Forum](#) on November 18. It's a highlight of [To Save And Project](#), the annual film festival at MOMA celebrating movies that have been preserved and restored. Organized by Joshua Siegel, Associate Curator of MOMA's Department of Film, it's an annual highlight of

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MOMA's film calendar and runs through November 25, with numerous choice movies worth catching like three programs devoted to the work of director Jack Smith.

But *Blimp* was a highlight, featuring an introduction by director Martin Scorsese (a huge fan and a key figure in the preserving of their work) and the great film editor Thelma Schoonmaker, who was married to Michael Powell for the last six years of his life. But of course the movie itself was the main treat. The restoration is just stunning: the Technicolor film looks positively dazzling, with *Blimp* roasting in a Turkish bath quite like a Christmas goose. Roger Livesey is the star and he ages from a young man to a heavy set blustery old fellow in a ham-free performance that is astonishing from beginning to end. Scorsese says Robert De Niro asked Powell how it was done (the aging) and Powell said, "It's acting." Not fair, since the makeup is exceptionally well done, especially for a color film of that era. (Aging still is hard to do; just go see *J. Edgar* if you doubt me.)

I've always been a little confused about the idea of Colonel Blimp. It's shorthand in the UK for a pompous old fool, jingoistic and silly and a figure that would be ridiculous if he didn't still wield power or people with power didn't still listen to his sort. Blimp was a cartoon character that first appeared in the Evening Standard in the 1930s.



Since this film is called *The Life And Death Of Colonel Blimp* you might reasonably expect it to be a scathing satire of such buffoons. But you'd be wrong. Many things are remarkable about the film but perhaps the most subtle is the fact that our Blimpian hero (called Clive Candy, VC) looks precisely like a Blimp right down to the outrageous moustache and walrusy face and yet he is nothing of the sort. The film humanizes Blimp or more precisely shows us a man who the superficial might dismiss as an old wit stuck in his ways but is in fact a thoughtful, intelligent and humane person who is not remotely jingoistic or ignorant of the cost of war.

Blimp/Candy is a sweetheart in fact and the vehicle by which Powell and Pressburger question the very act of war, especially when it involves atrocities and attacks on civilians, and wonders if war is always worth winning if it means losing your soul. As if that's not enough, the movie pivots around the genuine and warm friendship between Blimp/Candy and the German he duels with (another brilliant bit of acting, by Anton Walbrook) after the Boer war. (Nothing cements a friendship like a good sword fight.) Now here's the mind-blowing part of this: *The Life and Death Of Colonel Blimp* -- a movie by the most British of British filmmakers when resources were slim that questions war itself, warns against brutality against the enemy, features a friendship between British and German soldiers -- was released in the UK on June 10, 1943 at the height of the war and the day before Britain launched a massive air raid on Dusseldorf, Germany with some 700 planes dropping untold numbers of bombs on the city, a site of steelworks and oil plants. No wonder Churchill hated it.

Romance is also key to *Blimp*, which begins in the midst of World War II and flashes back (after Blimp/Candy is held underwater in that Turkish bath and a voice intones rather goofily "40 years ago...40 years ago...") to the early 1900s. Candy befriends the German he dueled with while they're both recuperating in hospital and daily visited by a lovely English woman (played by Deborah Kerr). The German and Kerr announce their engagement and Candy is thoroughly delighted for about two seconds until he realizes with despair that he too is madly in love with the girl. Candy spends the rest of the film looking for a woman who can match this ideal -- and in a way he succeeds, since Kerr plays two other female roles. Her performance is also terrific, for she makes each woman subtly different from the rest; it's a marvelous film debut.



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Several moments will stay with you for a long time, like the German's plea at the border to be allowed to escape from Germany into England and Candy's own ruminations on the cost of war. This Blimpian fellow is as far from Blimp as one can get and still be a war veteran of a certain age. None of what I've said captures the delicious...tone of the film, the delightful sensibility that permeates every scene. It's mature, intelligent, understanding, droll, humane and intoxicating; don't ask me how it creates that mood but it does and it's key to the film's pleasure.

It's shocking but somehow not really surprising to hear that 20% or 30% or so of all movies ever made are lost. Back in the early 1900s, who worried about film history when a bunch of lousy two-reelers were clogging up a studio's basement or posing a fire hazard? But I am frequently stunned that classic films by major directors can fall into disrepair. When Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* needs restoring, when movies by legends of British cinema like Powell-Pressburger only survive because Scorsese reaches into his own pocket to help pay for that rescue, you realize that no film is safe. That's why film festivals like [To Save And Project](#) at [MOMA](#) are so important and why any chance to see a movie like *The Life And Death Of Colonel Blimp* on a big screen should not be missed.

Thanks for reading. Michael Giltz is the cohost of [Showbiz Sandbox](#), a weekly pop culture podcast that reveals the industry take on entertainment news of the day and features top journalists and opinion makers as guests. It's [available](#) for free on iTunes. Visit Michael Giltz at his [website](#) and his [daily blog](#). Download his podcast of celebrity interviews and his radio show, also called [Popsurfing](#) and also [available](#) for free on iTunes. Link to him on [Netflix](#) and [gain](#) access to thousands of ratings and reviews.

Note: Michael Giltz was provided with free tickets to screening at MOMA with the understanding that he would be writing a review.

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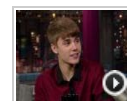
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