



## Review Article

Gender, Cultural History, and French Cinema of the Occupation

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## Review Article

# Gender, Cultural History, and French Cinema of the Occupation

Brett Bowles

### **Le Corbeau**

MAYNE, J.

Chicago and Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 2007  
114 pp., \$50, ISBN 978 0 252 07457 8

### **Remembering the Occupation in French Film**

HEWITT, L.

New York and Houndsmill, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008  
254 pp., \$74.95, ISBN 978 0 2306 0130 7

The publication of Geneviève Sellier and Noël Burch's *La Drôle de guerre des sexes du cinéma français* in 1996 marked a turning point in French cinema studies by bringing gender to the fore as a category of analysis and by blending sociology with the structuralist and psychoanalytical approaches that had dominated the discipline during the 1970s and '80s. In so doing, the book complemented a parallel wave of interpretative and methodological revisionism already well underway in the field of history (Scott 1988; Hunt 1991, 1992). In particular, *La Drôle de guerre des sexes* provided a basis for rethinking aesthetically-constituted categories such as poetic realism by refuting the longstanding claim that there was an essential thematic and formal continuity between French cinema of the 1930s and that of the Occupation (Jeancolas 1983; Garçon 1984). Instead, Sellier and Burch argued compellingly that the symbolic emasculation of France in 1940 at the hands of the Germans and the hyper-traditionalist gender politics of the Vichy regime prompted a radical shift in cinema's representation of male/female power relations, with the seemingly unshakeable authority of pre-war patriarchs usurped by proactive, often dangerous younger women.

Though the authors' French peers were slow to build on their pioneering work, Anglophone scholars embraced gender and interdisciplinarity as tools for rethinking the

role that film has played in France's working through the legacy of the Occupation. Leah Hewitt and Judith Mayne's new books both draw explicitly on Sellier and Burch, but respond to their challenge in substantially different ways. Echoing Lynn Hunt's pioneering work on the French Revolution (which remains curiously unacknowledged in an otherwise exceptionally broad, multidisciplinary bibliography), Hewitt argues that the French have collectively understood the Occupation as family romance and thus filtered the political through the lens of the personal, with female characters embodying the period's ethical and ideological contradictions. To this end, she reads the form and content of more than a dozen films made between the late 1950s and the late 1990s in relation to evolving historiographic debates and collective memory of the war, along the way drawing out the specific childhood circumstances that motivated prominent male directors such as Louis Malle, François Truffaut and Claude Chabrol to revisit the war as adults.

By moving between close textual interpretation, socio-political context and psychoanalysis, Hewitt effectively bridges the gap that traditionally separates cinema and literary studies from cultural history. The result is an innovative exercise in revisionism that draws out the importance of many previously neglected or critically scorned films; for example, Christian-Jaque's comedy *Babette s'en va-t-en guerre* (1959) starring Brigitte Bardot, Truffaut's *Le Dernier métro* (1980), and Chabrol's *Une affaire de femmes* (1987). In addition, Hewitt offers cogent summaries and new gender-based readings of the political and historiographic stakes surrounding high-profile titles such as Malle's *Lacombe Lucien* (1974) and Claude Berri's *Lucie Aubrac* (1997). Perhaps the book's most significant contribution is its use of gender to revise our understanding of the 'Vichy Syndrome' (Rousso 1990). While Rousso credits Marcel Ophüls' *Le Chagrin et la pitié* with having initiated the 'broken mirror' phase in 1971, Hewitt identifies its origins in a series of earlier fiction films including Alain Resnais' *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959), Jean-Pierre Melville's *Léon Morin, prêtre* (1961), Jean Renoir's *Le Caporal épinglé* (1962), and especially Melville's *L'Armée des ombres* (1969), all of which employ female characters to disrupt the Gaullist myth of a virtuous nation united in resistance to the Germans.

While Sellier has interpreted the equivocal moral qualities attributed to women in New Wave films as evidence of a reactionary misogyny triggered by the rise of French feminism in the late '50s/early '60s and cloaked in the aesthetics of male-defined *auteur* theory (Sellier 2005), Hewitt's analysis suggests that the gradual coming-to-terms with Vichy's repressed legacy also played a role. By projecting the moral ambiguities and failures of the nation onto their female characters, New Wave directors were already heeding Godard's 1968 call to reject 'political films' with obviously allegorical or topical content in favor of 'making films politically' through manipulation of cinematic form and characterization, albeit not in the way that Godard intended.

Hewitt does not insist enough on this crucial point and deals with the New Wave only in passing, but her subsequent readings of gender in *Lacombe Lucien*, *Le Dernier métro*, and *Une affaire de femmes* demonstrate clearly that the phenomenon has deep roots in the work of Malle, Truffaut and Chabrol. Hewitt argues convincingly that these

films confront the political and moral compromises of the dark years by obliging spectators to share an oedipal male gaze that reflects personal complexes born from the directors' childhood experiences during the war. For Malle, this involves guilt over his bourgeois class privileges, lack of engagement with Resistance ideology and avoidance of punishment for his youthful identification with both the titular anti-hero of *Lacombe Lucien* and the teenage 'collaborator' Joseph in *Au revoir les enfants* (1986) who denounces the Jewish schoolchildren to the Gestapo. For Truffaut, it involves resentment toward his absent, part-Jewish father during the Occupation (as echoed in the character of Lucas Steiner in *Le Dernier métro*), contempt for members of the political Left who retrospectively condemned those who, like the adolescent cinephile and future director himself, did whatever necessary to take care of themselves during the war, and his affinity for right-wing film critics Lucien Rebatet and Roger Nimier in the 1950s. Chabrol's own abandonment by his parents, both of whom worked in the Resistance, and fascination with wartime cinema produce a similar form of 'self-accusation bound to national guilt' (p. 152) allegorized in *Une affaire de femmes* through a son who seeks revenge against his abortionist mother for her lack of affection. In each case, the political is conflated with the personal and plays an incidental or justifying role rather than a primary motivation for the characters' actions. Given this emphasis, it is surprising that Hewitt mentions *Le Chagrin et la pitié* only briefly in relation to *Lacombe Lucien*, for Ophüls' war-related childhood traumas (as a twice-displaced Jewish refugee) and gendered portrayal of collaboration echoes Malle, Truffaut, and Chabrol.<sup>1</sup>

Moving into the 1990s, Hewitt turns away from gender to focus on broader questions of historiography and difficult search for truth amidst a multitude of competing, never fully verifiable representations. Whereas France's leading historians of the Occupation took Claude Berri and the former Resistance heroes Lucie and Raymond Aubrac to task for the ambiguities and embellishments present in Berri's heritage film *Lucie Aubrac*, generating a public round-table that unfortunately lent credibility to the accusations of collaboration and treachery leveled against Raymond by Klaus Barbie in his so-called 'Testament,' Jacques Audiard's playfully postmodern film *Un Héros très discret* (1996) emphasizes the impossibility of decisively distinguishing truth from fabrication by blending realist, documentary-style footage and fantasy into a revisionist narrative of one man's wartime activities. In so doing, Audiard takes a satirical, self-reflexive stance toward all preceding films about the Occupation, singling out *Le Chagrin et la pitié* in particular for its pretention to objectivity while simultaneously manipulating witnesses' testimony through staging and editing. Though certainly valuable in its own right, this final chapter does not fit especially well with what precedes it and feels rushed, treating in cursory fashion or omitting other equally worthwhile postmodern renderings of the Occupation such as Christian de Chalonge's *Le Docteur Petiot* (1990) and Jean-Paul Rappeneau's *Bon voyage* (2002). Nevertheless, on balance the book qualifies as a major contribution to both French cinema studies and cultural history for its addition of gender to previous social and political histories of cinema's role in shaping French collective memory of the war (Lindeperg 1997; Greene 2000; Langlois 2001).

Mayne takes a different approach to *Le Corbeau* (1943), offering a tightly focused feminist reading of the film that downplays links with either Vichy's gender politics or issues of national identity. Despite the film's high profile and its treatment in numerous journal articles and book chapters (Oms 1973; Ehrlich 1980; Chirat 1983; Sims 1999; Lloyd 2007), Mayne's volume is the first monograph devoted exclusively to it. The book is also the seventh installment in the 'French Film Guides' series published jointly by the University of Illinois Press and I.B. Tauris. Modeled after the British Film Institute's highly regarded 'Classics' and 'Modern Classics,' the series aims to offer authoritative readings that remain concise and easily accessible to non-specialists. Following the prescribed format, the book is divided into three sections: the first addresses production contexts; the second offers a reading of the film's thematic content and style in essay format; the third deals with its reception and afterlife.

From the outset Mayne rejects the longstanding tendency to interpret the film as an ideological allegory either endorsing or denouncing collaboration. She instead fits the film into the gender paradigm identified by Sellier and Burch, noting that 'crises of male authority abound in films of the period, frequently accompanied by an attendant preoccupation with women's status' (p. 20). *Le Corbeau* subverts the traditional gender roles associated with the mystery genre: Drs. Germain and Vorzet, the male characters who at first glance seem to be endowed with narrative and moral authority required to solve the poison-pen murders, are subsequently discredited as powerless to solve the crime (Germain) or directly implicated in their perpetration (Vorzet). A similar reversal applies to the female protagonists: Denise, the putative town whore, accurately deduces the identity of the Raven and turns out to be a vulnerable, loyal partner to Germain, while Vorzet's wife Laura, the seemingly ideal embodiment of womanhood, is revealed to be a mentally and emotionally unstable, sexually repressed participant in the crimes. Moreover, it is a minor female character, the mother of the patient who kills himself after receiving the first poison-pen letter, who in the film's final scene asserts ultimate authority by identifying and executing Vorzet, then walking placidly away from the scene of the crime as Germain watches in disbelief.

Mayne supports her analysis by analyzing in detail the evolution of the film's screenplay, whose original draft dates from 1932, in relation to the text that inspired it, psychiatrist Edmond Locard's 1923 case study of a real poison-pen epidemic that struck the town of Tulle in 1917. Carefully tracking the changes made by writer Louis Chavance and Clouzot, she emphasizes that the gender of the culprit changed from female to male. The importance of this modification becomes clear in her close reading of technique which interprets shadows as signifying a vengeful male desire for power, and the gazes exchanged by male and female characters at moments of dramatic intensity, particularly the emphatic close-ups showing Germain's suspicion and surprise when confronted with Denise and the avenging mother, as registering male impotence. Mayne concludes that the film's disturbing power lies not in its potential as a commentary on the political or moral compromises inherent in the Occupation, but in its creation of 'a world where gender confusion reigns; where women know, understand, and act in the absence of any viable male authority' (p. 55). 'This is a pessimistic portrait of a world gone

gender-berserk [and] a masterful yet deeply patriarchal attempt to demonstrate the consequences of what happens when women speak' (p. 66).

Though this tight focus on gender yields an original and convincing reading of the film, it precludes treating other thematic and technical dimensions that are arguably just as crucial for understanding *Le Corbeau's* subversive appeal. Clouzot offers a scathing denunciation not only of human nature, but of numerous administrative, moral, and social institutions dear to the Vichy regime: the Church (through a wonderful low-angle shot of a poison-pen letter floating down from the balcony during a sermon stigmatizing the perversity of gossip); the medical profession (particularly psychiatry, as personified by the gleefully hypocritical Vorzet); the school system (through a futile classroom dictation held to identify the handwriting of the Raven); the post office (whose director speaks of his 'sacred professional duty' to deliver poison-pen letters yet takes and destroys one addressed to his wife, presumably revealing his infidelity or other transgressions); and family (parentless children who unabashedly lie and steal appear throughout the film, with one little girl attempting suicide when she learns from the Raven that she is illegitimate).

Mayne mentions in passing the importance of *Le Corbeau* for the development of European noir and its roots in French poetic realism of the 1930s, but does not highlight its even more substantial debt to German expressionism. The theme of male impotence and its compensation by women, as well as Clouzot's use of light and shadow, strongly echoes F. W. Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922), which like *Le Corbeau* dramatizes national emasculation after a devastating military defeat. Like Vorzet, who decimates the social fabric of his town by orchestrating the poison-pen murders, in *Nosferatu* Hutter endangers his community by bringing Orlok from Romania; only Ellen's self-sacrifice saves society from destruction. In his characterization of Marie Corbin, the abrasive nun and hospital nurse who is falsely accused of being the Raven, Clouzot also draws on Fritz Lang's *M* (1931), particularly his metonymic use of sound in place of image. Just as the signature whistling of child murderer Hans Beckert and his shadow on a wall suffice to signify the abduction and killing of a little girl in the former film, the rising sound of an invisible mob pursues Marie through an empty maze of streets delineated by bright sunlight and dark shadow. When Marie does finally arrive home, she finds it ransacked and gazes horrified into a shattered mirror, this in parallel with Beckert's reaction to his own mirror reflection in *M*. One cannot be expected to cover every aspect of a notoriously complex film in a 100-page book, but a work of synthesis for cinema students and teachers should at least acknowledge such major stylistic influences.

Equally disappointing for cultural historians, particularly in comparison with Hewitt's interdisciplinary treatment of *Une affaire de femmes*, is Mayne's reluctance to link her analysis with gendered aspects of Vichy's cultural politics such as its strict enforcement of traditional female roles, aggressive pro-natalism and punishment of abortion (of which Germain is accused) by death, and the patriarchal leadership of Marshal Pétain, who by the time of the film's release in October 1943 was widely perceived as an impotent head-of-state no longer able to guarantee French autonomy

*vis-à-vis* the Germans or to prevent France's slide into increasingly severe material hardship and civil war. Making the leap from formal and thematic interpretation to historical significance is never easy, for it requires careful attention to the contingencies of production and reception, often through archival research.

Mayne links text and context in the first and third sections of the book, but with mixed success. The background information she provides on Continental Films and Nazi film policy toward France is excellent. She pays special attention to Continental head Alfred Greven, a longtime producer with UFA who was committed to making high-quality pictures that combined German technical expertise with French artistic talent. Entertainment and profit were his primary goals, with overtly ideological propaganda delegated to other Nazi-controlled production units such as the *Actualités mondiales* (the weekly French-language newsreel made in Paris) and Terra Films, the company responsible for the notoriously anti-Semitic historical drama *Jud Süß* (1940). For Greven this meant prioritizing genres whose popularity was already well established—light comedies, melodramas, and mysteries—and recruiting talent through any means necessary, even if that involved flouting Nazi ideology. In one instance he even recruited Jean-Paul Le Chanois, a Jew with strong ties to the French Communist Party, to direct Continental's *La Main du diable* (1943). The unpopularity of dubbed German films with French audiences at the outset of the Occupation made Continental's financial success all the more crucial and justified the investment of virtually unlimited material resources. In addition to enjoying exclusive access to one of the largest and best-equipped Parisian studio complexes (Paris-Studio-Cinéma), Continental ensured distribution of its films through the *Normandie*, an exclusive-run theater on the Champs-Élysées, and the SOGEC, a network of over 100 theaters across the occupied and unoccupied zones, many of them expropriated from Jewish owners.

Unfortunately, Mayne's reliance on information gleaned selectively from secondary literature (Ehrlich 1985; Bertin-Maghit 1989) results in an incomplete and at times contradictory portrait of cinema marketing practices and Franco-German film politics. Though Continental was clearly an influential production company, to say that it 'dominated the French film industry during the war in both economic and cultural terms' (p. 6) is inaccurate. In fact Continental produced only 30 of the 220 wartime feature films made in France, and pictures shot in the southern zone under the control of Vichy captured a majority market share nationally. When discussing the critical reception of *L'Assassin habite au 21* (1942), Clouzot's directorial debut for Continental, Mayne cites at face value laudatory reviews from the occupied-zone monthly fanzines *Le Miroir de l'écran* and *Ciné-Mondial*, as well as the corporate weekly *Le Film*, without acknowledging that all three were under tight German censorship, often engaged in hyperbole, and would not have commented negatively on a Continental production under any circumstances. *Ciné-Mondial* was not simply 'collaborationist,' as Mayne writes; it was funded, financed, and produced entirely by the Germans to establish their films' credibility with French audiences in the occupied zone. Based in Paris, *Le Film* was carefully censored by the Propaganda Abteilung; it was in no way, as Mayne states, 'the official film journal of Vichy' (p. 10). Nor was the

Comité d'Organisation de l'Industrie Cinématographique (COIC) created by Vichy to reorganize the film production in the unoccupied zone 'effectively controlled by the dictates of Greven and Continental films' (p. 79); this in contradiction to an accurate earlier statement that relations between the COIC and Continental involved 'profound conflicts' (p. 11).

This uneven picture of Franco-German film politics constitutes the book's most significant shortcoming, for it prevents accurate assessment of the ideological stakes surrounding *Le Corbeau*. Throughout the Occupation Vichy systematically attempted to limit or in some cases to prevent distribution of German-made films, including Continental's pictures, in the southern zone. Creating and maintaining an independent system of production was crucial not only to Vichy's financial health, but to its political credibility with the majority of French spectators who disliked the Nazis and craved autonomy. In its focus on cohesion and rebuilding, rather than exclusion and denunciation, Vichy's filmed propaganda was substantively different from the Nazis'. There was of course some overlap between the two sides, particularly with regard to anti-Semitism, but Franco-German cinema politics involved conflict and competition just as often as collaboration (Bertin-Maghit 2004; Bowles 2004a, 2004b, 2004c).

Archival documents from Vichy's Ministry of the Interior and its delegation to the Armistice Commission, as well as records from the Propaganda Abteilung's film section, show that French administrators engaged the Germans in a protracted censorship war throughout much of the Occupation, with each side banning films deemed damaging to its financial and/or political objectives. For example, in December 1941 Vichy censors banned the German-made film *Bel Ami* in the unoccupied zone following public demonstrations against its emphatic representation of French colonialism and cultural decadence. The Germans retaliated by banning Marcel Pagnol's hit *La Fille du puisatier* (1940), a melodrama that explicitly deplored France's defeat and directly competed with Continental's first cohort of productions.<sup>2</sup> By February 1942 Vichy's film censorship board had banned nine titles outright and restricted a tenth to spectators over 18 years of age.<sup>3</sup>

The board continued to function even after the Wehrmacht's invasion of the southern zone in November 1942 and the progressive weakening of Vichy's ability to defy German policy. The release of *Le Corbeau* triggered a major conflict, for the image of a provincial town engulfed in murder, sexual misconduct, recrimination, and hypocrisy constituted a direct affront to Vichy's program of social cohesion, national rebuilding, and return to traditional moral values. The board formally denied *Le Corbeau* a screening visa in December 1943, but Continental ignored the directive and distributed the film anyway.<sup>4</sup> Vichy subsequently granted prefects and mayors the authority to pull the film from circulation or to restrict access to screenings, as they deemed appropriate. The Germans retaliated decisively by banning a group of 60 French-produced pictures, imposing fines on theater owners who refused to show *Le Corbeau*, and in some cases closing theaters either temporarily or permanently.<sup>5</sup>

None of this information on reception appears in the book, as Mayne limits herself to discourse analysis of reviews from the Parisian press. To her credit, she does provide



an accurate and useful account of the film's denunciation by the Resistance publication *L'Ecran français*, identifies its crucial role in the post-Liberation punishment of Clouzot, and retraces the gradual rehabilitation of both the director and the film since the end of the war. In the end, the book offers an original and brilliant gendered reading of *Le Corbeau*, but underestimates and at times misrepresents the film's ideological and political significance in the context of the Occupation.

Methodologically, Mayne's work exemplifies the traditional divide that separates cinema studies rooted in textual analysis and theory from cultural histories connecting film to prevailing socio-political mentalities, discourses, and practices. On the other hand, Hewitt's *Remembering the Occupation in French Film* illustrates the utility of integrating these approaches, thereby allowing us to take fuller measure of cinema's power as an art form, a vehicle of personal expression, and as a means for working through the conflicting collective legacies of wartime collaboration and resistance.

## Notes

- [1] While Siân Reynolds (1990) has rightly criticized Ophüls' sparse use of female interviewees and his association of women, especially the hairdresser Madame Solange, almost exclusively with collaboration, it should be noted that the film also makes contrapuntal use of Georges Brassens' song 'La Tondue' to denounce the hypocritical scapegoating of women labeled 'horizontal collaborators.' On this point, see Bowles 2008, pp. 132–136.
- [2] Rapport pour Monsieur le Ministre de l'Information, 20 December 1941, Archives Nationales (AN), F60/300; weekly reports of Referat Film, 2 January 1942 and 9 September 1942, Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv Freiburg, RW 35/224. On the aesthetics, ideology, and censorship of *La Fille du puisatier*, see Bowles (2009) and Vincendeau (2009).
- [3] Rapport pour Mr. le Préfet de la Région de Lille, 13 February 1942, AN/AJ 41/336.
- [4] Procès-verbal de la séance de la Commission de Contrôle Cinématographique, 2 December 1943, AN/F60/1560.
- [5] Rapport pour Mr. le Ministre des Affaires Etrangères, 23 December 1943, AN/F60/1560; Procès-verbal de la séance de la Commission de Contrôle Cinématographique, 5 January 1944, AN/F60/1560.

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