



Illuminating the Dark Years: French Wartime Newsreels on DVD

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REVIEW ESSAY

ILLUMINATING THE DARK YEARS: FRENCH WARTIME NEWSREELS ON DVD

Brett Bowles

Archives de guerre, 1940–1945: ce que les Français ont vu dans les salles de cinéma

MARC FERRO (ed.)

Paris, Nouveau Monde Editions/Institut National de l'Audiovisuel, 2004
2 DVDs (Region 2), 402 min., €24.95

Images de guerre, 1940–1945

JEAN-PIERRE BERTIN-MAGHIT, SYLVIE LINDEPERG & OLIVIER WIEVIORKA (eds)

Paris, Nouveau Monde Editions/Institut National de l'Audiovisuel, 2004
Interactive DVD-ROM for Windows and Macintosh, €49.00

Public memory of 20th-century history, especially of the Second World War, is inescapably audio-visual, constructed in large part by the newsreel clips that constitute the essential primary material of retrospective documentaries about the period. In the past decade there has been a proliferation of such films as a result of the 40th- and 50th-anniversary commemorations, accelerating disappearance of veterans, restoration of deteriorating nitrate collections, and opening of once-restricted cinema archives in America and Europe. As a result, few television viewers on either continent can claim never to have seen at least some black-and-white footage from the war. While such developments are gratifying for scholars, they also oblige us to reflect critically on the use of filmed news as a source for writing history.

The newsreels distributed in France during the Second World War have traditionally been difficult for researchers to access. Whereas the *Deutsche Wochenschau*—official voice of the Third Reich from 1939 to 1945—became available

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commercially through International Historic Films in Chicago in the early 1990s, until recently its French-language counterparts were known only secondhand from their inclusion in documentaries such as Marcel Ophuls's *Le Chagrin et la pitié* (*The Sorrow and the Pity*, 1969) and Claude Chabrol's *L'Oeil de Vichy* (*The Eye of Vichy*, 1993). At best, these films offer an incomplete and in many ways misleading portrait of the newsreels' original content and impact on public opinion.

In all there were five weekly series shown in France during the war. Between 1940 and 1942, the Vichy government and the Germans independently controlled production, censorship, and distribution in their respective zones of influence. In the occupied north, audiences saw the *Actualités Mondiales* (AM), a French-language compilation of clips shot in Germany and other parts of the Reich with sequences filmed on site in France. In the unoccupied southern zone and French North Africa, cinemas screened *France-Actualités Pathé-Gaumont* (FAPG), produced in Marseille using the combined resources of France's two largest pre-war cinema companies. The situation changed dramatically in August 1942 with the establishment of *France-Actualités* (FA), a joint Franco-German newsreel that supplanted its predecessors throughout the country. The liberation of Paris in August 1944 brought about the demise of FA, whose equipment and facilities were expropriated by the Communist- and Socialist-controlled Comité de Libération du Cinéma Français (CLCF). The result was *France Libre Actualités* (FLA), which enjoyed a *de facto* monopoly through December 1944 before being displaced by a more ideologically conservative series sponsored by the French provisional government under the title *Les Actualités françaises*.

After the dissolution of their parent companies in 1945–1946, ownership of the AM, FA, and FLA fell by default to the semi-private company responsible for the ongoing production of the *Actualités françaises*; FAPG remained under the joint purview of Pathé and Gaumont. As direct evidence of Franco-German state collaboration, the newsreels made during the Occupation had the potential to topple the Gaullist myth of a nation unified, in spirit if not always in action, behind the Resistance. *Le Chagrin et la pitié* did so by juxtaposing clips from the *Deutsche Wochenschau*, the AM, FA, and FAPG with testimony from German, French, and British interviewees. Ophuls pulled no punches in his searing cross-examination, exposing the depth of French anti-Semitism and Vichy's active participation in the Holocaust, the ideological animosities within the Resistance, and the willful, self-serving blind spots in the nation's collective memory.

In mid-1969, shortly after Ophuls officially registered his final cut with Swiss production company *Télévision Rencontre* and applied for a French public projection visa, the state-run Office de Radio-Télévision Française (ORTF) took control of the entire wartime newsreel collection from the *Actualités françaises*. Meant primarily to impede further critique of the Gaullist political establishment following the socio-political turmoil of May 1968 and the transfer of presidential power from Charles de Gaulle to hand-picked successor Georges Pompidou, the acquisition may also have been motivated by Ophuls' personal history with the network. In 1967–1968, Ophuls and his producer André Harris had resigned from the ORTF's monthly news show *Zoom* to protest the government's tendentious media coverage of the student uprising. Not coincidentally, following *Le Chagrin's* theatrical release in April 1971 the ORTF censors blocked its television broadcast for over a decade.

The scandal surrounding the film ensured that access to wartime newsreels would remain carefully controlled for many years to come. Under French law, the Minister of Culture could always deny requests to consult documents less than 60 years old. Exceptions were occasionally granted to select academic researchers for on-site viewing, but administrators discouraged reproduction of the films (for justifiable reasons of material conservation) as well as public dissemination of any potentially inflammatory excerpts referring to collaboration and the fascistic policies of the Vichy government. During the 1970s and 80s, the only images that surfaced regularly in retrospective documentaries were those of daily life during the so-called 'dark years,' German persecution of French resisters, or other politically safe topics.

The practice continued after the breakup of the ORTF and creation of the Institut National de l'Audiovisuel (INA) in 1975, but over time the number of approved consultation requests increased gradually. The watershed moment came in 1995 when President Jacques Chirac, citing the nation's duty to remember the Occupation fully and accurately, issued a directive facilitating access to war-related archives. That same year the INA created a new administrative unit dedicated to promoting public use of its extensive collections. The initiative included transferring the entire collection of wartime newsreels from their original 35-mm nitrate format to VHS, publishing a detailed index to the *Actualités Mondiales* and *France Actualités*, and installing a state-of-the-art consultation facility known as the *Inathèque* at France's new National Library. Since 1998, accredited researchers have been able to view the complete set of films there without special permission; better still, in 2004 a representative set of excerpts was put on the web.¹

Archives de guerre and *Images de guerre*, collaborative endeavors produced jointly by the INA and innovative multi-media publisher Nouveau Monde Editions, represent the latest step toward definitively lifting the cultural taboo and administrative restrictions that long surrounded this extraordinarily rich collection. Although the double DVD set is intended primarily for the general public and the DVD-ROM for scholars and students, both offer direct access to wartime newsreels in digital quality and a solid pedagogical framework.

Archives de guerre is the work of pioneering media historian Marc Ferro, author of an excellent biography of Vichy head of state Philippe Pétain and former editor of the renowned journal *Annales: économies, sociétés, civilisations*. In the 1970s and 80s, Ferro led the effort to legitimize film as a historical source in France by publishing widely and directing numerous theses on the topic. Between 1989 and 2001 he hosted *Histoire parallèle*, a weekly television series on the Arte network which compared representations of key international events in different countries' newsreels.² In all, the two DVDs contain 172 clips divided into 23 chronological units, beginning in August 1940 and ending in September 1945. Just over 80% of the content comes from the *Actualités Mondiales* and *France Actualités*, with the remainder extracted from *France Libre Actualités* (8%) and *Les Actualités françaises* (11%). Before each unit Ferro appears briefly on screen to provide relevant diplomatic, military, and political background information; afterwards, he rematerializes (literally, as if beamed in from a *Star Trek* transporter) to comment on the films just viewed.

The nearly seven-hour program takes a holistic view of the war and its aftermath, addressing the dynamics of Franco-German state collaboration, the rise of the Resistance and its struggle for survival, the Holocaust, the respective roles of the

United States, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union in defeating the Nazis, the post-war purge of collaborators, the founding of the United Nations, and the beginnings of the Cold War. Though the focus always remains on France, consistent coverage of events taking place in Europe and the rest of the world delivers an admirably contextualized, global perspective on national history.

Archives de guerre does nevertheless suffer from several pedagogical flaws. The first is a lack of English subtitles for either Ferro's comments or the newsreels' voice-over commentary; the second is disproportionately thin coverage of cultural topics and daily life during the Occupation, which at times may render the material dry for students. It is also disappointing to note that only 14 short clips are included from *France Libre Actualités*, a fascinating series that reflects the struggle between Gaullists and their Marxist adversaries to take credit for France's liberation and position themselves to control the post-war provisional government.³

Ferro excels at identifying the newsreels' recurring ideological themes and their conspicuous silences, such as Pétain's removal of Prime Minister Pierre Laval from power in late 1940 or the Wehrmacht's disastrous defeat at Stalingrad in early 1943. He notes perceptively that German propaganda in France typically practiced lying by omission (*mensonge par exorcisme*) rather than telling outright falsehoods, and that the strategy constantly ran the risk of backfiring. Thus *France Actualités'* extensive post-Stalingrad footage of German troops retreating through thick mud and destroying bridges to slow their Russian pursuers, rather than producing admiration for Nazi resilience and heroism in fighting off Bolchevism, as intended, likely gave resentful French viewers a sense of sadistic pleasure and hope that the Occupation might soon end.

Ferro is much less attentive to the interplay between cinematic form and narrative function, a task crucial to assessing the psychological and emotional impact of filmed propaganda. He says little about the newsreels' voice-over commentary, visual style, editing, or the use of music and special effects. These elements varied significantly from series to series and often changed over time within the same series. For example, battle footage shown in the *Actualités Mondiales* sought to convey the impression of unstoppable German speed and power by using frequent close-ups of racing planes, tanks, and boats; to reinforce the effect, producers often added pre-recorded, hyper-amplified sounds of explosions, machine gun fire, screaming propellers, and rushing water. Such techniques were meant to convince French spectators they should resign themselves to Nazi victory and reject resistance as futile self-endangerment. On the other hand, FA attempted to rally declining public support for Vichy by steeping audiences in national icons including Pétain, Joan of Arc, and the flag. In order to promote identification with such images, the newsreel often dissolves a close-up of representative citizen or group into a close-up of the Marshal's patriarchal face or the tricolor flying proudly against a clear, sunny sky.

Ferro overlooks several extraordinary clips illustrating the subtle narrative strategies often employed in newsreels, including one of Pétain delivering his 1943 Christmas Eve radio message to the nation. At the time Vichy had lost virtually all public credibility following its draconian enforcement of the hated Obligatory Labor Service requiring French men to complete a six-month work detail in Germany, a series of Allied victories in North Africa and Italy, and an escalating civil war pitting the Resistance against a Gestapo-supported French paramilitary force known as

the *Milice*. Over the course of the Occupation Pétain's speeches had often been filmed and inserted into newsreels in order to reinforce especially important propaganda themes or to manage specific crises in public opinion. Typical editing procedure consisted of combining tight close-ups of Pétain speaking directly into the camera with footage illustrating his words—in this case, scenes of buildings destroyed and civilians maimed or killed in Allied bombings.

However, here we find an additional element never before used: behind-the-scenes shots of the production process, which reveal the artificial, constructed nature of audio-visual propaganda. By taking the spectator inside the control booth alongside the sound engineers, using medium-range shots to show the recording equipment surrounding Pétain's desk and the typewritten script from which he reads, and viewing his performance from a variety of unusual, almost voyeuristic angles outside his sight line (over his shoulder, from the side through the glass of the control booth), the film offers viewers an unusual measure of transparency in an attempt to win back their trust. Paradoxically, though, such disclosure still serves a propagandistic function by urging spectators to comply with Pétain's tendentious appeal for French solidarity and obedience to prevent further suffering. In the context of late 1943, this tactic ultimately failed to reverse the tide of public opinion, but its very existence is significant as an example of the adaptability and guile of Franco-German newsreel production.

Unfortunately, in his closing remarks Ferro dismisses both newsreel and radio propaganda as fundamentally ineffective: 'We mistrusted it and hardly believed in it. [. . .] One must not believe that it had much influence on the morale or the ideas of the French. It was deeds that influenced them: the defeat, the Occupation, repression, lies' (DVD 2, chapter 121, 3:17 and 4:25). Elsewhere he contends that 'we got our information more from the radio by listening to Radio-Paris and Radio-London, but by 1944 we didn't dare believe them. [. . .] It was [Swiss radio announcer] René Paillet who weighed the truth on both sides' (*donnait la balance de la vérité*) (DVD 2, chapter 70, 0:28, and chapter 121, 4:13). Although primary archival documents—especially the monthly reports filed by departmental prefects in both zones—support the contention that French audiences were generally suspicious of propaganda and that lived experience affected public opinion more directly, Ferro's summary dismissal denies the symbiotic relationship between the two and the power of mass media to condition thought and action by playing on spectators' pre-existing hopes, fears, and expectations.

If at first this position seems surprising for a scholar of Ferro's acumen who spent much of his career demonstrating the relevance of film as a historical source,⁴ it is probably attributable to Ferro's own extraordinary experiences during the Occupation. As a student at the University of Grenoble, then an Alpine ranger in the Vercors *maquis*, he had a uniquely critical perspective on state propaganda which few of his countrymen shared. After noting that *France Actualités* attempted to discredit Resistance fighters by calling them 'terrorists,' Ferro adds tellingly that his own family considered him as such, a condemnation which 'leaves the taste of ash in one's mouth' (DVD 2, chapter 69, 0:52). At the time, Ferro saw through the newsreels more easily than the silent majority of French citizens who opted for survival through tacit acceptance of the status quo rather than active engagement in either resistance or collaboration. Given the tenacious, misleading perception that France was a nation of

collaborators—a counter-myth created in large part by Ophuls's use of newsreels in *Le Chagrin et la pitié*—Ferro's refusal to consider the potential impact of those films more seriously should be taken as a tribute to his integrity and distaste for retrospectively judging his less valorous, less clairvoyant compatriots and family members.

Images de guerre offers all the advantages of *Archives de guerre* but corrects virtually all its interpretative and pedagogical flaws. Running through QuickTime media player (included on the disc), the interactive DVD-ROM is built around a corpus of 277 documents: 202 newsreel clips, 44 written texts, 21 posters/photos/drawings, and 10 maps. These can be accessed individually through a chronologically arranged menu of thumbnail images, or as part of 16 thematic dossiers. The first 10—covering topics such as 'Vichy and the National Revolution,' 'Daily Life in Occupied France,' 'French Collaboration,' and 'The Resistance in France and Europe'—are in essence pre-programmed interactive sessions that guide users through the various documents with frequent short explanatory notes and multiple-choice quizzes to check comprehension. Feedback on the latter is instantaneous, and users can always backtrack to view documents multiple times if needed.

The last six dossiers focus more narrowly on sub-themes ranging from 'Working in Germany' and 'Intellectuals and Artists under the Occupation' to 'Vichy's Youth Movement,' 'Wartime Paris,' and 'Armament Production.' Instead of following a pre-programmed tour, in this section users view the documents and receive guidance from a two-page study guide in PDF format which offers general background information, a series of open-ended discussion questions, ideas for more in-depth research, and a select bibliography. Perhaps most important, additional custom dossiers can be created by using an integrated search engine and multi-media workspace that allows easy cutting, pasting, and annotation of all documents included in the database. Once complete, any custom dossier can be saved and exported for future consultation. This feature allows teachers to design their own curricula and testing materials, while students can create multi-media presentations.

Thanks to the combined expertise of its three academic co-editors—Sylvie Lindeperg, Jean-Pierre Bertin-Maghit, and Olivier Wieviorka—*Images de guerre* successfully integrates elements of media studies with more traditional cultural, military, social, and political history. Whereas Wieviorka, one of the pre-eminent scholars of the Occupation, contributed essential content in the latter fields, Lindeperg and Bertin-Maghit supplied information relating to the films' content, production, and reception.⁵ In a welcome contrast to *Archives de guerre*, many of the quizzes accompanying the thematic dossiers feature questions that draw attention specifically to the techniques of cinematic propaganda.

The overall result is nothing short of dazzling both intellectually and technologically. In fact, the DVD-ROM's functionality is superior to the system available on site at the *Inathèque*. For scholars of the Occupation, the disc highlights the utility of integrating newsreels into their research and offers a first step toward doing so. As a classroom resource, it offers virtually unlimited possibilities thanks to its highly flexible, customizable format. Although there are no English subtitles for newsreel clips or translations of written documents, the voice-over commentary of each film is fully transcribed in French and can be read while viewing clips thanks to a split-screen display feature. Best of all, Nouveau Monde recently announced plans to publish the INA's entire 85-hour newsreel collection on a 15-disc box set.

Scheduled for completion by mid-2007, it will offer all the content and multimedia capabilities of the original outlined above, plus extensive English subtitling. Although much research still needs to be done before wartime newsreels will be properly appreciated, we now finally have the right tools for the task.

Notes

- 1 Edited by Edith Réta, the index appeared under the title *Les Archives de guerre, 1940–1944* (Paris, INA/La Documentation Française, 1996). To view clips on the web, visit www.ina.fr/voir_revoir/guerre/index.fr.html
- 2 Among Ferro's many publications, see *Pétain* (Paris, Fayard, 1987); *Analyse de film, analyse de sociétés: une source nouvelle pour l'histoire* (Paris, Hachette, 1975); *Film et histoire* (Paris, Editions de l'EHESS, 1984); with Christian Delage, *Révoltes, révolutions, cinéma* (Paris, Centre Pompidou, 1989); *Cinéma et histoire*, 2nd edition (Paris, Gallimard, 1993); with Jean Planchais, *Les Médias et l'histoire* (Paris, CFPJ Editions, 1997). The episodes of *Histoire parallèle* devoted to the war are available on DVD under the title *Histoire parallèle: la seconde guerre mondiale* (Paris, Editions Arte, 1996).
- 3 On this point, see Sylvie Lindeperg, *Clio de 5 à 7: les actualités filmées de la libération, archives du futur* (Paris, CNRS Editions, 2000) and Brett Bowles, 'Jean Renoir's *Salut à la France*: documentary film production, distribution, and reception in France, 1944–45,' *The Historical Journal of Film, Radio, and Television* 26(1) (2006), 57–86.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 In addition to her *Clio de 5 à 7* cited above, see Lindeperg's *Les Ecrans de l'ombre: la Seconde Guerre Mondiale dans le cinéma français, 1944–1969* (Paris: CNRS Editions, 1997). For his part, Bertin-Maghit has also published two pioneering books: *Le Cinéma sous l'Occupation: le monde du cinéma français de 1940 à 1946*, 2nd edition (Paris, Perrin, 2002) and *Les documenteurs des années noires: les documentaires de propagande en France, 1940–1944* (Paris, Nouveau Monde Editions, 2003). The latter deals with stand-alone documentary films held at the Centre National de la Cinématographie in Bois d'Arcy rather than with the INA's newsreel collection.

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