STRATEGIES OF THE FRENCH WAR FILM

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French
by
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ABSTRACT

The relationship of French national identity to its cinema is a well-established field. Yet, most studies have so far either taken a broad historical approach or focused on a particular director or period. Using various theoretical approaches, this project seeks to investigate an area so far ill- or untreated by scholars: what is the relationship of film form to the ideas circulated by a given work, whether they be overt or hidden?

To answer this question, the present study makes a close formal analysis of ten French war films from across the Twentieth century. One significant challenge is to appropriately define the area of study, for the French war film is quite different from its Anglo-American counterpart, and the current study undertakes a gradual redefinition of this sub-genre of the historical film.

War films are a subject of choice because they react to, or seek to represent, particular moments of crisis for national identity, especially considering France’s troubled experiences during the past hundred years. Thus, one can examine films made under the shadow of war as well as movies made at a historical remove from their subject. This duality of temporal distance and social function allows the current study to employ a dual prism: looking at movies as both documents of social history and as increasingly legitimate historical reconstructions. The chronological breadth of this project, from Abel Gance’s 1919 *J’Accuse* to Jean-Pierre Jeunet’s 2004 *Un long dimanche de fiançailles*, permits us to suggest an evolution of strategies, ranging from literary appropriation, to allegory, to Barthesian myth and artificial myth and most recently to experiments in history.
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A man takes a picture
A moving picture
Through the light projected
He can see himself up close
- U2, “Lemon”
Chapter 1: Introduction

Think of the extraordinary spectacle offered us: the birth of an art which is as important by virtue of its esthetic innovation – the depiction of movement – as by its social consequences, unprecedented since the invention of printing.

– André Bazin, 1943, “Let’s Rediscover Cinema!”

A young European woman sips tea in the morning sun on her hotel room balcony. The kimono draped casually over her slight frame and the brush of a smile upon her lips speak silent volumes of her contentment – even happiness. The teacup clinks on a saucer as she turns to look inside upon her sleeping Japanese lover. With a sigh, she leans upon the doorframe and looks at his hand as it twitches slightly in his dreams. Suddenly, we are no longer in a hotel room; the hand is not upon a bed of soft linen; the hand before us is not the same, resting limply upon the stony ground. The woman recoils from this unexplained intrusion, disturbed as much by its seeming randomness as by deeper secrets to which we are not yet privy.

This small moment from Alain Resnais’s 1959 Hiroshima mon amour illustrates a radical conception of time and space whose particular enunciation may well be unique to the cinematographic medium. More important to the present study, it demonstrates an equally radical shift in artistic and popular attitudes towards the traumatic memory of war. After the Débâcle, collaboration, resistance and the rafle Vel’d’hiv, storytelling on the silver screen would never be the same. This is not only a matter of narrative content, of subjects taboo or revisited. It is also a matter of the jump-cut: using cinematic form to raise questions or elide them, to explore history in new ways, or to camouflage ideology in historical “fact.”

How does form relate to the ideas circulated by a given film? More specifically, how does French cinematic form react to the tumultuous events of the war-plagued twentieth century? What forces does it deploy and what strategies does it adopt in order to cope with the
unprecedented brutality of trench warfare or the humiliation of foreign occupation? By extension, how does it address new and changing conceptions of history and historiography?

The relationship of French national identity to its cinema is an established field of study, yet most works so far either take a broad historical approach or focus on a particular director or period. This project makes a close formal analysis of ten French war films from across the twentieth century. It investigates the discrete, if complex, enunciations of the philosophies of each movie, the world-views it embodies without necessarily declaring them openly.1 It concentrates on war films because they explore especially powerful moments of crisis in French national identity. Examining a selection of works from across the past century allows me to do two things. First, I can place an emphasis on films made in the shadow of war. Abel Gance’s 1919 J’Accuse, Clément’s 1945 La Bataille du rail and Pontecorvo’s 1966 The Battle of Algiers all resound powerfully with the temporal proximity of their historical subjects. Second, the breadth of this selection also permits me to sketch something of an evolution of popular attitudes towards historical film, specific conflicts and historiography in general.

Reconnaissance

To date, only four books exist dedicated solely to the French war film.2 Joseph Daniel’s Guerre et cinéma appeared in 1972. The work is an admirable effort in many respects, but outdated today. Paul Virilio published his Guerre et cinéma in 1984, but instead of the film industry’s

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1 In this project, I use “ideology” mostly in the same way as Althusser: everyone inevitably has a world view, a frame of reference, and thus an ideology of his or her own. The same holds true for any discourse, since it is a human construction.

2 Perhaps of equal importance is that while relatively few monographs have been published, there is a plethora of individual articles that analyze French and Francophone films about war. These are scattered across a wide variety of anthologies, collections and journals. This state of affairs may have more to do with the changing landscape of academic publication than the subject at hand, but it has shaped how French war films have been investigated: in small bits and in conjunction with various other topics. This kind of interdisciplinary approach certainly has its benefits, but the fact remains that in-depth, book-length treatises on the subject are somewhat rare. The present study seeks to address this situation.
portrayal of war, Virilio focuses on the military use of cinematic technology. *Les Écrans de l’ombre* is Sylvie Lindeperg’s 2005 offering to the field, focusing uniquely upon French films made during and about the Occupation. Philip Dines’s *Images and the Algerian War* (1994) similarly focuses on a single conflict. This paucity of attention raises an important question: is there actually such a thing as the French war film as a genre unto itself? Has the notion of genre lost any real meaning? Even if one can arrive at a satisfactory definition of “the French war film,” is it still useful? As the current study progresses, this question will become one of our touchstones, for I will stretch the bounds of what may be conventionally considered a “war film,” especially by Anglophone audiences.

Here already we encounter an obstacle and a potential tool: cross-cultural comparisons between Anglophone movies about war and their French counterparts. On one hand, one must shed certain preconceptions. French cinema has little to compare with *All Quiet on the Western Front, Patton, Iwo Jima, Rambo* or *Saving Private Ryan*. Spectacle and individual, even nationalistic, heroism are infrequent concerns of French filmmakers when they approach the subject of war. On the other hand, some comparisons can be fruitful. Anglophone war films are infused with elements from other cinematic genres, such as romance, action, westerns, or thrillers. Similar French works are equally hybrid, though they draw more often from literary or philosophical wellsprings. Already, we have begun to accrue characteristics that may help to define the French war film. Works in this category seem to prefer the collective over the individual and quiet drama over explosive spectacle; they are also, perhaps necessarily, hybrid in nature, incorporating not only other genres, but other mediums – and always a story of the past.

For, the war film is a kind of historical film, but what constitutes the historical film as a genre? Leger Grindon, in *Shadows of the Past*, offers a good starting point by identifying the
genre’s central theme and its recurring elements. Historical films meditate upon the relationship of the individual to society, most often through the recurring figures of both romance (representing the personal) and spectacle (the collective). This is a good, Levi-Straussian view of how the genre may function, but it is not sufficient, for a filmic genre is determined just as much by its content. Richard Abel provides such a definition of the genre in its earliest stages, referring to it as “historical reconstruction:” 1) a subject calling for the reconstruction of a historical period; 2) elaborate, sumptuous, authentic decors and costumes; 3) a narrative that emphasizes climatic set-pieces – of dazzling tableaux or sensational, sweeping action (168).\(^3\) A synthesis of these views, then, gives us a good idea of the conventional historical film: a popular filmic narrative set in the past whose story emphasizes spectacle and/or action and whose primary function is to represent the relationship of the personal to the social.

What, then, can we consider to be a war film? Joseph Daniel divides the subgenre into two categories. “War films” (films de guerre) are “films de fiction dont le cadre et le sujet sont constitués par un conflit armé, et qui nous donnent à voir un ou plusieurs combats entre forces adverses” (17).\(^4\) On the other hand, the term “films about war” (films sur la guerre) applies to “tout film évoquant, à un moment ou un autre, la guerre en général ou un conflit particulier, à condition que cette évocation ait une certaine importance dans la conduite du récit, dans l’existence des personnages et dans les rapports qu’ils entretiennent, ou dans la morale de l’œuvre” (17).\(^5\) This distinction will allow me to consider films that may not be conventionally classified as war films but that nonetheless concern themselves with war.

\(^3\) Abel also includes a fourth characteristic, the inclusion of major stars in leading roles.

\(^4\) A recent example would be Indigènes (Bouchareb, 2006).

\(^5\) Such as Casablanca (Curtiz, 1942).
**Film and History**

The intersection of film and history is a new, growing and contentious field. It seems that historians, whose traditional methods are based largely on a nineteenth-century model of empiricism along with a novelistic mode of representation, are ill at ease with the cinema and its tendency towards historic liberties and even outright invention. Only in 1980 does Pierre Sorlin’s *The Film in History* boldly advance the notion that the cinematic medium is a valid field of historical investigation. Sorlin focuses on the feature film rather than newsreels or documentaries, and his main hypothesis is that “[n]early all films refer, if indirectly, to current events” and thus historical reconstructions offer “a view of the present embedded in the past” (36). Sorlin’s work, especially the first chapter, reads like a primer for people approaching film studies for the first time – which, perhaps many historians were in 1980. While *The Film in History* is an important first step for cinema’s acceptance into historical studies, Sorlin remains quite conservative. If one can study a movie as a “document of social history that […] aims primarily at illuminating the way in which individuals and groups of people understand their own time” (25), the cinema is still not the equal of written history in its capacity to investigate the past. Sorlin admits that ambiguity can be a positive aspect of cinema, but he still praises the notion that historical reconstructions take for granted the independently existing nature of history (43).6

There appear to be two kinds of descendants of Sorlin’s work. The first is typified by Natalie Zemon Davis’s *Slaves on Screen*. Davis is clearly a traditional historian (though she is interested in rather untraditional and even marginal areas) who comes to the study of film with the precepts of mainstream historiography. She is quite clear about the criteria for writing about

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6 Additionally, small errors sometimes undermine Sorlin’s approach. For example, he explains the static camera placement of early cinema by the cumbersome nature of the apparatus. While this may have been true of Edison’s kinetoscope, the Lumière brothers’ cinematograph was lightweight and mobile.
history and though she allows for some liberty in historical films, she still applies a conventional historiographic model to cinema. This is most apparent when she asks the question, “Can there be lively cinematic equivalents to what prose historians try to accomplish […] through modifying and qualifying words [such as ‘perhaps,’ ‘it may be that,’ ‘we are uncertain’]?” (131). Films such as *Hiroshima mon amour* have already answered this question by performing historical investigations that overflow with contingency. Also, her metaphor is awkward if not erroneous, since it applies a purely linguistic concept to a medium which has consistently defied such methodology.

It might be an understatement to say that Robert Rosenstone has taken Sorlin’s bold notion and extended it. For Rosenstone, a film is much more than a “document of social history;” the cinematic medium presents us with a radical – but still valid – way to represent and investigate the past. In works such as *Film on History/History on Film* and *Experiments in Rethinking History* (editor with Alun Munslow), Rosenstone points up the artificial nature of all historical writing. In the post-modern era, the supposed objectivity of empiricism has succumbed to epistemological skepticism – the basic modernist conflation of form and content should be a thing of the past. Moreover, cinema is not historiography and holding the former to the standards of the latter is inappropriate. Rather, historical films must be understood on their own terms.

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7 Historians should seek evidence of the past widely and deeply with an open mind; 2) historians should tell readers where they found their evidence; 3) historians’ primarily responsibility is to decide what their evidence means and what account they want to give; 4) subjective and normative judgments should not impede one’s understanding of the historical subject; and 5) historians should not knowingly falsify events even in small matters (Davis 14-15).

8 Hayden White suggests the novel term “historiophoty,” a concept investigated more closely in Chapter 5.

9 Rosenstone is clearly influenced by Gilles Deleuze’s ideas about cinema, though I feel he takes one point a little too simplistically. He signals a paradoxical weakness/strength of film – that the cinematic image is incapable of generalizing in the way of the written word. For example, the term “apple” on the page evokes a certain type of idea-image in the reader’s mind. A filmic image cannot do the same thing; it can only signify “this apple here.” This apparent limitation becomes a strength for the historical reconstruction because the spectator must engage the specific, the meaning of which can be more easily contingent than the general. However, Rosenstone seems to
Though Marc Ferro’s *Cinéma et Histoire* (1977) predates Sorlin, his ideas have much more to do with those of Rosenstone, Munslow and Marcia Landy. Central to Ferro’s approach are two axes: the “historical reading of a film and the cinematographic reading of history” (19). Ferro is somewhat singular in his insistence upon film’s historical agency: more than a mere reflection of its culture of production and consumption, a film can change things, can make things happen. Propaganda is a strong example, but other kinds of films have such a capacity as well. Ferro demonstrates how Harlan’s *Jud Süss* (*Jew Seuss*, 1940) had direct causative effects of the molestation of Jews after its showing in Marseilles (Ferro 16). One could also point to Resnais’s *Nuit et brouillard* (1955), which continues to have a lasting impact on its audiences and which was so well received in West Germany that it earned national government funding to support its distribution and viewing by various youth groups (Raskin 35). Historical films do even more than make things happen. “Like every cultural product, political action, and business, each film is a history that is History, with its network of personal relationships, its orders of objects and men where privileges and burdens, hierarchies and honors are regulated” (Ferro 18). What is most remarkable about this observation is its understanding of history as a (at least partially) subjective construction. Ferro goes directly to the heart of where Sorlin fears to tread: “a cinematographic reading of history presents the historian with the problem of his own reading of the past” (19-20).

**Theory: The Toolbox Approach**

This project deliberately uses a wide variety of theoretical approaches, from gender studies to historical experimentalism, from *bricolage* to Eco’s typology of the Middle Ages. Rather than ignore or at least downplay the fact that film does generalize. As Hayden White points out, it does so at levels of higher order than the individual image, such as with the sequence or the scene (1197).
attempting to impose a single framework upon a diverse selection of films, I have decided to
search through the theoretical toolbox for the systems that appear to be the most appropriate for
each analysis. Neither does every analysis follow the same formulaic steps, for different films
call for different approaches. What this method may lose in overall cohesion, it gains in the
specifics of the close readings. Thus, most theoretical discussion is found in the introduction to
each chapter rather than here.

Nonetheless, the theories of both Roland Barthes and Gilles Deleuze are frequent
touchstones. Barthes’s concepts of myth and artificial myth, first published in *Mythologies*, have
surprising affinities with Deleuze’s “organic regime” and “crystalline regime” from *Cinéma I*
and *II*. Most importantly, both theoretical systems speak to the fundamental subject of this
project: the correspondence of form and ideology. I discuss specific applications particularly in
Chapters 3, 4 and 5.

Eventually, you will undoubtedly notice that many of the other methodologies adopted
herein are of a literary and semiologic nature. As a scholar first of French literature who
discovered film along the way, this is on one hand a natural extension of my own formation and
predilections. Habit is nonetheless an insufficient justification; this project demonstrates that
there is something to be gained through such an interdisciplinary approach. Just as the French
war film finds itself at the conjunction of history, cinema and national identity, this project
blends approaches from various fields the better to examine its subject.

**Strategies**

The heart of this study is a series of close readings of ten films from a wide cross-section of
French and Francophone production during the twentieth century. I consider the number to be
sufficiently representative of French cinema in order to draw some broader conclusions, but it is
also small enough to allow for close readings of each work. I have borrowed other criteria from Daniel, beginning with the decision to focus on films that have been commercially successful. While certainly not representative of artistic merit or esoteric interest, commercial success is a good indicator of a movie’s potential social impact. Additionally, like Daniel, I have selected works that I believe to be important both intrinsically (in their originality) and extrinsically (in their influence on contemporary audiences, subsequent thought and cinematic creation).

In addition to (re)building a definition of the French war film, each chapter investigates its subjects via two general prisms: as a document of social history as well as a legitimate investigation of a real historical conflict. As documents of social history, what do these movies tell us about French society both as snapshots of the era in which they were made and, when considered together, its evolution over the course of the twentieth century? As historical examinations, what do these works tell us about the bitter conflicts that the French endured during the past century?

In between these two broad areas, there lies historiography – and eventually historiophoty. One aim of this project is to suggest a possible evolution of historical representation as well as popular ideas concerning both the discrete subjects of each film and the writing – or filming – of history in general. Thus, I explore the films in roughly chronological order of release but the underlying logic is not necessarily causative. Exceptions to chronology, notably Une affaire de femmes (a 1988 film treated alongside the 1919 J’Accuse), complicate a simple historical narrative in a positive way.

Each of the following analytical chapters investigates a pair of films that illustrate a certain mode of representation, an overarching and/or underlying signifying strategy. In chapters 2, 3 and 4 the emphasis is on exploring films as documents of social history. Employing such
strategies as literary appropriation, allegory and myth, they are understood primarily as reflections of their respective societies of production.\textsuperscript{10} (Even so, they may contribute something new to our knowledge and understanding of the past.)

If the primary function of the historical film is to meditate upon the relationship of the individual to society, some war films synthesize literary and cinematic concerns to do so. Literary appropriation groups two related but different strategies: \textit{bricolage} and adaptation. Abel Gance’s 1919 \textit{J’Accuse} irreverently borrows signs and tropes from nineteenth-century literature in order to craft a powerful and unique call to remembrance, mourning and a public assumption of responsibility necessitated by the unprecedented brutality of the Great War. Across a gulf of time, the literature/cinema rapport in Chabrol’s \textit{Une affaire de femmes} (1988) is characterized best by the concept of “hypertextuality.” The result of this process is a profusion of films all in a single and singular work: \textit{Une affaire de femmes} not only adapts a previous text, but it also investigates women’s experiences during the Occupation and at the same time addresses issues of women’s rights and capital punishment contemporary to its release.

Thus we have a \textit{film sur la guerre}, and in a way war is eschewed for other concerns. This is the primary tactic employed in the strategy of allegory. Renoir’s 1936 \textit{La Grande Illusion} explodes the illusory barriers of nationality and ethnicity while using cinematography to illustrate a more liberal, fraternal and egalitarian social organization along class lines. However, one may find a certain paradox at the heart of this work. While Renoir’s ideal would seem to suggest an erasure of difference, the basic Self/Other binary remains. Instead of German/French or Jewish/Gentile, the divide is most prominent along the lines of gender. In \textit{Les Visiteurs du soir} (1942), Carné and Prévert use war in the opposite manner as in \textit{La Grande Illusion}, allegorizing

\textsuperscript{10} A film’s “society of production” is a concept to which I return frequently. By this I mean the historical, social and cultural context of a movie’s creation and initial reception.
the war-time era of the film’s society of production rather than using a war setting as a metaphor. Through sumptuous production values and a fantastic medieval setting, the filmmakers voice a subtle but acerbic commentary on the misuse of power and the fascistic tendencies of the Occupation.

Though the Devil is ultimately chased from the château of Les Visiteurs, its inhabitants pay a heavy price; there is no clear victory. One can understand this ambiguous ending as representative of the times, of a popular consensus that things must change, but an equally widespread uncertainty as to how. After the shattering humiliation of the Occupation, French cinema rose to the challenge with deliberate assuredness embodied in the myth of Resistancialism. René Clément’s 1946 La Bataille du rail is “the mythic film of the Resistance” (Hayward 190). In an effort to recuperate a sense of pride and national unity, it deploys the strategy of Barthesian myth, infusing its signification with an invisible ideology. Surprisingly, The Battle of Algiers (Pontecorvo, 1966) performs much the same function. In an effort to render its Communist and anti-colonial ideas accessible a western audience, it adopts a documentary-like style that results in a faux-naturalism. Thus, despite its anti-hegemonic agenda, it ultimately recycles the ideas (that is, western and colonialist ones) inherent to conventional film form.

Chapters 5 and 6 mark an important shift from a Sorlinian emphasis to a Rosenstonian one. These films are more than artifacts of their respective times: through the modes of artificial myth and historical experimentalism, they also contribute valid meditations to the representation of history on-screen. What ties these disparate works together is epistemological skepticism. To varying degrees, each film is aware of itself as an artificial construct and it openly uses that artificiality to explore its historical subject.
Moving beyond the merely counter-mythic function of *The Battle of Algiers*, Melville’s 1969 *L’Armée des ombres* creates a Barthesian artificial myth. This two-step process requires a source myth, but also that the human will behind the discourse be readily apparent. Melville accomplishes this by treating the Resistance with his trademark stylized austerity. Remarkably, though *L’Armée des ombres* never lets the spectator forget that he is watching a feature film, it also manages to render the most intimate, moving and perhaps authentic representation of the Resistance experience ever put on the silver screen. This basic paradox of historical filmmaking, that the more one openly lies, the closer one approaches the truth, is completely embraced by *Le Chagrin et la pitié*. Despite important criticisms accumulated across the decades since its release, Marcel Ophüls’s landmark 1971 documentary remains a bold and fundamental model of historiophoty – the representation of history on film.

The blend of creativity and critical thinking embodied in *Le Chagrin* has led some recent directors to create works of historical experimentation. Tavernier’s 2002 *Laissez-passer* makes full use of the cinema’s greatest strengths for reconstructing the past, physically as well as psychologically. However, despite the film’s ability to parachute us into the Parisian film industry of the Occupation era, it also continues to circulate the myth of Resistancialism. A more successful experiment in history is Jeunet’s 2004 *Un long dimanche de fiançailles*, whose unrepentant artifice nonetheless widens our understanding of the Great War while at the same time acting as critical model of historical thought that can question the basic precepts of time and space.

Already we can see that the French war film leads us to unexpected and challenging places. It may occasionally share some aspects with its Anglo-American counterpart, but its greatest accomplishments are elsewhere. Exploring the possibilities of representing critical
moments of the past, it can challenge our notions about history and its writing (or filming) in general, and lead us to a greater understanding of historical thought and its role in the ever-changing notion of the French nation across the past century.
Chapter 2: Literary Appropriation

Of course the illusion of art is to make one believe that great literature is very close to life, but exactly the opposite is true. Life is amorphous, literature is formal.

- Francoise Sagan

Science means simply the aggregate of all the recipes that are always successful. All the rest is literature.

- Paul Valery

How do French films use literary forms, whether appropriated from various genres or from a single written work, to investigate war? What modes of thought do these movies tend to articulate? The synergy of literature and cinema is a long-standing practice and this is particularly true of the French, who draw regularly from the well of their own literary tradition: there are no fewer than eight Francophone adaptations of Hugo’s Les Misérables, and the œuvres of Flaubert and Zola have been mined countless times. Yet the relationship is not just one of adaptation, for cinema also borrows from the literary realm in a more roundabout way, adopting its forms and manners of signification. The most readily identifiable examples for many would be among the early works of Alain Resnais, whose Hiroshima mon amour and L’Année dernière à Marienbad both articulate literary concerns and express a literary approach to film form. Thus we need to expand our vocabulary slightly. To examine both of these categories, I will adopt the term “literary appropriation.”

Abel Gance’s 1919 J’Accuse is a landmark of early cinema that signaled the establishment of movies as a significant art-form and meditated upon the unprecedented brutality of World War I in a unique way. Despite a stated project to create a language of tragedy “from scratch,” this uniqueness stems rather from an irreverent borrowing and amalgamation of pre-existing literary forms. Classic narrative structure, theatric conventions, melodrama and the ever-shifting paradigmatic associations of nineteenth-century poetry all collide in this film. Gance
uses familiar forms to engage his audience, but subtly prepares them for a radical transformation from a melodramatic love story and conventional war heroism to a redemptive myth that seeks to express a new language of loss.

A key concept in helping us to understand Gance’s cobbling together of so many disparate elements is *bricolage*, a discursive strategy that originates from Claude Levi-Strauss’s *La Pensée sauvage*, wherein he contrasts the *bricoleur* with the engineer. Whereas the latter thinks scientifically and approaches obstacles in a straightforward manner, the former thinks magically, or mythically, and approaches obstacles in an irreverent way. The engineer is mostly concerned with concepts; he tackles each problem he encounters anew, and crafts tools and resources specific to his task. The *bricoleur* deals rather with pre-existing signs; he uses whatever materials are already at hand. Since these pre-existing tools are not necessarily the “best” for the job, the *bricoleur*, through mythical thought, works by analogy and comparison and his creations are effectively just rearrangements of various elements (Levi-Strauss 21).

Though *bricolage* is constrained to functioning upon the ruins of a previous discourse, it performs a fascinating reversal of the Sausurrean signifier and signified. Its components are endlessly reversible, associable and even interchangeable.

Whereas *J’Accuse* borrows widely from myriad literary forms, Claude Chabrol’s *Une affaire de femmes* (1988) is derived primarily from a single written work, the book of the same name by François Szpiner. This is not to say that the latter film is less rich. Quite the opposite: by adapting a written work about a historical period, it has several layers. Furthermore, Chabrol

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11 “Both science and magic […] require the same sort of mental operations and they differ not so much in kind as in the different types of phenomena to which they are applied” (Levi-Strauss 13). While each seeks to answer the basic human instinct for order, scientific thought is based on doubt and always looks out and beyond a current state. Magical thought by contrast “postulates a complete and all embracing determinism” (11), and is constrained to the state of being that science attempts to supersede.
uses the film to think not only about the past, but the present as well. *Une affaire de femmes* is in effect three films in one: an adaptation, a historical film and a topical commentary.

All of these functions respond in various ways to previous discourses. To examine the first two categories of response, a useful idea is that of “hypertextuality,” defined by Gerard Genette as “any relationship relating text B ([…] hypertext) to an earlier text A ([…] hypotext) upon which it is grafted in a manner that is not one of commentary” (5). This is produced by either transformation or imitation. Transformation is a simple mechanical gesture, in effect copying. Imitation, or mimesis, requires a “matrix of imitation” that is interposed between the hypotext and hypertext (83). This matrix performs a generalizing function, one which essentializes the “idiolect” of text A. Its creation necessitates a certain mastery of specific qualities of the imitated text and then serves as a template for text B.

Therefore, “to imitate is to generalize” (Genette 85) and this has certain consequences for the hypertext. Firstly, “hypertextuality is most often revealed by a means of a paratextual sign that has contractual force” (8). A good example would be successful genre films, whose signs call upon previously-existing symbols of more or less accepted meaning (i.e. black hats and white hats, in the conventional Western). Secondly, “a simple understanding of the hypertext never necessitates resorting to the hypotext” (397). Hypertexts are more or less autonomous, and stand only to gain from the reader’s or spectator’s knowledge of the work from which it draws.12

To the casual observer, these films would seem to have very little in common. They are separated by many decades, by different esthetics, by different relations to literature and different historical subjects. Yet their common concern with the written word and their war-time settings

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12 Imitation is particularly necessary in film adaptation because every medium “has some kind of irreducible specificity” (384). For Genette, this limitation is precisely the thing to be celebrated about hypertextuality, for in the generalizing matrix of imitation, there arises a certain ambiguity, one which “is precisely caused by the fact that a hypertext can be read both for itself and in relation to its hypotext” (397). Every cinematic adaptation is in effect (at least) two discourses in one, and there is always a certain ludic interaction between them.
lead them to espouse remarkably similar modes of thought. Both seek to investigate the past critically and to use film form to engage the audience in this critical investigation. Both also meditate upon the social function of the individual by examining individuals in moments of historical crisis.
“Puisque les poètes se taissent, il nous faut de toutes pièces créer des tragédies pour les yeux.”

The silent version of *J’Accuse* (1919) thus announces its project from the very beginning. This ambitious statement is not unproblematic but I believe it is the key to understanding the film’s exceptional nature. How does Gance go about creating a “tragedy for the eyes?” Despite the assertion that his methods are created “from scratch,” I propose that he engages in a kind of *bricolage*, borrowing elements from various sources, in particular forms from nineteenth-century literature. This unconventional (even irreverent) cobbling together engages the spectator by using familiar elements. However, via the penultimate sequence, it leaves the plane of familiarity to enter that of a redemptive myth – wherein lies its unique power.

The following analysis begins with a close examination of the film’s opening sequence and then uses its opening declaration as a guide. *Tragédie*: the film inscribes itself broadly in a theatric tradition, one that is also primarily in verse. *Les poètes*: it seeks to fill a perceived void via a foregrounding of poetry and of the written word. *Pour les yeux*: this foregrounding is accomplished visually (this is a film, after all), and the paradigmatic nature of poetry overflows the diegesis to enter the film’s montage. In the final analysis, Gance engages the spectator on familiar ground, while at the same time preparing us for a brilliant defamiliarization. He moves beyond melodrama to a redemptive myth that aims to make sense of the unprecedented brutality of World War I by focusing on the role of the individual in post-war society.
**Opening Salvo**

How does this transposition take place? What forms and figures are present throughout *J’Accuse* that not only place the audience at ease with their familiarity, but prepare us for the radical departure from the familiar? I will answer these questions in three steps, by looking at the interplay of the literary (i.e., familiar) and the cinematic, their synergy and eventual synthesis.

The title sequence of *J’Accuse* operates metonymically for the film as a whole, much as an overture would for a symphony or opera. Scores of soldiers mill about on an empty field and then swiftly form ranks to spell out the film’s title. “J’Accuse!” is a collective cry that simultaneously assaults with its acrimony and inspires a kind of spectacular awe with its scale. Personal and collective, it immediately provides a clue about both the film’s tone and content. Gance next proceeds to situate the film not once but twice. After providing a subtitle of “Tragédie cinématographique des temps modernes,” he declares his *raison d’être*: “Puisque les poètes se taisent il nous faut de toutes pièces créer des tragédies pour les yeux.” *J’Accuse* is thus positioned in a variety of ways. It places itself within in the tragic and poetic genres, albeit ones interpreted by the camera. Our temporal reference is also established. Certainly the loaded term “moderne” is not used casually; not only is it a time-frame, but also a frame of mind.

The final portion of the opening sequence serves as poetic *dramatis personae*. The main characters are presented in a brief series of portraits, three of which are transformational in nature. First we see Maria-Lazare, whose stern image dissolves into a pair of crossed swords. Next, François Poitin’s manically laughing visage becomes that of a barking dog. Jean Diaz melts from a portrait of idle repose to his final state of a haggard madman. Edith and Angèle follow, but are not treated to any kind of special effect. They are merely presented, though their

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13 This striking sequence was a cinematic convention of the time. Gance evokes very early Meliès (*Le Magicien*, 1898) as well as Feuillade’s Fantomas serial, whose first chapter opens with exactly such a series of dissolves revealing the various disguises assumed by the eponymous anti-hero (*Juvé contre Fantomas*, 1913).
emoting certainly gives the spectator a good idea of their archetypal conduct: Edith, the innocent and fearful maiden; Angèle, the happy little girl. The first three portraits are poetic because of their manner of signification, which is abstract and metamorphic, more paradigmatic than syntagmatic. Maria-Lazare is associated with swords, those weapons of officers and older wars: he is the Warmonger. François, already a menacing, chauvinistic figure, can be labeled the Brute. His violence is not military, but domestic. Jean’s transformation is the only one that gives the spectator a bit of foreshadowing, playing up the “tragedy” already promised. One is even tempted to read this triptych as a brief narrative: two sorts of violence serve to render a peaceful man (a poet, even), tired, alone and insane. Jean is the Christ-like Victim.

*J’Accuse* commences by subtly showing all of its cards, from theme to content and form. It even gives away the ending! The beginning is a promise, a sampling, and the director goes about fulfilling this promise through literary *bricolage*. His borrowings are manifest in three areas for which the opening statement of purpose will serve as our guide.

**Tragédie**

Gance begins his borrowing and cobbling together in modal and generic terms. The tragic genre finds its roots in ancient Greek theater, and its tradition was enriched by the Neolassical literature of the seventeenth century in France. *J’Accuse* contains several theatrical elements that I divide into three areas. First, there is the narrative structure, which takes place in five acts and follows the customary arrangement of exposition, rising action, climax, falling action and dénouement. Secondly, the film has a number of theatrical conventions, situations often found in plays to create tension and/or progress the narrative. Finally, much of the work, including the acting style, functions in the melodramatic mode. As Peter Brooks points out in *The Melodramatic Imagination*, this mode of narrative and acting style originates from the French
street-theater of the early to mid-nineteenth century. It is characterized by exaggeration, both of the actors’ gesturing and of situations of conflict, and also includes Manichean concepts of Good and Evil.

When summarizing the plot of *J’Accuse*, most critics seem to follow the three- or four-part structure implied by the original release in 1919. Handily, each section is punctuated by a “J’accuse!” from Jean Diaz. However, I find that the film is divided into five acts that, while they do not adhere to the classical three unities, still follow the classical and linear narrative tradition. Act One is expository, setting the narratives time and place and introducing us to the main characters whose fates we shall follow: the simple villagers of Orneval, the sensitive Jean Diaz, who longs for the affections of the timid Edith Poitin; Edith’s brutish husband, François, and her strict father, Maria-Lazare. The exposition concludes with the announcement of war with Germany and the posting of the general mobilization orders. Gance takes this moment to leave no doubt about his film’s temporal situation: the orders are clearly labeled August 8, 1914.

Act Two is full of complicating events. After warning Jean to stay away from Edith, François leaves for the front. Jean’s mobilization orders do not oblige him to leave for another few weeks but crisis does not wait: a telegram arrives, announcing that Edith has been kidnapped by the Germans! Jean utters his first “J’accuse,” immediately enlists and is sent to train as an officer. Both men are soon after reunited at the front, and the initial encounter is not warm. Contrary to genre conventions, it is not heroics that ultimately brings together these rivals but their common love for Edith.

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14 Interestingly, the Brute brings a number of his wife’s effects. There is a tender moment on the train as he ponders them. This is the first step in a radical transformation that he undergoes over the course of the story.

15 How Edith was kidnapped is very vague in the 1922 version of *J’Accuse*. In the original release, François sent her to live with relatives in the northeast of France, whose village was captured by German forces.
Act Three continues to center on the love triangle and brings the conflict to a melodramatic head. Shell-shocked, Jean returns home on medical leave – just in time to recite his “Ode au soleil” to his ailing mother, who dies during the final stanzas. As one soul leaves the Diaz household, another enters: Edith has escaped from her German captors and returns – with a child born of rape. Summoned by Maria-Lazare, François returns and tricks Edith into betraying her love for Angèle. The friendship of the Brute and the Poet disintegrates as Jean attempts to protect mother and child. François eventually sees reason, but understands his own vicious nature; he cannot remain. He asks Jean to join him at the front; despite his fragile mental health, the latter agrees.

In Act Four, the two men return to the front and remain there for four torturous years. During a battle, Jean finally goes completely mad. He has written a series of letters to Edith, and unwittingly entrusts their delivery to François. Both men survive the battle, but are wounded and brought to hospital where they lie in adjacent beds. François’s wounds are mortal; he dies thinking of his beloved hunting dog and holding Jean’s hand across the gap between their beds.

Jean physically survives, but in Act Five returns to Orneval a deranged and haggard mockery of his former self. He summons everyone with vague promises of news of their men at the front. He then recounts a shocking vision, represented directly on-screen, of thousands of dead soldiers marching on the village. The revenants cry “J’accuse” along with the poet, staring through windows at those who they have left behind, those who have betrayed them in their memory. Only when the villagers confess their forgetfulness and pray for redemption do the walking dead depart. Later, Jean rediscovers his notebook of poetry. His idyllic, romantic “Ode au soleil” now sounds hollow and naïve. He modifies the last stanzas, shouting his last “J’accuse!” at the sun itself, and then dies.
Other Theatrical Conventions

A five-act narrative structure may harken back to centuries of theatric convention, but alone it is not sufficient to categorize the *bricolage* in *J’Accuse*. The film also contains other conventions of the genre. Eavesdropping functions both to create tension and as a method of characterization. Likewise, the reporting of news “from the wings” (that is, via letters and telegrams) advances the narrative.

*J’Accuse* contains important instances of eavesdropping or ironic interceptions. In Act One, before war has been declared, Maria-Lazare daydreams in his study of retaking the Alsace-Lorraine. Hearing someone approach, he quickly hides behind a curtain (perhaps not wanting to appear as an overt warmonger). François enters, searching for his father-in-law, and sees the maps and effects left upon the table. Only when François visibly approves of such militaristic thought does Maria-Lazare make his presence known. The scene resembles the events of the first act of Hugo’s *Hernani*, where Don Carlos hides in a closet during his wife’s interview with the eponymous character. Later in *J’Accuse*, Jean intercepts the orders for François to detonate a German ammunitions depot. Rather than send his rival, he assumes the suicide mission himself. Both of these sequences serve to define the characters further. Maria-Lazare is a warmonger and *révanchiste*, but he is also a coward at heart. He enjoys a positive relationship with his son-in-law that is based perhaps upon their common violent and chauvinistic natures. Jean Diaz is more than a kind soul; he sheds his timidity and bares the other cheek.

It seems quite logical that in a world before contemporary methods of communication news would arrive second-hand. Nonetheless, the abundance of written messages in *J’Accuse* is more than merely pragmatic; it is a conscious nod to the theatric convention of reported events. Constrained by the three unities (and perhaps good taste), Sophocles does not show the suicides of Haimon and Antigone on stage. Don Rodrigue’s victory over the Moors is not directly
represented, but rather reported by a courier. In silent film, such reports are impractical. Instead, Gance relies upon a visually representable form of communication: letters and telegrams. These objects have two major roles in *J’Accuse*: they advance the plot by relaying information and they provoke the characters to action. The general mobilization orders set the entire film in motion; a telegram tells of Edith’s kidnapping; letters call Jean and François home from the front.¹⁶

The written word does more than transmit information; like Gance’s conception of cinema itself, it is a way to model thought and create action.¹⁷ Jean teaches Angèle to write one thing, “J’accuse.” He thus passes on his ideology to the next generation, creating – to take the Christ archetype to the extreme – his first disciple. His instruction sticks: in Act Five, Angèle guides Jean’s mad, quavering hand to write the same phrase in a touching and slightly chilling reversal of roles. I do not believe that this indicates Angèle is brought up as spiteful person, as might be intimated by the caustic phrase and inferred from her treatment by the village children as a “Boche.” Rather, the phrase is one of connection for the little girl, a shared and positive activity that is almost a term of endearment.

**Melodrama**

Though not exclusive to the theater, the melodramatic mode finds its roots there and is plainly evident on many levels of *J’Accuse*. The acting style is for the most part exaggerated, which both adheres to the conventions of the time (drawn from stage acting) and compensates for the silent nature of film (what may be connoted by vocal tenor is instead expressed through gesture).

¹⁶ The prominence specifically of letters represents perhaps another borrowing, this time from the epistolary genre.

¹⁷ Dès le début, Gance pense son action pacifiste en termes cinématographiques […] : le cinéma est conçu par lui comme étant *par excellence* le meilleur moyen, non seulement de véhiculer et de transmettre des idées pacifistes, mais de les faire agir. Ce n’est pas seulement un moyen d’expression ; c’est un instrument d’action qui permet de modeler l’imaginaire sociale et donc d’intervenir sur le psychisme des masses. (Vezryoglou 109)
François, reacting to the news of Edith’s kidnapping, weeps, nearly prostate on the edge of a trench, his hand covering his face. The reactions of the villagers to Jean’s apocalyptic vision are certainly larger than life.\(^\text{18}\)

Melodrama, in the form of dramatic irony, also shapes many situations, especially the entirety of Act Three. The attempt to hide Angèle’s origins, even her relationship to Edith, while patently absurd, is the central conceit in this portion of the film. This single premise then drives a series of overblown sequences, including François’s trick: he reports that Angèle has drowned, and Edith’s maternal panic gives her away.\(^\text{19}\) Later, during the confrontation at the Diaz household Jean must physically restrain François from beating his wife. The most outrageous moment may be when Angèle innocently hands François his own rifle. Is this a strange blessing of his intentions to leave again for the front?

Typical of many war films, \textit{J’Accuse} also contains a Manichean concept of good and evil. The Germans are the ill-seen Enemy culpable of mass murder, rape and other atrocities. A scene from the lost original cut depicts a group of children, whose hands have been severed, shouting “J’accuse!” in a courtroom at their Prussian aggressors before the bar. However, the film is not consistent with this approach and constantly problematizes the identity of the accused. While the war and its concomitant horrors remains the ultimate evil, the identity of those responsible for it constantly shifts. This simplistic division of good and evil remains nonetheless important, initially creating allegiance between the spectator and the protagonists via nationalistic lines.

\(^{18}\) This tendency towards overacting makes moments of understated gesturality all the more remarkable. When François warns Jean to stay away from Edith in Act One, the scene is an exquisite moment of minimalism. François arrives at the Diaz household. He glares at his rival, and firmly places a pipe to his lips. Jean politely lights the pipe with a match and averts his gaze. Satisfied with his show of machismo, François puffs the pipe once and leaves. The entire scene has neither intertitles nor even mouthed dialogue but the Brute’s threat is clear.

\(^{19}\) This moment recalls Scene 5, Act IV of Corneille’s \textit{Le Cid}, where the Spanish king instructs his court, “Montrez un œil plus triste,” and implies the death of Don Rodrigue in order to determine Chimène’s true feelings.
Only later, after the audience has become emotionally invested, does the blame begin to shift – and is ultimately reversed from the Other to Us.

Theatric forms and conventions arrange and advance the narrative of *J'Accuse*. A five-act structure, the use of eavesdropping and reported events and the melodramatic mode are not created from scratch, but borrowed from previous discourses and rearranged in a new way to shape the larger, more general elements of the film. However, Gance’s *bricolage* does not end here; it also seeks to fill a void “puisque les poètes se taisent.”

**Les poètes: Filling the Silence**

Poetry constitutes the second area of Gance’s literary *bricolage* in *J'Accuse*. Jean Diaz is the unique diegetic source of verse, whose primary prewar occupation of writing evokes or relates to an emphasis on the written word. Interestingly, a second poet is also present, though never overtly: Apollinaire, by whom the keystone revenant sequence is doubly inspired. The central importance of poetry, especially as it is depicted visually during Jean’s recitations, spills over from the film’s diegesis into its very form.

Jean is an archetypal figure of the nineteenth-century poet, blending romantic style with Rimbalvian hallucinatory vision. When not timidly wooing Edith, he works constantly on his project, “Les Pacifiques,” writing in a pool of light cast by his desk lamp and reciting his works to his mother. Jean’s verse, though we see little of it in written form, is composed largely of conventional, romantic idylls. His “Ode au soleil” is depicted directly upon the screen via images of the rising and setting sun, with a ghost-like woman (who may be Edith) floating through a series of natural landscapes. The heavy stylization of the recitation sequence, especially the matte painted backgrounds and the superimposed woman, connote a transcendental and transformational theme in Jean’s poetry. These themes are mirrored in the diegesis by Jean’s
mother, who falls asleep during the first recitation and dies at the same moment during the second. His verse is thus implied to have a real effect upon the outside world, even if only an ironic or negative one.

Jean’s poetry is initially a characterization device, casting him as meek and sensitive. It provides a moment for him to dote upon his mother and further differentiates him from François the Brute. Later, it becomes much more as its transformational theme works upon its own role in the film. For its first return, at Maman Diaz’s death, Jean’s poetry becomes a device of (melodramatic) tragedy, its celebration of life and light contrasted with the destruction and death caused by the war. It returns a second time at the very end to close the book, as it were, on Jean’s life. Here, the very title of the collection indicates its ironic and outmoded nature: in the aftermath of the Great War, “Les Pacifiques” is naïve in both intent and content. Nothing is peaceful for Jean, and the transcendental idylls found within are inadequate to represent his tormented soul – so much so that Jean modifies the closing stanzas of his “Ode au soleil,” transforming the erstwhile celebration of light, life and nature into a vitriol of despair and death.

**The Phantom of Apollinaire**

While Jean is the film’s only diegetic poet, he shares this role in a hypertextual manner with another. The phantom of Apollinaire haunts *J’Accuse* in two ways. First, his memory inhabits the film’s revenant sequence. Blaise Cendrars, one of Gance’s cinematographers, was a good friend of Apollinaire, who died on November 9, 1918, just 8 days before the shooting of the chilling sequence of the war-dead rising to their feet. Jay Winter recounts a fascinating anecdote

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20 The presence of Apollinaire and his poetry is certainly not the only hypertext of *J’Accuse*, as the title itself references Emile Zola’s critical discourse of the Dreyfus Affair. Gance makes a further connection by prominently placing a menorah in the Diaz household: Jean’s mother, and by extension Jean, are Jewish. The fact that nothing is ever made of this ethnic specificity in the film may be meaningful of itself. Jean is French first, and his patriotism certainly cannot be questioned.
of just how deeply the cinematographer was struck by the loss of his friend (Winter, Sites of Memory 19-22). After the post-funeral meal, Cendrars was unable to find the poet’s grave. Instead, he wandered about the Père Lachaise cemetery for much of an evening, eventually happening upon some gravediggers. Cendrars, apparently delirious with frustration and grief, imagined a clod of earth to resemble the head of his departed friend. The moment left an indelible mark upon him, and greatly influenced his shooting of the revenant sequence.

Furthermore, Apollinaire’s funeral took place on the same day as the military parades in Paris to celebrate the Armistice. The parades were for Cendrars a bittersweet moment, one whose emotional resonance was so powerful that it led Gance in 1922 to add the celebrated split-screen image of the revenants and the Armistice military parades, fully evoking the poet’s memory.

Second, the parallels between J’Accuse and Apollinaire’s poem “La maison des morts” are remarkable. Both focus on a poet protagonist who brings the dead back to life. Both feature a country village to which the living dead return. Both represent the undead and their familiar, even domestic encounters with the living. Both include a celebratory farandole. There are important differences, of course. Apollinaire’s poem narrates a peaceful, even joyful meeting as lovers are reunited and parents revisit their progeny, while the encounter in J’Accuse is one of terror and blame. Nonetheless, the ultimate message of each work, meaning created by the interaction of the living and the dead, has a common resonance:

Car y-a-t-il rien qui vous élève
Comme d’avoir aimé un mort ou une morte
On devient si pur qu’on en arrive
Dans les glaciers de la mémoire
A se confondre avec le souvenir
On est fortifié pour la vie
Et l’on n’a plus besoin de personne (Apollinaire 46)
It is difficult to establish a direct link between “La maison des morts” and *J’Accuse*, since Apollinaire’s *Alcools* was not published until 1920, though the composition of its contents certainly predates or at least parallels the shooting of Gance’s film. This coincidence of theme, even of narrative content, certainly tends to support Winter’s idea that artists of the World War I era were in a desperate search for a new language of loss to represent their radically transformed world.

*Pour les yeux: L’alchimie du Verbe*

As we have just seen, poetry plays a central role in *J’Accuse* on both a diegetic and thematic level. However, silent film cannot capture the fullness of poetry, as the latter has an auditory, even musical dimension that becomes apparent only when recited. This is especially true of Jean’s poetry, a typified sort of nineteenth-century verse. Gance compensates for this shortcoming by approaching the problem sideways, translating Jean’s poetry visually. This is a precise instance of *bricolage* where the signifier (written verse) changes places with the signified (nature, the sun and a female muse); the images that inspired Jean, that he recites, are re-represented imagistically in a brilliant kind of cinemato-poetic shell game.

This act of *bricolage* is more important than a sly solution to the problem of cinematically representing a single poem. Let us remember that Gance’s project here is to create a tragedy (that is, a work to be performed) for the eyes (a work for neither the stage nor the ears). The visual translation of Jean’s poetry spills over from the recitation sequence to the rest of the film, which often signifies in the same abstract manner, emphasizing the paradigmatic over the syntagmatic. It is in this way that Gance achieves the height of his activity as a *bricoleur*, borrowing elements from poetry (a written and spoken art-form) to shape his cinematic work (a silent art of the moving image).
Poetic Montage

Poetry moves from the diegesis of *J’Accuse*, where it characterizes and thematizes, to its montage, where it connotes meaning. Montage traditionally works on the most basic level as a narrative device: this thing happens, and then another, linking images along the syntagmatic axis. However, Gance often uses montage to associate images paradigmatically, suggesting metaphors, psychological states and transformation. His montage is not limited to the juxtaposition or superimposition of diegetic images, but also includes the use of intertitles in a variety of ways.

Perhaps the best instance of metaphoric or figurative montage in *J’Accuse* is entitled “Les humbles drames de départ.” Gance represents the village’s preparations for war with a series of vignettes whose only actors are hands: praying, packing, drinking wine, sharing a meal, holding each other. The sequence makes use of both understatement and synecdoche to connote the emotional state of the villagers. The vignettes are visually simplistic: no faces (which are conventionally used to express emotion), no dialogue (another conventional manner to relay information about characters) and a minimal use of objects (which play a special role in historical films). The sequence is an osmazone of hope and anxiety. It is abstract because, aside from the intertitle providing a theme (much like the title of a poem), there is neither a spatiotemporal nor a narrative context for these images: they speak largely for and of themselves. Like the “Ode au soleil,” the sequence is a divagation from the film’s narrative, a pause in or perhaps a distillation of time that places more emphasis on emotion and paradigmatic association than on action and syntagmatic duration. What we have here is a metaphor: hands express emotion.

The montage of *J’Accuse* connotes psychological states in a more direct manner as well, less metaphorically but still associatively and contingently. There is a striking sequence when
war is declared: as the village crowds around to read the mobilization orders, an older woman stares despondently into the camera, which, we may infer by others around her gazing in the same general direction, means that she is looking at the posted orders. This is followed by a split-image matte. On the left is a static painting of peeling church bells around which circle a flock of black birds (crows, perhaps); to the right is a superimposed image of a danse macabre where small puppet skeletons dance in a circle about a single, taller skeleton. Next, we see a close-up of Maria-Lazare, again looking into the camera, who can barely contain his enthusiasm. The sequence ends with the mobilization orders again.

The inference of this sequence appears initially quite clear: the villagers have different views of the war. Maria-Lazare, already known to the spectator as a révanchiste, sees the declaration positively. The woman, probably old enough to remember the Franco-Prussian War, sees only death. Nonetheless, contingency arises from the method of association. While it is clear that the posted orders are the basic cause or motor of this scene, from whom does the dual image of death arise and to whom does it apply? The syntagmatic order of the montage would seem to associate it with the woman, and yet, because it is not book-ended by her image, but cuts directly to Maria-Lazare, it is associated with both of them. A third possibility is that the image arrives from the narrative voice itself. A story-teller (often ironic) is present throughout the film in its intertitles as well as such abstract images as the danse macabre, providing exposition as well as commentary. This kind of contingent association is typical of much of the psychological montage in J’Accuse, as figurative representations of states of mind inhabit a shared space, either attributable to more than one character or at least having an equivocal origin and application.

Finally, montage creates meaning by more than syntagmatic association. Mostly through the use of superimposition and dissolves, it also connotes metamorphosis, a favorite theme of
many poets who would have been well known to Gance. The director introduces this strategy very early, as we have already seen, and revisits it in nearly surreal moments of foreshadowing or irony. After the posting of the mobilization orders, Jean returns home and picks up his notebook. We are provided with a close-up of the cover, where the large, clearly written title, “Les Pacifiques,” dissolves into the image of a scythe. Superimposition associates this shot with other images, namely the danse macabre (which recurs regularly) and the ghostly muse of Jean’s ode. Superimposition and the dissolves often used to introduce them imply a kind of supernatural possibility of metamorphosis, an otherworldly capacity that is fully realized by the ultimate transformation: bringing the dead back to life.

**Imagery and Repetition**

An important formal element of poetry is repetition, whether in rhyme, rhythm or lexicon. Poetry does more than just repeat itself; it also performs a kind of theme and variation. *J’Accuse* does much of the same thing by introducing certain visual elements within one context and then revisiting them in another; this has the effect of connoting to them one meaning and then later assigning them another meaning. Three recurrent images are particularly significant: hands, birds and the danse macabre.

Hands are first introduced as an important theme in the “Humbles drames” sequence discussed above. There, they have a metaphoric function. They return throughout the film in a variety of roles. Most often, we seem them when characters are writing. In these instances, they share the narrative function with the letters but also remind us of the human agency involved in letter-writing. Edith’s gloves, which are among the effects that François brings with him to the front, evoke her absence. Her (missing) hands are fetishized by the plaque that François creates, an item that serves eventually to bridge the antagonistic gap between himself and Jean. The
connotation of unity by hands is revisited as the dying François holds the hand of the unconscious Jean in the hospital.

Hands also have a sinister use: they are the primary instruments of violence. Gance focuses on the hands of Maria-Lazare and other officers as they plan their strategies, moving pins about on a map, underlining both human agency and an insidious kind of abstraction that takes place in the theater of war. Hands also play a central role in the rape of Edith by François in Act One, which is mirrored by the depiction of the rape by her German captor. In the first sequence, François drags his wife to bed by her hair. The key shot is framed to center on Edith; all we see is François’s hand violently gripping the hair at the top of her head. The later rape is less directly represented but perhaps more powerful: Edith cowers in a corner as the shadow of her captor (who we know is German by the pike-helmet) looms above her. A shadow-hand moves down the wall towards her head. Each shot is framed in a similar manner, and the parallels between them, though not unproblematic (is François, by association, a kind of Prussian?), have not escaped the attention of a number of scholars.

Three different images comprise the visual thematic of birds in J’Accuse. The most important avian image is that of the owl. What does its appearance mean at the moment of farandole? Its large eyes connote watching, which in turn implies the spectator - or perhaps Jean as he peers through a window at Edith. At its appearance at the mobilization orders? The owl is a traditional symbol of wisdom (an ironic one in this case) but is also the avatar of Athena, goddess of war. During Jean Diaz’s nightmare? At war, still, but now the owl could represent home, or a bird of prey (which raises the question of who is the predator and who or what does it hunt?), or simply a random image to represent Jean’s deteriorating state of mind. The crows mentioned above have a symbolic value. Within the shot, they give the matte painting a sense of
dynamism, indicating movement and unrest and at the same time creating a visual parallel: as the birds circle the bell tower, so do the skeletons dance in a ring. Crows are carrion-eaters, and their presence has since antiquity been associated with the dead. Thus the visual parallel is doubled thematically – dual images of impending doom. Birds are not only harbingers of death; they can be the victims themselves. In Act One, Jean and Edith have a moment alone in the woods. François, out hunting with his rifle, sees them and takes aim – at a small bird on a nearby branch. The innocent victim is seen in close-up, figuring François’s murderous jealousy, and violently disrupting the rendezvous.

The danse macabre is one of the few recurring images with a constant meaning. It appears no less than five times over the course of the film and it always imparts a sense of melancholy or doom. Of more interest are the associations it creates with other elements. When Edith returns to Orneval, she comes directly to Jean’s house. Her entrance is striking: a pale corpse carrying a child. It is tempting to think of Edith as the central skeleton around which all the others revolve, since she is the crux of the love-triangle and motivation (positive or negative) for nearly everything that both Jean and François do. The danse macabre is also related ironically to the joyous farandole that opens the film. The war tragically transforms the collective act of dancing from a celebration of life to a mockery of it. In Act Three, at the front, François’ regiment is on leave, dancing, drinking and generally making merry. The quartermaster slips away to retrieve two bottles of wine, and falls victim to German artillery as he returns. Through a common element of mass movement in time, one could also associate dance to the march of dead in the penultimate sequence. The step here is one drained of life and joy: the furious, military and violent marching of the undead, one not dissimilar to a military parade. War’s ultimate
transformation thus fully inhabits and transforms movement in the film, degrading it slowly over time.

**Intertitles**

As one discusses the imagery and montage of *J’Accuse*, one may note the increasing importance of its intertitles. These elements tend to fall into one of three categories. First, letters and telegrams serve as kinds of intertitles, performing a dual function of advancing the narrative and providing expository information as well as establishing theme. Intertitles can also have a straight-forward role of exposition: “As Jean writes,” “Four years later,” “The Big Evening,” etc. However, such unequivocal reporting is somewhat rare. Far more often, intertitles serve to introduce theme or create mood. The intertitle that precedes the posting of the mobilization orders relates: “Then, one day as happiness shined upon the village…” Here is the most common location of a bitterly ironic narrative voice; men at war have (cryptically): “Du jus là-dedans!” and are “Fraîches et joyeuses!” This last title is accompanied by a matte painting of a corpse caught in the bare branches of a tree.

Gance makes scant use of dialogic intertitles, relying on the actor’s gestures to relate the essence of their exchanges. Interestingly, most reported dialogue is in the informal register, almost always using the “tu” form, and non-standard spelling to better imitate the spoken word. Gance borrows again from literature – the effect is almost novelistic in its characterization, much as Zola adopted dialects for his characters. Since most dialogue is in the “tu” form, it is particularly striking when Jean’s and François’s reconciliation hinges on a change from the formal “vous” to the informal “tu.” François, whose jealous animosity would normally lead him to keep Jean at a linguistic distance, insists that he be addressed in the “low” register. Gance’s *bricolage* here is quite ingenious: what had formerly served as a characterization device
(immediately casting the villagers’ interrelations as familiar and even intimate), now serves as a method to demonstrate the powerful transformational capacity of war and to turn the frères-ennemis theme on its head.

**Conclusion**

Gance begins the narrative of *J’Accuse* in the mode of melodrama; that is, he begins with a discursive strategy with which his audience of 1919 would be intimately familiar. However, he is able to shift from the banality of a love-triangle plot and conventional war-heroism to a mythic mode of collective self-reflection and redemption through the use of *bricolage*. By imbedding the entire text of *J’Accuse* with literary elements, he is able to accomplish this radical departure in three steps. First, by borrowing elements from the theater, including the melodramatic, he engages the audience on familiar ground, placing them at ease while maintaining their interest. Secondly, a diegetic source of poetry opens the door in two ways: it raises the topic of language and, eventually, its inadequacy; and it introduces a paradigmatic, contingent manner of signification. Finally, poetry is contagious: its spreads from the film’s narrative to its form, adapting its montage and its imagery to its own tendencies of abstraction and metamorphosis. Thus, the film itself, in a way, teaches us how to read it: poetically, certainly not in a literal sense. Together, these three elements prepare the spectator, through the use of montage and a liberally associable profusion of images, for the mythical divagations of the penultimate scene.

This combination of poetic and cinematic forms is alone remarkable, but let us remember that Gance wants to do more than create art for art’s sake. Cinema is for him an instrument of action, one that models the collective imagination and is intended to operate on the mass psyche. What kind of psychological and social model does *J’Accuse* present, then? The use of melodrama would initially indicate a very traditional one as Gance recycles forms of Romantic
interaction that reach back across the centuries and are, in this case, heavily influenced by literary conventions. However, the film does not remain here. Indeed, Jean’s poetry, the epitome of past language, comes up short; it cannot reflect the unprecedented brutality of the Great War.

Previous ways of thinking are not abandoned; a *bricoleur* does not deal with concepts but signs. Rather, antecedent ciphers are reformulated even reversed, as is the primary discursive function of *bricolage*. In the trenches, poetry does not – cannot – celebrate the transcendental purity of nature or the selfish notion of *ennui* that characterizes the nineteenth-century *mal du siècle*. It must turn outward, not inward, concerning itself with the collective and not the individual; it must celebrate death, not life, and in doing so give life new meaning. In Gance’s quest for a new language of loss, poetic function is maintained but its content and intent are radically altered. Through Jean and by extension through the poetic mode of signification that permeates the film, *J’Accuse* shocks the audience into facing its own responsibility, to examine its role in society. Everything is connected, or at least connectable; and if human will realizes the height of the imaginable (bringing the dead back to life), then anything is possible, especially a world in which everyone is aware of his role in war and peace, life and death, love and hate.
Une affaire de femmes: Adapting the Past for the Present

Je vous salue, Marie, pleine de merde…
— Marie Latour

Chabrol’s Une affaire de femmes (1988) is an intensely rich film, one whose power stems not only from Isabelle Huppert’s tour de force performance and the director’s acumen for characterization, irony and understatement, but also from its hypertextual nature. This last characteristic poses a particular problem: how do we understand this film? Under what prism should we consider it? “Liberally inspired” by Francis Szpiner’s book of the same title, is it strictly an adaptation of a written work? Set during the German Occupation, is it a historical investigation (what Joseph Daniel would call a “film sur la guerre”)? Or, since it focuses on a woman abortionist sentenced to death, should we regard it as a topical social commentary?

The brief answer is “yes.” The polyphony of Une affaire de femmes requires that we study it from a number of different angles, under a variety of lights. Only then can we discover the depth of its palimpsestuous complexity, of texts layered upon texts, interwoven in an intricate manner. In effect, there are at least three different films in this single (and singular) work: Une affaire de femmes is a hypertext, a historical film and a social commentary. Treating the film as a hypertext, it is important to reinvest/reinsert Szpiner’s book into the cinematic work, as it has often been elided in much criticism and scholarly analysis. Here, the transfer of narrative and the adaptation of narration are the focus. Its historical nature is manifest through the themes of voyeurism and surveillance, shared characteristics of cinema and the Vichy regime that also engage the spectator in a striking way: implicating us as witnesses, collaborators and judges. Finally, the film also calls upon us to judge more than Marie, addressing social issues contemporary to its production such as women’s rights, abortion and the death penalty. However,
ambivalence in both the film’s characterization of Marie and its form problematizes that judgment.

In the end, I am seeking to demonstrate how the hypertextuality of Une affaire de femmes both delimits and liberates it, opening it to a variety of expressions. This simultaneous limitation/liberation is apparent on a variety of levels, including form, narrative and theme. Its harmony of hypertextual eclecticism and a unifying treatment of ambivalence towards its myriad elements is its most important characteristic. Like J’Accuse, this overarching approach to signification provides a unique, complex model of thought, one that is equal parts critical and connective.

**Adaptation**

Discourse surrounding Chabrol’s film has constantly elided its relationship to Szpiner’s book. Reviews and even scholarly articles concerning the adaptation most often relate that it is “based on real events” or a *fait divers*. The director himself makes very little mention of it in the handful of interviews near the film’s release in September of 1988, preferring to focus on his own aims; the phrase “ce qui m’intéressait” appears often. The opening credits state that it is “liberally inspired” by Szpiner’s book, and thus it seems quite evident that Chabrol (who co-wrote the script with Colo Tavernier O’Hagan) was not so much interested in adapting a written work as retelling its story. Nonetheless, if Szpiner’s text only “liberally” inspires the film, Chabrol certainly uses it as a primary starting point and touchstone. To convince Isabelle Huppert to prepare for her role, he sent her the book to read (Bruiana 43), but a more convincing argument for its importance is the amount of sheer transference from page to screen.

It is important to reinvest Szpiner’s book into Chabrol’s film if for no other reason than, as Genette points out, a hypertext stands only to gain from the recognition of its hypertextual
nature. The book is a prism, a vector of memory through which a version of the past is told. Not only does an investigation of its relation to the film help us to understand the latter, but ignoring its influence is tantamount to hiding it, to equating it with any number of conventional historiographies whose truth value is too often uncontested. Quite to the contrary, there are distinct peculiarities about Szpiner’s work that illuminate equally singular elements of Chabrol’s.

**Szpiner’s Narrative Voice**

Szpiner’s *Une affaire de femmes* is difficult to characterize, a piece of historical research that reads much like a novel. It appears to inhabit that grey area of historical fiction – part archival research, part pure speculation. For the most part, Szpiner plays it safe, dividing his chapters into either historical exposition (1, 2 and 11) or fictional narrative. This dichotomy is reflected not only in content, but also in the presence and role of the narrative voice. In fact, there are three levels of presence of the narrative voice: a mode of nearly direct address to the reader, subtle commentary and Zola-esque self-effacement.

The first level of presence is the strongest and most overt, that of the expositional chapters. Here, Szpiner approaches, but does not fully enter, the mode of direct address. The tone and style is very much that of traditional historiography, one which directs its discourse at a vague and general audience almost like a lecture. Very important to these chapters is their temporal orientation: we are clearly looking at the past from the point of view of the present. Szpiner emphasizes this by bookending his work. Firstly, he begins at the end of his story, with the announcement in the Paris newspapers of the Marie-Louise Giraud’s execution. This moment of historic specificity is then further embellished – in what I find to be a particularly French manner – with anecdotes of French literati of the time. Simone de Beauvoir is mentioned, sitting in a café in occupied Paris (she has not yet written *Le Deuxième sexe*) as is André Malraux. In
this way, perhaps Szpiner is attempting to prove his knowledge of French literary history, though at the same time he subtly underlines a fact that one need not point out, especially to a French audience: that in 1943 France remained occupied by German forces. Secondly, Szpiner ends in the present, with a general call to awareness about abortion in contemporary France. Despite the fact that abortion has been legal for a number of years, he points out that it remains very difficult in a number of départements. Thus remain the conservative attitudes that helped, in a small but significant way, to murder Marie-Louise Giraud.

In these chapters it is easy to equate the narrative voice with the book’s author. However, the second level of presence problematizes such an equation. The fictional chapters are clearly separated from the historical ones, both in content and style. In this second level of presence, the narrative voice is self-effacing, predating itself on the nineteenth-century realist novel. Here, the reader does not encounter a historical lecture, a researched and overtly recreated story of the past, but rather a more personal tale, one where characters, their actions and relationships, come to the fore. It is here, and only here, that Marie-Louise “speaks” and “acts.” The narrative voice largely hides itself behind the dialogue and events of this half-factual/half-imagined story, “transparently” representing “what happened.”

There is a bridge between these two levels of presence. This third level is one of eruption and trespass and is primarily engaged in commentary. It appears often at the end of a fictional chapter, commenting ironically on Marie-Louise’s fate or creating some kind of dramatic irony by revealing facts unknown to the story’s protagonists. This mode of commentary is not restricted to the fictional chapters, as it appears at times in the exposition, especially in Chapter 11, wherein Szpiner explains the origins of the Tribunal d’État and the dramatis personae of
Marie-Louise’s trial. The entire affair is referred to as “cette parodie de la justice” (135) and the Tribunal d’État, as “ce monstre juridique” (141).

This level has a disrupting effect on the overall narration, as fictional accounts of Marie-Louise also slowly become present in Chapter 11, which by the previous model should have been separated from the historical exposition. Despite the book’s efforts to return to its model of separation, by returning to its mode of novelesque narration in Chapter 12, it ultimately blends all three levels together, as historical dates and times finally, fatally, interact with Marie-Louise at her execution, and the mode of commentary continues in a call to awareness.

Transferences

Brian McFarlane, in his work *Novel to Film*, suggests a way of investigating filmic adaptations of the written word without using the conventional lexicon of “fidelity,” one which often carries unnecessary, even counter-productive moral attitudes. McFarlane divides the act of adaptation into two distinct processes. The first is *transference*: “the process whereby certain narrative elements of novels are revealed as amenable to display in film” (13). The second is *adaptation proper*: “the process by which other novelistic elements must find different equivalences in the film medium, when such equivalences are sought or available at all” (13).

Transference occurs primarily on the level of narrative, of the basic units of action that compose a story. For a supposed “liberal adaptation,” it is remarkable how much Chabrol and O’Hagan transfer from Szpiner’s book to the film. While they abandon Szpiner’s bookending organization and distinct separation between history and fiction, they retain all the major points of Marie-Louise Giraud’s story as presented in the novel. She does not set out to be an

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21 See especially Robert Stam’s introductory chapter to *Literature and Film: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Film Adaptation*. 
abortionist; she begins by helping a neighbor and is rewarded for her good will. Further “services” are also “rewarded,” and though Marie-Louise effectively becomes a kind of grassroots entrepreneur, she never has any kind of business model or goals beyond providing for her family and her own comfort. Her meeting with the prostitute Lulu is by chance though the friendship plays an integral part in increasing Marie-Louise’s business and income. The steady income allows the Giraud family to move twice, each time into larger, more comfortable (but never lavish) apartments. Marie’s arrest and trial are also included in the film. Though her co-defendants are removed, the series of events (Paris, waiting in jail, the trial, the sentence, solitary confinement, the last-minute replacement of her lawyer, her eventual execution) are all transferred directly from book to film. The heart of this affair is very much intact.

Narrative Adaptations

Though for McFarlane transference usually happens on the level of narrative, there are two significant differences between the book and the film, that we can categorize as adaptations proper: a transformation of the written form of a story so that it may function better in a different medium, or at the very least, within the desired connotations of the story’s retelling. Firstly, Chabrol changes the name of the story’s protagonist from Marie-Louise Giraud to Marie Latour – certainly not a capricious decision. 22 Despite a desired esthetic of documentary and realism, Chabrol was not interested in making a documentary of la femme Giraud (Bruiana 43). Rather, he was more intent on making “une affaire d’une femme,” focusing on the figure of Marie-Louise Giraud and her individual story. This approach, it seems to me, could very easily lead to a wild variation on Szpiner’s book, which deals more with a collective of women, only at the

22 “Ce qui m’intéressait, c’est de faire un film à proprement parler pathétique, sur une femme seule, perdue et qui ne comprend rien à ce qui lui arrive” (Riou).
center of whom was la femme Giraud. Yet, this is not the case. If Chabrol and O'Hagan have simplified the dramatis personae of Szpiner’s account, they do so to allow the film to focus more closely on those who are present and Chabrol takes a very complex look at each character.

A second, more problematic difference is the identification of Marie’s husband, Paul, as the author of the letter of denunciation. This instance is not substantiated by the book or any archival research – indeed, Szpiner goes out of his way to point out that the letter was anonymous and despite numerous efforts by the police, the sender’s identity was never discovered. Though the real Paul, a cuckolded husband and generally bitter man, certainly had means and motive, he was but one of many possible suspects. I find it particularly lamentable that some historians – Miranda Pollard among them – appear to take Paul’s identity as the denouncer as fact and not Chabrol’s fiction.

We must therefore ask: why this significant modification, particularly in the light of so much direct transference? I have three hypotheses for this narrative adaptation. First, there is the filmic convention of causality: audiences like to know why things happen.23 The sudden appearance of an anonymous letter, where no overt enemies have been previously intimated, would seem to be merely an artificial conceit to move the plot along. Life may be random, absurd and even at times unfathomable, but realist narrative is not, espousing rather an illusion of causality and intimating a comprehensible universe. Additionally, the anonymity of this letter would underline its unjust nature, and would almost certainly shift the audience’s sympathy, if

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23 Adaptation, the opposite of transference, usually has to do with medium-specificity. Thus, we may find an answer when we consider the generic expectations of the spectator. Traditional films very much inhabit Deleuze’s organic regime: most spectators anticipate a story to be a closed set of fully-explained causes and effects. While the anonymity of the letter’s author is a historical fact, in Chabrol’s film such an event might appear haphazard or even lazy: a convenient way to punish the amoral protagonist. If this is the case, I believe that Chabrol creates an interesting effect. By following the conventions of the organic regime, he plays fully upon its inherent paradox, of its inability to close a set, or to close it only partially. This partial closure then plays directly into the sense of moral ambivalence that is an important theme of the film.
not outright allegiance, to Marie. This would undermine the carefully-constructed ambivalence maintained throughout the film, closing its moral openness and indecision.

Second, there is a kind of poetry to the letter. Paul passes his idle time at home making decoupage, an activity that evokes the cutting action of the guillotine. The letter is metonymically the same stuff, its construction a logical and practical choice, but also one that by cutting up sends Marie herself to be cut. The letter, though playing a rather minor role on the screen, reveals the ultimate power of words, a power so great that it even transcends the film’s diegesis. It is read by some nameless voice-over (perhaps Paul, but we cannot be sure) that extends beyond the scene of the letter’s creation to the following sequence, casting the singing lesson in a certain ironic light. For the audience, the zenith of Marie’s personal triumph is a sad pinnacle of hypocrisy.

Finally, the choice to identify Paul as the letter-writer has a further metonymical function, an emblematic instance of the frustrated male gaze. As we shall see, the male point of view in *Une affaire de femmes* is an important theme, equated with that of Vichy and collaborationism. As Paul, the wounded French man, takes revenge on his wife for cuckolding him, so too does France, the wounded nation, take revenge on Marie for “robbing it of sons.” Marie must suffer and die so that Vichy – and Paul – can feel better by regaining a sadistic sense of masculinist ego.24

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**Further Adaptations**

In addition to these narrative adaptations, there are three other important and interrelated instances of adaptation. The first is the bookended form of Szpiner’s work; the second has to do

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24 “The patriarchal power structures which condemn her to death […] do so because she has sought to live outside male society and the roles it assigns women” (Austin 136).
with the narration and subject of film and book; and the third concerns the historic specificity of each text. The movie begins and ends in a very different manner than the book. Instead of announcing Marie’s execution or highlighting the difficulties of receiving an abortion in contemporary France via a recognizable authorial presence, the film is bookended with Pierrot’s voice. The first sound we hear is his plaintive cry as a child, tired and cold, out in the countryside gathering food with his mother and baby sister. The last sound is that of Pierrot-the-adult as he calmly narrates his mother’s execution in voice-over. Additionally, the film ends with a different call to awareness: for the children of those sentenced to death. Both of these adaptations signal an important shift from book to film, one that has the effect of allying the spectator more closely with the cinematic subject (Pierrot) and object (Marie). This alliance implicates the spectator much more into the story than Szpiner’s narrative voice, which both maintains a certain critical distance and always allies itself with Marie-Louise Giraud.

This shift of narrative subject is largely possible because of the point of view most typically espoused by Szpiner’s narration. In difference to strictly omniscient or first-person points of view, the book’s restricted consciousness alliance with Marie-Louise “provides a point of clarification for the reader, not necessarily in an affective sense, but as a more or less consistently placed vantage-point from which to observe the action of the narrative” (McFarlane 19). In Chabrol’s work, the focal character might be Marie, but only in the sense of plot. We never gain sufficient access to her motivations and thoughts in order to ally with her. She remains the filmic object; its subject is to be found elsewhere, primarily in the figure of Pierrot.

Pierrot most often watches his mother; he is an outside observer, a witness with whom the audience can ally through sympathy and shared incomprehension of Marie. We therefore

25 “The novelistic form of restricted consciousness […] perhaps best approximates the cinematic mode of narrative” (McFarlane 19).
appropriate his complex attitude toward her, one of adoring love and perplexed longing. When Marie refers to her daughter, Mouche, as her “one success,” the next shot is of Pierrot, looking at his mother in melancholic confusion. Later, when Paul and Marie argue, the tension of the scene is dissolved by Pierrot’s sudden appearance, introduced in a shot from the boy’s point of view as he pulls away a curtain and gazes up at his parents. This placement of the filmic subject in the diegesis has important implications in the theme of voyeurism, which I will examine next.

The final area of adaptation is that of enunciations of historical specificity. Despite the fact that only one date is every explicitly mentioned (April 14, 1943 – Marie’s execution), Une affaire de femmes the movie leaves little doubt as to its temporal setting. This is largely accomplished by mise-en-scène: the phonograph, costumes like those of the French soldier-husband of Marie’s neighbor or that of the Nazi officers, and décor like the film’s many automobiles and a pair of Vichy propaganda posters.

Indeed, Chabrol seems to go out of his way to demonstrate his knowledge of history. He laces many expositional shots with authentic details; the entire Rachel storyline was invented whole-cloth for the film, acknowledging France’s role in the deportation of Jews and other minorities in an understated way that also works to characterize Marie. Late in the film, two lawyers discuss Marie’s case in a Paris park, another entirely invented element that relates how much the Vichy regime was an outgrowth of French society and reactionary politics, not just compliance with Nazi demands. At these moments, the plot seems to pause while the film expresses its knowledge of the past, underlining its will towards realism and historic authenticity. In this way, these narrative pauses mirror the expositional chapters of Szpiner’s book, where the authorial voice steps away from the fictional narrative to provide historic information and

26 Indeed, one critic points out that much of the film is shot “à la hauteur des yeux d’enfant” (Heymann 9), favoring low angles that replicate Pierrot’s height (where they don’t directly signifying what he is looking at) without intimating a sense of grandeur or larger-than-life importance that such angles often connote.
context. In contrast with the book, of course, the film integrates this kind of information into the
diegesis and thus these “dating” effects are naturalized into the filmic discourse.

**Naturalism, Voyeurism and Surveillance**

The visual nature of the temporal indications discussed above comes as no surprise – this is a
film, after all, a medium that derives much of its power from the projected image. However, the
naturalized and naturalizing manner of the filmic discourse leads us to two important themes,
voyeurism and surveillance, which both stem from Chabrol’s chosen style in *Une affaire de
femmes*. A will towards a realistic and even documentary approach seems to be quite common in
historical films, and war films in particular, evidence of a desire to establish authenticity and
authority.27 This will to realism/documentary has two significant formal aspects, both of which
stem from the self-effacing nature of realist narration.

Firstly, in the absence of overt, stylized montage, the spectator is left to focus not on the
film as film, but on the characters themselves and their actions. In the case of *Une affaire de
femmes*, many critics have noted the presence of melodrama, particularly the “maternal
melodrama,” a genre which saw it heyday in the 1940s. It focused on reinforcing conservative
ideals of a woman’s role in society, punishing those women seeking to breach traditional gender
barriers as “bad” mothers and wives, leaving the home to seek out a career as a mode of self-
fulfillment (Doane 70-71). This tendency has a powerful parallel with the ideologies of Vichy,
and is also characterized by a “will-to-transparency” (71). Chabrol plays up the moral and
political parallels between the maternal melodrama and Vichy gender politics, using the former
to explore the latter.28 Secondly, more than allowing the spectator to focus upon the characters

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27 In an interview about the film, Isabelle Huppert is succinct: “Pas de caricature ici. Un portrait réaliste, presqu’un
documentaire sur la lutte quotidienne dans une atmosphère de stagnation” (Buruiana 43).
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and their actions, this style also tends to naturalize the ideology of the film. Camera tricks and sophisticated methods of editing would run contrary to Chabrol’s desired expression. This is not to say that the film’s ideology is a simple one; as I shall examine more closely in the following section, the ideas expressed and their treatment are quite ambiguous. A stylized enunciation would probably have served only to complicate an already equivocal message.

This realism is also found in both the film’s sets and framing. The constrained social space to which Vichy assigned women is reflected in the tight physical spaces of the film, the claustrophobic, domestic interiors that Marie constantly seeks to escape. Her first apartment is perhaps the best example: dingy and confining, comprised of only a small kitchen and a single bedroom. The kitchen table is so small that Marie’s neighbor cannot lie upon it during the abortion procedure; she must lie on the ground. “Dire que des gens font l’amour comme ça!” she remarks with sad irony as Marie kneels to administer the abortive. Even if Marie does not stay on the ground – she moves twice, each time to more spacious lodgings – the entirety of her existence is imprisoned by the camera frame. She is often positioned squarely in the center of the image and remains there, rarely if ever escaping.

On this point, Chabrol himself raises another hypotext of *Une affaire de femmes*: Hitchcock and his typical shot composition, in which characters are most often framed in medium shot and close-up (DVD commentary). The key shot of the film, reproduced as the initial image of the trailer, in theater posters and as the DVD cover, is entirely Hitchcockian: a distressed and confused Marie, almost in profile; her face framed by the imposing, trench-coated

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28 *Une affaire de femmes* “is essentially a melodrama which ends up confronting the ideology of the period (much as Marie has to do)” (Austin 133).

29 Despite the lament of a handful of critics, who site a regrettable “manque de renouvellement formel,” (Bertin-Maghit), Chabrol is quite clear about his decision for a conventional (and therefore realistic) approach: “Ce sont des gens simples; il fallait les filmer simplement” (DVD commentary).
figures of two arresting officers who stand between Marie and the camera. This same shot composition has already appeared during the carrousel scene. Here, the image is of a fleeing Resistance fighter who is shot in the back. Framed in exactly the same way, his face holds much the same expression as Marie’s. This instance has thus already established the fatal connotation of this arrangement.

**Desire Denied**

Through association with Hitchcock, especially such films as *Rear Window* and *Vertigo*, arises voyeurism – a cinematic theme *par excellence*. But, as in many of Hitchcock’s films, the voyeurism of *Une affaire de femmes* is not about simple sexual pleasure. On the contrary, it is a dangerous element, for both those looking and looked upon, because it is consistently a desire denied, a frustration of male sexual yearning that has fatal results. The primary voyeur of any film is the spectator, and Chabrol establishes early on a dynamic of showing/not-showing to both entice and frustrate. An example is the first abortion performed by Marie. What could be a crass or simply technical representation is treated through careful camera placement with respect and even a little prudishness. There is no spectacle here, no great collective feminine triumph. The simplicity of the scene underscores its importance while it also sets in motion the entirety of Marie’s incremental spiral towards the guillotine.

Later abortions are treated with less delicacy, as Marie has become very matter of fact about the entire business. To her last client she states simply, “Lay down. Relax. Remove your undergarments,” and then relegates most of the work to her maid while she leaves to have sex with her lover, Lucien. Nonetheless, important parts of this scene are voyeuristic, related through Pierrot’s point of view as he peers through the kitchen door keyhole. Still, there is no pleasure here, nothing sexual about Pierrot’s gaze, only childlike curiosity and a desire to be a part of his
mother’s life. A desired denied, and this is something that Pierrot shares with his father. Paul constantly ogles his wife, ignoring her face and her words for her legs and hips. In these shots we enter voyeurism proper, a mode of overt sexual desire related through visual means, but also a mode that excludes any notion of Marie as a person. Marie is well aware of the exclusionary nature of this gaze: “It’s not a wife you want,” she says, “it’s just a piece of ass.” She responds to his advances with either avoidance (Paul’s gaze at her hips is answered by the closed kitchen door) or flight (when he attempts to kiss her forcefully one evening, she beats him off and screams “Never!” while running away.)

While Marie may flee the lurid and unconsciously misogynistic advances of her husband, she doesn’t seem to run far. In many ways, the inverse of Paul is Lucien. It seems remarkable that the only male who gains sexual satisfaction is an egotistical and sadistic collabo, but the relationship is a wholly unhealthy one, wherein the lovers can only insult each other (“Your son is a real brat,” “You drive me mad.”) There is nothing voyeuristic about Lucien: what he desires, he obtains, and in fact he punishes Pierrot for gazing through the keyhole in the scene mentioned above. As much as Marie is the inverse image of the Vichy’s ideal woman, Lucien is the embodiment of all that is authoritarian, patriarchal and misogynistic of the Vichy regime.

Chabrol levers this marriage of opposites one against the other. On one level, perhaps that of depravity, Lucien and Marie are perfectly matched. Nonetheless, they are polar opposites as ideological representations: a woman who strives for independence and self-fulfillment and who constantly defies the law of the fascist government – and the man who actively executes, even embodies, the patriarchal will of that government. In many ways, Marie sleeps with her own murderers. This polarization of gender divisions (women as underclass independence-seekers versus men as over-class misogynists) is sustained throughout the film, but instead of casting
Marie as some paragon of women’s liberation, relationships such as that of Marie and Lucien render her all the more ambivalent a character. She uses Lucien to define herself against the desires of Paul: she willfully (and fatally) becomes the unfaithful wife. In turn, Lucien uses Marie as, ironically, “a piece of ass.” He takes pleasure from Marie, but the acidic depiction of their rapport shares none of that pleasure with the spectator. Like Pierrot and Paul, we are left outside, gazing through the keyhole or at Marie’s legs with unfulfilled desire.

The Judging Gaze

From the sexual desire of voyeurism to the judgmental action of surveillance is but a small step. Returning to Huppert’s description, if the theme of voyeurism stems from the film’s realistic style, its depiction of a “lutte quotidienne” results in an equally important theme of surveillance. What Marie struggles against is not just the difficulty of procuring the physical necessities of food and shelter, but also the imposed definition of the feminine and the atmosphere of moral paranoia induced by the Vichy regime.

Surveillance, like voyeurism, implies a duality of roles, those watching and those watched, a Self and an Other. Here, however, the relationship is not one of desire but fear and perceived menace. The actants of this dynamic are established by the shift of filmic subject and object discussed above. Though Marie may be the narrative subject, the focal character used to understand the events of the film, she is – in an interesting reversal – rather the object of the film as a whole, a role to which she is relegated because of her opacity and moral ambiguity. The spectator cannot fully ally himself with Marie because he is never given sufficient access to her thoughts and feelings. Instead, the spectator tends to ally emotionally with Pierrot and, eventually, with Paul. The father-son relationship evokes a certain collaborationism, and they are the Self of the surveillance dynamic, characterized by incomprehension and a frustrated desire,
menaced (especially in Paul’s case) by Marie’s inaccessibility (Hewitt 167). This role of surveillance is consummated by Paul’s letter of denunciation – his judgment passed as he uses the tools of the state in a cowardly fashion to exact revenge.

This role of judging watcher is not uniquely that of Pierrot and Paul. Rather, it is eventually extended to the spectator. The seeds for this transference are sown early on, as we ally emotionally with Pierrot, who seems neglected by his mother for no reason and who obviously yearns for her affection. But it is not until the singing lesson that the filmic subject (always the camera) completely coalesces with the audience via Chabrol’s extended crane shot. Paul’s letter, read in voiceover, establishes the tone of this scene. Given the flagrant nature of Marie’s actions (Paul comes home to her asleep with Lucien in their marriage bed), the spectator remains in a mode of alliance with the cuckold. The scene opens with Marie walking down the street, seen from a slightly elevated angle. She approaches the camera, which slowly sinks to frame her in a medium shot as it follows her to a door. She rings and is allowed inside, but the camera does not follow. Rather, it maintains its height and tracks left, moving along a series of tiles on the outside of the building. The tracking continues, and after two long sets of tiles, the camera rises to look through a window. While Marie is singing inside, reflections of passers-by are clearly seen in the glass. This long take confirms the spectator as outside viewer, held at bay just like Pierrot and Paul, and able only to gaze inside through a barrier that distorts our view and reinforces the distance between us and Marie. When we finally enter the building, to a shot of Marie singing in close-up, it is too late. Marie’s dreams are finally realized, but the audience/camera/filmic subject is already resigned to never completely enter her world. Her triumph is her own and we can never share in it. It is this opaque inaccessibility that renders Marie the filmic object, the Other upon which we can only gaze.
Chabrol’s film does more than allow (oblige?) us to gaze at Marie. In the final scenes, Marie’s incarceration and trial, the role of the Self in the surveillance dynamic is brought to its extreme conclusion: the spectator is called upon to do something that he has been doing all along – to judge. Our judgment of Marie is demanded, but it is also problematized, due to the ambivalent approach Chabrol has carefully maintained throughout the film.30

Social Commentary

“Moral relativism is the recurrent theme of Chabrol’s work” (Austin 5), and thus we finally arrive at what may be the most important aspect of this film: its carefully constructed ambivalence. This attitude in Une affaire de femmes is both theme and message, expressed in

30 Though this completes the spectator’s role in the surveillance theme, “Chabrol’s feat is to have made visible this collaborationist gaze of Vichy (in its private and public dimensions) though our own eyes while also filling us with the outrage of that gaze’s injustice” (Hewitt 173).
equal parts by the characters and by cinematography. Despite this neutrality, the director does not remain upon the fence, raising matters of women’s rights, abortion, the death penalty and interclass struggle. Chabrol presents each issue in a problematic light, making an effort to show both sides of the coin; however, he does not call it in the air.

**Ambivalent Characterization**

Ambivalence in *Une affaire de femmes* is created mainly by characterization, particularly that of Marie, and a complex relationship of alternating attraction and repulsion is established between her and the spectator. One image of Marie is particularly illustrative of her characterization. She has moved into the third and final house, a multi-room affair that dwarfs her former lodgings and where she rents spare rooms to her prostitute friend, Lulu. The latter has just finished with a client, and the women share a coffee in the kitchen when Paul comes home from work; passing through the kitchen, he grabs a bottle of wine and quickly leaves; Lulu, preferring to avoid a scene, also departs. Marie is left alone in a striking and prolonged tableau. She sits at the table, centered in the camera’s frame, wearing a simple dress and a blue apron. In the background, the kitchen tiles are light green and white, which along with the dull color of the table cast the entire image in pastel shades. The only strong color is that of the black stove behind Marie, whose pipe rises directly behind her head. To the right of the stove is a large white sink, and above it some ladles and large kitchen spoons hang neatly. On the table is a bizarre sort of still-life: a stained casserole dish, a dark cooking pan, and a loaf of bread, partially eaten, with a knife stuck into it and jutting into the air.

31 “Chabrol […] fustige l’hypocrisie d’une société qui, pour être située dans le contexte précis des années 40 ne prolonge pas moins son visage hideux dans nos années 80” (Caron 39).

32 “Chabrol doesn’t excuse Marie as much as ask his audiences how well they would hold up under the circumstances” (Pally 17).
For a few long seconds, Marie simply stares just beyond the camera, at the door to the dining room where Paul has just gone. The careful shot composition and its static nature invite us to look carefully at this arrangement, which is emblematic of the irony and careful ambivalence of Chabrol’s characterization, a parody of Vichy’s ideal woman. Marie is in the kitchen, the heart of domesticity, clad in the appropriate attire of dress and apron, a mixture of both feminine sexuality and domestic servitude. The background, with its right angles (the tiles), clean sink and neat utensils, is one of order and even calm. The foreground is precisely the inverse image: the pans are dirty, placed on the table in a haphazard manner. The bread is an important element: a central symbol of nourishment and the provider role that Marie plays, but also an image of violence (it is torn, not neatly cut; there are crumbs about it), and even of sex, with the knife/phallus penetrating the bread, suspended there, a kind of symbolic invasion that could
stand for the Occupation, or, more likely, the invasion of Vichy politics into the most intimate matters of morality and sexuality.

Marie sits between these two polar opposites, surrounded by contradictions that are her own creation (it is her kitchen, after all). Her expression is unreadable: disdain? indecision? Through her gaze after Paul, we may surmise that she is thinking about him, but we gain no entry into those thoughts. The height of this ambivalence that surrounds Marie is the stovepipe. Situated directly behind her head – a most deliberate placement, since in conventional photography, one would seek to avoid such a bizarre alignment – it evokes at once a single, devilish horn (by its black color) and a strange, elongated halo (by its roundness.) Thus we are presented with a brief but fascinating and ironic portrait. Marie is in the one location that she constantly seeks to flee, the domesticity of the kitchen, cast as both provider and destroyer, bringing both maternal order and feminine sexual destruction. Nonetheless, even in such a static image, we cannot pin her down. Instead of a unified presence, this portrait exudes ambiguity and a multiplicity of possible roles.

Of course, Marie is not the only ambivalent character in *Une affaire de femmes*. Paul, though wounded, weak and a cuckold (a status which draws our allegiance, or at least sympathy) is also egotistical, masculinist and vindictive. Pierrot is a neglected child who yearns for his mother’s love, but also wants to be an executioner when he grows up and symbolizes, through his enthusiastic use of German and courteous attitude towards Nazi troops, a chilling and childlike sort of collaborationism. Lucien, though the least likeable of the three, still exudes a certain charismatic virility. Though appalled at his misogyny and amorality, we can understand Marie’s attraction to him.
Ambivalent Form

The major formal indicators of ambivalence in *Une affaire de femmes* are the pan and the long take. Pans reveal characters to be in a shared space and thus suggest a link between them. Chabrol most often makes use of an “ironic pan,” one that establishes the characters (and it is almost always a pair) in a shared space and therefore suggests a connection, but that simultaneously uses shot composition and mise-en-scène to problematize that connection. When Yvonne, the mother of six, gives an impassioned monologue, perhaps the best of the entire film, there is a pan from her to Marie. This movement would usually suggest a deep connection of sympathy and common cause between the two characters. However, the camera pans from a close-up of the mother to Marie in medium-long shot, across the room, leaning on a window sill, a table between them. The mise-en-scène runs counter to the connection conventionally indicated by the pan; via physical separation, it suggests instead cold, calculating distance. Only after a long moment’s pause does Chabrol cut to a close-up of Marie in which she forces a smile and assents to the abortion.

The same is true of many of the film’s long takes; while Renoir uses the long take in *La Grande Illusion* to suggest connections and togetherness, the dinner scene after Paul’s return in *Une affaire de femmes* has just the opposite connotation. A family, physically present, shares a meal, but each member remains mentally and emotionally distant from the others. If they have anything in common, it is only the oppressive poverty of their surroundings and the very thin soup. Paul reads a letter to Marie after dinner, a love letter sent to one of his fellow inmates. It could be a moment of connection but is instead one of accusation and frustrated desire. The extended take connotes no connection, but only underline that Marie and Paul do *not* look at each other.
Figure 3: Looking at Not Looking

The long takes of Lulu and Marie in the bar give us a moment to consider the importance of mise-en-scène and the ironic way in which Chabrol uses it. Rather than facing each other, the women sit side by side at a corner table, their backs to the wall. During their conversation, they don’t look at each other much, just sideways glances over the rims of their wineglasses. They have a masculine, competitive relationship, facing the outside world side-by-side as soldiers, but not collaboratively. This is in sharp contrast to Marie’s relationship, also portrayed in a bar, with Rachel, whom she not only faces, but with whom she dances and to whom she remarks, “Tu as des beaux yeux, tu sais?” The arrangement of characters for the camera indicates what might even be contrary to their dialogue. Even if Marie seeks an affinity with Lulu, the prostitute is right: there is still a great deal of difference between the streetwalker and the housewife.
Both Sides of the Coin

*Une affaire de femmes* is ambivalent in both characterization and form, but Chabrol is not content to merely demand and then render difficult the spectator’s judgment of Marie. He draws our attention to other issues, illustrating their complexity through the characters and other elements of this film. He uses the historical context of Vichy and Marie’s story in particular as a prism to even handedly examine issues which were areas of great contention contemporary to the film’s production.

The first, and most general of these is women’s rights. Against the patriarchal backdrop of Vichy France, Chabrol casts such iconoclastic figures as Marie and Lulu as his protagonists, women aware of their subjugated position and yearning for something more. In this light, one might be able to consider *Une affaire de femmes* as a deliberately provocative statement of feminist ideals – indeed at least one film critic has done so (Howe). However, Marie and Lulu are more anti-heroines than banner-toting May 68ers. While Lulu may have a sexual freedom only dreamt of by many housewives of the Vichy era, Marie included, she is proportionally subject to physical, financial and social limitations, forced to live on the fringes of society and sell her body to gain a living. Marie may willfully break Vichy law, but she does so without any kind of overt ideology.33 Her selfish, even myopic behavior does not engender ideas of heroism, but neither is she a pure victim. In this manner of characterization, Chabrol makes (or at least takes part in) an important historiographic innovation, adding nuance to an era of French history that even today casts its players in Manichean roles.

Neither is Chabrol unreflective about Marie’s primary occupation as an abortionist. If Marie considers what she does, with a certain naïveté, as simply “helping out” (“Je ne faisais ça que pour rendre service”), Chabrol and O’Hagan invent a character as a foil to this point of view.

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33 She, “like many around her, is careful to avoid taking the long view” (Maslin).
When Yvonne dies, her sister adopts the orphaned brood. She then comes to visit Marie, two of the children pathetically in tow. The sister is an iconic prude: tightly coiffed hair, a dark, unrevealing dress – the antithesis of Marie’s loose, bouncing locks and short, flowing skirt. But the sister does not come to judge or berate, rather she is the embodiment of Chabrol’s “definitive message:” she pays Marie what Yvonne had owed, and then calmly states “What do you think you were killing, spiders? Children in a mother’s womb have a soul.” Refusing Marie’s forced hospitality, the sister leaves. This is an important moment of adaptation from Szpiner’s book, which contains no such scene or carefully ambivalent attitude towards abortion. Indeed, Szpiner is unabashedly pro-choice. The film is more careful about such ideologies; the sister, despite her conservative piousness (“God has sent me this cross to bear,” she proclaims), costumes and attitude, recognizes Marie’s freedom. Her ideas, however briefly presented, are given as much weight as Marie’s iconoclastic opportunism.

The film’s attitudes towards the death penalty and class-struggle are perhaps less evenhanded. There is no case made for the justice of state-sanctioned murder, rather Chabrol uses understatement to underline its horror. Much in the same way that abortion or prostitution is treated, the camera carefully looks away at the moment of Marie’s death. The execution itself is quite unspectacular, an ironic version of one of the primary elements of a historical film. Instead of diatribe, Chabrol uses the understated emotion of the scene to couple it with the voice of Pierrot-as-adult, whose presence tends to mitigate the more reactionary effects possible of such an unjust execution (cf. Austin 137). The fallen guillotine blade is replaced with a call to awareness that, as we have seen, divagates from Szpiner’s: “Ayez pitié des enfants.” It is not Marie, far too problematic a character to suddenly garner our sympathies, but Pierrot and
Mouche, and thousands of other children who are deprived of a parent, to whom Chabrol directs our attention.

Class-struggle also figures into the understated polemics of *Une affaire de femmes*, highlighted obliquely only towards the end. Marie, now in jail and fearful of her fate, lashes out by remarking that it is always the poor in her situation, that rich women are not subject to such terror and injustice. The suddenness of this class consciousness may seem a little out of character for a woman who had so carefully avoided any ideology in an atmosphere where all ideologies are so polarized, polarizing and dangerous. Nonetheless, that single statement has led some critics, such as Michel Cade, to examine *Une affaire de femmes* as a metaphor for class struggle. The historical reality was that women in Marie’s position – poor, unemployed, living on the fringes – were the easiest targets of Vichy’s 300 Law. It may be somewhat ironic that while Marie may disparage the privileges of the bourgeoisie, it is just that level of affluence and ease that she sought. Nonetheless, the bitter grapes theory does not counter Cade’s and Pally’s observations that Marie was socially and economically set up to fail.

**Conclusion**

It is not without irony that this ambivalence unites the three-fold nature of *Une affaire de femmes*. Adapted from a written work, set with meticulous historical specificity and at the same time addressing a number of inflammatory topical issues, Chabrol’s film holds together via a careful palimpsest. The first level of this palimpsest is Szpiner’s book, the primary hypotext. Through transference, adaptation and even invention, Chabrol and co-writer O’Hagan take part in a time-honored tradition of literary adaptation, a practice common in every filmmaking society, but one which has particular force in French cinema. The written word most often

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34 This 1942 statute made abortion a capital offense similar to treason.
adapted is the “great work,” those important literary texts such as Madame Bovary or Les Misérables of which the French are so proud, milestones of cultural achievement. Szpiner’s historical fiction does not stand among them, but as for the cinema one can certainly consider it akin. The practice of literary adaptation, then, is not an isolated one, and its tools of production, replication and reception are similar to another form of representation: history.

History as text, as artificial reproduction of the past, even as selective memory, is the second, broader and deeper level. With a well-known setting that immediately charges the film with “une atmosphère de stagnation,” Miranda Pollard underlines how much Une affaire de femmes is a “vector of memory” as it confronts us with a complex and problematic story that the spectator must actively engage. Moreover, we must engage it on its own terms: as a story, as a work of fiction, as a massive hypertext whose sources are myriad and whose paths and reflections are equally diverse. Nonetheless, this is Une affaire de femmes, a single story, a single text that reunites all of these threads and weaves them together in multipart harmony. One finds this harmony in the ambivalence of the film towards issues contemporary to its production. As a “vector of memory,” Chabrol is crafting a representation that can, eventually, have a direct effect on other representations, both of the past and the present. As we have seen, Chabrol’s story may call upon another text as well as upon history and the spectator, but it is not a clarion call. Chabrol does not make it easy to draw clean moral distinctions and carefully avoids

35 “Chabrol’s story […] obliges us to confront ‘the story of women’ under Vichy […] and representations of abortion and female sexuality in repressive historical contexts. Une affaire de femmes raises the question of narrative conventions that define how we all – historians, witnesses, filmmakers, and ‘audience’ – tell the story of wartime France.” (Pollard, “Reign of Virtue” 178) Note that this is not (or no longer) “Szpiner’s story” or “Marie’s story.” This shift of ownership is interesting – and telling. A simple act of metonymy underlines how important the role of filmmaker (as auteur) remains.

36 “What is Chabrol's message? He does not say. His film is as opaque as his character. Story of Women is a morality play without a conclusion. We have to make up our own minds. Most movies on themes like this instruct us about how to think, by portraying its characters as good or bad, and casting them to seem attractive or otherwise. Chabrol does not make it so easy.” (Ebert)
making facile pronouncements, but *Une affaire de femmes* does instruct us how to think, or rather, it provides certain models of thought. By subtly displaying the paradox at the center of realist narrative (a will to explain everything and project an illusion of closure and causality), Chabrol creates a film full of partial closure, that is, ambivalence. The connective and critical nature of this ambivalence is important. Since we cannot contain any one thing in the mode of thought espoused by Deleuze’s organic regime as it is portrayed in this film, we must rely upon other sets, each one equally incomplete. Thus, Chabrol seems to cautiously intimate that we cannot take things out of context. We must understand Marie as a woman of the 1940s, under the social, political and economic pressures that surround her. And we must do the same for ourselves today – and tomorrow. Our own lives, perhaps, are just another kind of hypertext, and we can only gain from realizing their interconnected nature.
Chapter 2 Conclusion

Drawing broad conclusions from two such disparate films as J’Accuse and Une Affaire de femmes presents a number of challenges. How can we evaluate a work from 1919 about the Great War alongside a movie from 1987 set during the German occupation? A gulf of time, technology, subject matter and social context seems to divide them. Nonetheless, they have strong affinities because they take part in the same broad activity and perform a similar function. Borrowing material from other media, they lead audiences to reflect critically upon the past and present; they also project lessons learned into the future. Literary appropriation and social self-criticism work synergistically. By making connections with forms outside the cinematic medium, J’Accuse and Une affaire de femmes emphasize the interconnected nature of society. The ultimate message may be a double-edged sword: despite the isolating terror and trauma of modern warfare, you are not alone; but your every action (or inaction) has consequences for your fellow human beings.

It is especially significant for French audiences that these works take part in what has become a long standing tradition of adaptation and/or bricolage. Even if a source text does not stand amongst les grandes œuvres, the practice of adapting the page to the screen calls upon French pride in past literary achievements – pride that both World Wars eroded. Of equal significance may be the tenor of these movies. The richest films about the French experience of war are not violent anthems of patriotism, but complex, literary and introspective affairs. Thus France seems to have at least partially learned a bitter lesson about modern armed conflict. The most lucid cinematic reflections upon it seek to diffuse notions of self-perpetuating violence by hinting that harm to others is also harm to oneself.
Beyond a message of pacifism and a greater awareness of one’s role in society, these films are useful as historical investigations. *J’Accuse* underlines the commonly accepted idea that the Great War was an unprecedented trauma but the particular challenge here is that Gance’s work must be read metaphorically. The penultimate scene clearly illustrates how much World War I has changed things. Usually, the living bring home the dead. But as the fallen soldiers are intercut with footage of the triumphant armistice march, now the dead bring home the living. It would be difficult to think of a more apt or more powerful metaphor of the difference in popular attitudes towards war between 1914 and 1919. With care, metaphor becomes a legitimate historiographical trope.

*Une affaire de femmes* also reinforces accepted historical facts: that people lived in desperate deprivation during the Occupation, that French Jews were deported by their fellow citizens, that power was wielded unevenly and often unjustly and that the French were just as responsible for the atrocities of Vichy as the invading Nazis. However, it has new things to teach us about this era. People kept on living, and the dire circumstances of the Occupation and the French State did not lead to sharp Manichean lines but rather troubled already murky waters. Indeed, the French State’s attempt to rigorously impose its own ethical standards with the 300 Law resulted in a mockery of justice and the misapplication of masculinist power.

The disparate nature of these films also helps to advance a redefinition of the French war film. The battle scenes and heroic melodrama of *J’Accuse* render it a straight-forward *film de guerre* while the setting of *Une Affaire de femmes* makes it unequivocally a *film sur la guerre*. However, their common hybridity and a concomitant emphasis on social and artistic interconnections ally them strongly. French war films are hybrid creations, but unlike the metacinematic blends of their American counterparts, they tend to draw on the French literary
tradition to make connections that are more than winks across the theater aisle. They instead engage the audience in meaningful and complex ways that resonate intensely with French audiences in specific.

Literary history, metaphor and hybridity: already we seem to have strayed from the realm of the conventional war film. Perhaps that paradigm needs to be reevaluated when applied to the French cinema. The next chapter continues to wander, extending the influence of literature and the use of metaphor into the practice of allegory.
Chapter 3: Allegory

Le cinéma, c’est une industrie, mais malheureusement, c’est aussi un art.
– Jean Anouilh, Le Scenario

The great films of the occupation turned the period’s liabilities into assets.
– Evelyn Ehrlich, Cinema of Paradox

The infusion of issues contemporary to its society of production into Une affaire de femmes places war at a distant remove from at least part of that film. This eschewal of direct (historical) representation, not only makes Chabrol’s movie a film sur la guerre, but renders it somewhat akin to the subject of this chapter: allegory. La Grande Illusion (Renoir, 1936) and Les Visiteurs du soir (Carné and Prévert, 1942) are less concerned with the armed conflicts that either comprise their settings or shape their productions than with voicing social critiques beneath the specter of war.

How do these works use extended metaphor to out flank their respective subjects? As with any successful flanking maneuver, they come at it from opposite sides. La Grande Illusion uses a war time setting (World War I German prisoner of war camps) to critique French society of the 1930s. Les Visiteurs, on the other hand, uses a medieval setting to allegorize the war time issues contemporary to its production. While allegory is most often a function of narrative, how does the form of these works support their purposes or even illustrate larger ideas? Renoir’s form and narrative seem to be ultimately at odds with each other; while the former explores a universe of connection, the latter resolves the disruption of the story by reifying difference. Form and content in Les Visiteurs is more in harmony: they are wildly connective and interrelated and it is this characteristic that justifies an allegorical reading of this contentiously debated film.
Before beginning the analyses proper, this is an appropriate place to discuss two larger theoretical issues that I employ throughout this chapter: Deleuzean montage and Burch and Sellier’s typology of gender in French films of the 1930s and 40s.

**Deleuzean framing, *hors champs* and *montage***

Renoir’s virtuoso cinematography and Carné’s deliberate pacing in *Les Visiteurs du soir* both call for an equally rich set of theoretical tools with which to examine them. Deleuze’s unconventional ideas on both framing and montage are of greatest service to us here, since they can most easily take into account both the more conventional, Hollywood, style of camera set-ups and editing along with camera movement as an editing technique.

Framing for Deleuze mirrors one level of Bergsonian movement, a relative and provisional closing of a set (Rodowick 45). The Set in film is the Shot; the cinematic frame delimits the mise-en-scène. Of central importance to both Deleuzean framing and the present study is the problem of out-of-field, or *hors champs*. Since any closure provided by the frame is provisional, relative and always artificial in the movement-image semiotic, it is the nature of the filmic medium that a new set always replaces the old and in doing so implies a relation not only between the two sets, but with the film at large. Whether a first shot is replaced by an entirely new image (editing) or by a fluidly shifting perspective on the same figures (camera movement) is on a certain level immaterial. Thus conventional editing and camera movement are equated as signifying strategies through the concept of *hors champs*. However, this equation is not complete: while camera movement and conventional editing have the same signifying capacity, they do not necessarily imply identical meanings even when their subjects are similar.

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37 “The frame as limit implies a set that is not yet seen but that nevertheless appears, implying a new unseen space, and so on” (Rodowick 48).
This understanding of framing and its possibilities as a signifying strategy in film leads us to Deleuzean montage.\(^{38}\) This process works metonymically across all levels of signification in a film as an organizing principle (or \textit{agencement}) of images as ideas. There remains a final and most important role of montage: the expression of change.\(^{39}\) This representative capacity of montage is key to understanding not only Deleuze’s larger philosophical concerns (montage is used in the time-image semiotic to directly represent time and a Bergsonian Whole) but also to the current study, whose subjects call for a new dynamism in French society.

\section*{Gender}

A second common area of investigation in this chapter is the prism of gender, for which I appropriate the categories presented by Noël Burch and Geneviève Sellier in \textit{La Drôle de guerre des sexes dans le cinéma français}. Looking at the French cinema of the 1930’s, Burch and Sellier borrow from Vincendeau’s concept of an “incestuous” relationship (usually father/daughter) apparent in a remarkable number of movies of the era (26). This incest is largely metaphoric, but the dynamics of a sexual rapport between father and daughter figures have important connections with the social and political attitudes of the time where patriarchy reigned supreme despite the momentary rise of the socialist \textit{Front Populaire}.

Burch and Sellier create a typology of incestuous relationships by identifying the various roles of the father figure. The first is \textit{le père tranquille}, “où le pouvoir du père est conforté parfois sur un mode explicitement sexuel [...] mais le plus souvent sur un mode implicite” (26). An example can be found in \textit{Boudu sauvé des eaux} (Renoir, 1932) whose \textit{père tranquille} is not

\(^{38}\) “More than a style of cutting, montage expresses a logic of composition – a concept or a regulating idea in the philosophical sense – that informs the film both globally and in each of its parts” (Rodowick 51).

\(^{39}\) “Montage is composition, the assemblage [\textit{agencement}] of movement-images as constituting an indirect image of time” (Deleuze, \textit{Movement-Image} 29-30).
the eponymous character, but his savior, the smugly bourgeois Édouard Lestingois. Though the central conflict of the story revolves around the anarchic challenge to the patriarchal power of Lestingois by Boudu’s innocuous antics, the film’s conclusion is clearly a return to male-centered stability and yes, sexual rewards. The second type of father figure is *le père sacrifié*, typified by Henry Baur and Eric von Stroheim. Stroheim is indeed an exemplar of this type in *La Grande Illusion*, as I will discuss later, but a more prominent and interesting case is that of Bœldieu, whose sacrifice can be interpreted as a step away from the reification of patriarchal power. Finally, there is *le père indigne*, who is most often not the protagonist, but serves instead as the antagonist for a younger man. Jules Berry frequently played in such roles, and though as antagonist and thus the ultimate loser of most films (more than once via murder), the sexuality and charisma of this type of *père* is the most sinister and, narratively if not practically, also the most powerful, the driving engine of a film’s story.
Exalted as one of his greatest films, Jean Renoir’s *La Grande Illusion* (1937) may also be his most problematic. The work is commonly regarded as a pacifist social allegory that illustrates not only the brutal absurdity of war, but a radical conception of social organization, one in which the bonds of social class are more profound than those of nationality or ethnicity. However, its richness derives from a certain paradox: namely, in a film that would seem to embrace liberty, equality and fraternity (those ephemeral ideals of the French republic), Renoir cannot escape the necessity of differentiation.

This paradox can be traced in both form and content. Though on the surface it may seem improvisational or at least light and almost spontaneous, Renoir carefully crafts his film through camera movement, editing and mise-en-scène. Looking at these elements together, we can see that *La Grande Illusion* creates a strong impression of shared cinematic space – a space that seeks to establish egalitarian connections between characters, but that also delimits and separates them. Additionally, the frustration and transgression of gender issues is representative of the prisoner experience, which simultaneously disturbs and reinforces relations of power. Renoir’s most conservative move in an otherwise progressive work is to rely on traditional gender roles to bring resolution to the film through the Maréchal/Elsa romance. Both cinematography and gender issues represent the central paradox that drives *La Grande Illusion*: greater fraternity and equality is derived by the exclusion of another group. Striving for freedom, one encounters only
new restraints, and in the case of gender (whose political nature is often ignored), ultimately with old restraints.

**Renoir’s Interventions**

*La Grande Illusion* is a remarkable marriage of film form, dialogue and acting. Though he is unafraid to use conventional editing techniques, Renoir tends to prefer camera movement and deep focus. This provides a fluid connectivity between the characters and the environments they inhabit. Moreover, the characters “collectively embody a range of class positions and nationalities so that their interplay constitutes a meditation on what divides or unites men” (O’Shaughnessy 124). Their representative nature (the working-class Maréchal, the aristocratic Bœldieu, Rosenthal the Jewish businessman, Rauffenstein the rigid Prussian officer) allow us to understand the work as an allegory, but one that never falls into a simple matter of stereotypes.

Moreover, this is a war film without a single battle scene. Only one shot is ever fired; only four characters die – and only one death is depicted directly on-screen. This understatement is one of the film’s greatest qualities, for a more direct representation would not serve the director’s aims. The focus is not whiz-bang explosions and melodramatic heroism; rather, war is a secondary concern, a frame within which the film structures an allegory of social interaction. The conflict remains nonetheless essential, and imposes itself at important moments, especially those in which the film takes us furthest away from the fighting, such as in the German officer mess, the prisoners’ transvestite vaudeville, or the Maréchal/Elsa romance.  

40 Bœldieu is the one on-screen shooting and death. We never meet the other dead characters: a French pilot “shot down in the flames,” and Elsa’s father and her husband, victims of the Somme offensive. It is interesting to note that Renoir initially intended to film the air-battle where von Rauffenstein shoots down Maréchal and Boeldieu, but the scene proved too costly. I think the film is better for this lack.

41 Beyond allowing Renoir to focus on the allegorical purpose of this film, it has a counter-mythic purpose as well: “Rather than focus on the horror of the trenches, as other films in the 1930s had done, *La Grande Illusion* explores the myths that legitimize and romanticize war before slowly and surely puncturing them” (O’Shaughnessy 129).
Though many of Renoir’s films from the 1930s are often thought to express ideals of the Popular Front, one should regard the association as only a partial alliance (Strebel 76). Renoir did write rather prolifically for numerous left-wing journals of the era, like the short-lived Ciné-Liberté. During the 1930s, he directed several films with overtly socialist and collectivist messages, such as Le Crime de Monsieur Lange (1936), Les Bas-fonds (1936), La Grande Illusion (1937) and La Marseillaise (1937). Additionally, he served as organizing director for La Vie est à nous (1936), the French Communist Party’s first feature film and his most politically engaged project. Nonetheless, Renoir never joined any political party.

The search for a direct representation of Popular Front ideologies, or especially those of a particular faction, is in vain. Rather than specific ideologies, two axes tend to dominate Renoir’s production in the 1930’s: 1) writing the “History of the present”: despite historic (La Marseillaise) or geographic (Les Bas-fonds) abstractions, Renoir’s films remain reflective of the social and political climate of France in the 30s; 2) “il se tourne de l’observation et de la reproduction de la face purement extérieure des choses pour s’intéresser au monde mental de ses personnages” (Serceau 17). Thus, we may examine his films of this era as socio-political interventions whose broad ideologies are expressed through the psychologies and interactions of their characters.

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42 It is very tempting to see Renoir's films of this period as a transparent expression of Frontist values, mirroring their ideological contradictions even as they sought to conceal them. [However] They do not transparently reflect Frontist ideology or a specific conjecture. They need to be considered as active interventions in a contested and evolving terrain, interventions which pursue ideological struggle in the arena of representation and have to find their own way to politicize cinema while reaching out to a popular audience. (O’Shaughnessy 104)
Cinematography

Cinematography is the real foundation of Renoir’s expressive power. The mobile frame in *La Grande Illusion* is the primary signifier of common space and activity. Via the notion of *hors champs*, so important to the mobile frame, we come to the use of deep focus, which accentuates those notions of simultaneous activity and shared space already implied by out-of-field. Yet despite a preference for long takes and a mobile camera, Renoir is unafraid to use conventional editing techniques, notably shot/reverse-shot. Unconventionally, the director uses the inherent polarity of the technique to imply a dialectic, in the case of Bœldieu’s and Rauffenstein’s conversation in the German’s chamber, to represent an argument. Finally, close-ups are relatively rare in *La Grande Illusion*, but their sparse use indicates their greater importance. Interestingly, objects, not human faces, are the main subjects of close-ups, a treatment which lends them extraordinary signifying power.

The “Prowling” Camera

Peter Cowey notes that Renoir’s camera is constantly “going on the prowl” (DVD commentary). Rather than cutting from one set-up to the next, Renoir and cinematographer Matras prefer to move the camera fluidly through the space of the film set, resting upon a certain tableau for a moment and then gliding to the next site of interest. The seamless nature of Renoir’s long takes is impressive – at once natural and striking. By natural, one could also understand – almost – invisible. In sharp contrast to the bravura opening of *Touch of Evil* (Welles, 1958) or its post-

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43 […] it is less for his socially complex themes than for their ingenious presentation on the screen that Renoir is celebrated as the decade's greatest filmmaker. [...] The deep-focus photography he championed, the shooting through doorways and windows, the long tracking shots, and the seemingly casual but always indicative blocking of actors turn the spectator into both sympathetic witness and judge. Renoir's humanism derives less from the sentiments his characters express than from a style that maintains contradictory elements in a single field, and from the themes suggested by such coexistence. (Andrew, *Mists of Regret* 293)
modern homage in *The Player* (Altman, 1992), in which the sweeping camera movement and extremely long take remind the audience incessantly that we are watching a film, Renoir’s approach is more subtle. Though the takes may be remarkably long and the camera’s movements dizzying once traced, while watching, the spectator has little to no sense of artificiality about it. It may be helpful that Renoir does not move the camera much vertically; it remains almost constantly at the same height from the floor, nearly at eye level, so as to focus better on the characters. These movements are striking in both their level of technical achievement and in this nearly invisible characteristic.

The signature long take of *La Grande Illusion* occurs during the vaudeville in Hallbach. Most of this scene is shot and edited along the conventions of a musical of the time: three-quarters and full shots of the characters on-stage interspersed with medium shots of the German officers’ reactions or full shots of the audience from the rear of the stage. However, the carnivalesque mirth of this scene is turned abruptly on its head when Maréchal bursts on-stage to announce that Douaumont has been recaptured by French troops. The entire prisoner audience immediately rises to its feet, shown in a very long shot from the back of the hall. Cut to the orchestra; the lead English “girl” enters from off-screen right: “‘La Marseillaise,’ please.” This begins a bravura long take as illustrated below.
Figure 4: La Marseillaise Scene

The orchestra begins to play (1), and the camera pans right with the lead “girl,” who doffs his wig and sings forcefully (2). His gaze is off-screen and to the right; the camera tracks in this direction to find the rest of the “girls,” also now wigless, and all of the French officers singing with equal verve on-stage (3). Maréchal is center-stage, and he gazes down and to the right of the frame, where editing has previously established the German officers to be sitting. The song continues, and as Maréchal takes a few steps to the right of the frame, the camera follows, tracking right and pulling slightly away to reveal a pair of German officers conversing (4). We cannot hear them over the din, as the entire hall of prisoners is singing. The officers leave hurriedly to the left; the camera follows, but only until it reaches the audience, all of whom are on their feet and singing with fervor (5). The camera tracks to right across the audience (6), and then continues on this trajectory to rediscover the orchestra (7) and the lead “girl” (8). In a single take, stretching for longer than a minute, the camera has described a complete circle in a
clockwise fashion. To resolve this long take, Renoir does something unexpected: he reverses direction, tracking left, counter-clockwise until the audience, still singing, fills the frame (9).

The key idea here is that of reversal, both that of power and roles. The scene begins as a simple vaudeville: the stage is a space set apart, one intruded upon only by invitation (as the Actor calls out to the German guard, Arthur). Even with regard to the editing, it is carefully contained. The camera seems to pace, tracking slowly in and out, cutting away only briefly for a few reaction shots. It is free to move, just as the prisoners are free to sing and to cross-dress, but that freedom is carefully controlled. Then the war intrudes without invitation, exploding this controlled containment. To announce the news of Douaumont, the plain-clothed Maréchal bursts into the milieu of English officers in drag. The carefully constructed mise-à-part of the stage’s space disintegrates and the camera is freed to roam about the hall, and the (sexual and musical) freedom granted to the performers on-stage spills off the proscenium into the space between the footlights and the spectators, the space physically roamed by the camera.

The prowling camera tells a series of vignettes, using both a mobile frame and the materials of the hall to separate them. The lead “girl” is a moment of international solidarity and resistance against a common enemy. Maréchal’s story is a simple, even naïve one: defiant vengeance. The German officers are just as transformed as the lead “girl,” unmanned and caught unprepared by the virulent and spontaneous uprising. They can only retreat and reposition. This admission of defeat is coupled with a small but interesting visual – the camera passes by a column, a simple post that supports the roof of the hall. Yet it causes a momentary darkness as it fills the frame, acting as a kind of ad-hoc edit. Indeed, the image revealed afterward is quite different: the entire prisoner population is singing as defiantly as those on-stage.

44 A division that is, as proper to the idea of carnival, ironically freeing, a space of frivolity and mirth.
As the camera tracks from the audience to rediscover the orchestra, it passes another post; it moves past it a second time tracking from the “girl” to the audience again. This quick appearance and reappearance of a virtual editing element, whose role was established by the first post, performs a double task. First, it establishes a kind of realism, a simple intrusion of the hall’s everyday architecture into the smoothness of the cinematography; the space described by the camera is given depth and just enough dissymmetry to be more believable. Secondly, though the camera’s tracking speed does not increase, the virtual editing increases the tempo of the sequence, more sharply dividing the images and building them to a rousing finale in which the erstwhile spectators and prisoners have become performers and victors.

**Deep Focus and hors champs**

Like the posts in the scene above, many things intrude upon Christian Matras’s “prowling,” breaking the frame and passing in front of the camera. The audience is thus made aware of the presence of figures and objects out-of-field. Rather than a reminder of the artificiality of the cinematic medium, these intrusions, as noted above, serve to create a sense of realism, of life and its constant motion. The characters of *La Grande Illusion* are not framed tightly and insulated from their surroundings, but rather inhabit them fully. Figures and objects enter and exit the frame to establish a sense of activity and continuity. The closed set of the prison camp is constantly re-opened and redefined.

A key technique to this continual re-opening is that of deep focus. Whereas *hors champs* emphasizes activity that intrudes and even occasionally interferes, deep focus accentuates what is already in front of the camera. Especially in exterior shots, Renoir inhabits the background with movement that is nominally unrelated to the foreground action. The use of deep focus has two
general uses. First, it can establish a “documentary-like realism” (Cowey). To illustrate this effect, let us look at the “garden sequence.”

At Hallbach, the French officers are digging a tunnel to escape and dispose of the removed dirt in the prison garden. They gather their tools, and the camera tracks left to follow them as they move from tool storage to the garden. Immediately behind the characters is a barbed-wire fence. The Actor plays the usual fool, attempting to step through the fence and is warned off by a guard. The French officers continue left and out of frame. The camera stops as they pass; the focus is as much on the fence as the characters in the foreground. Far in the background is another portion of the camp, a large courtyard where new recruits train and parade. Deep focus and mise-en-scène create a sense of shared space, but also sharply accentuates boundaries, physical (the fence), linguistic (a sign in German proclaims “Verboten”) and thematic (prisoners “garden,” but they are really carrying on the fight in their attempt to escape; German soldiers “parade,” but they are equally carrying on the fight for their own side.)

The use of deep focus changes radically at Wintersborn, where instead of revealing shared space and simultaneous activity, it underscores the isolation of the prison camp. Rauffenstein, under the guise of civility, gives the newly arrived Maréchal, Bœldieu and Demolder a tour of the château/prison. They arrive upon a tall parapet; the camera is set to look through an open door that frames the scene. Just behind the characters is a massive machine gun manned by two guards. Further a field is an empty and serene countryside. Rauffenstein approaches the edge of the parapet, removes his monocle and looks down over the edge. “A drop of one hundred and seventeen feet,” he proclaims and replaces his monocle. Bœldieu mirrors the gesture with his own eye-piece: “It was very pleasant of you, sir, to have shown us around your

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45 I quote the dialogue provided by the English translation of the published script, but neither the French nor the English versions provide an accurate portrayal of this scene as it appears on-screen.
estate.” Maréchal chimes in with his own irony: “Yes, it’s a really pretty castle, sir.” Rauffenstein turns and exits left out of frame, followed closely by a scowling Bœldieu. Maréchal continues: “So ancient…” The camera tracks towards Maréchal as he pauses in the doorway, “…and so cheery.” He exits left out of frame, followed at last by Demolder. The camera remains in the same position: the doorway, the guards and the machine gun. A rack focus of the distant landscape underscores Rauffenstein’s point: Wintersborn is a place irrevocably apart and not to be escaped.46

Shot/Reverse-Shot Technique as Dialectic

If Renoir and Matras prefer long takes and framing two conversing characters together rather than more conventional editing techniques, we must take special note of the latter. The shot/reverse-shot technique tends to isolate two characters visually. The shared time and space of their conversation is merely implied through a logical verbal exchange and a common background. Renoir uses this isolation and alternation to subtly emphasize the building of an argument between Bœldieu and Rauffenstein.

The scene takes place in Wintersborn and opens with a long shot of the officers in Rauffenstein’s opulent chamber. They walk slowly towards the camera at a slight diagonal, pause for a moment for a three-quarters shot, and then continue off-screen. Cut to a window in Rauffenstein’s chamber at an angle nearly 180 degrees reversed from the previous shot, an impression confirmed as Bœldieu and Rauffenstein enter the frame from off-screen left at a corresponding angle to the previous shot.47 Bœldieu and Rauffenstein sit on a bank beneath the

46 In the published script, Rauffenstein’s line continues: “No one will escape from here.” Cinematography accomplishes more subtly and more richly the same task.

47 The 180-degree rule, the basis of the shot/reverse-shot technique, is thus established and respected from the outset, never to be broken during the entire scene.
window, flanking the German officer’s single – and symbolic – geranium. Their conversation flows from French to English to French again, but the subject matter is the same: a lament for the slow and tragic death of the aristocracy. Rauffenstein is deeply troubled by this fate: he is bit by bit becoming useless. Bœldieu has apparently come to terms with the extinction of his social class.

The editing establishes a particular pattern. The scene begins in a typical Renoir manner: two characters together in a long shot. Even as they sit, they are depicted together in-frame. However, as the conversation continues, the shot/reverse-shot technique comes to the fore. As each character speaks, he is shown in a three-quarters shot, then a medium shot and then close-ups from the shoulders. Their commonality remains in their code-switching and the subjects of their conversation: horses, war and their privileged social class. Yet what divides them is mirrored by the editing: these two men do not share an ideological space. Remarkably there is only one reaction shot in the entire scene, a brief moment of Bœldieu listening attentively to his comrade and captor while silently disagreeing. Shots of a character speaking comprise the entire rest of the scene. This lack of reaction shots further underlines the divide between Bœldieu and Rauffenstein, as neither is very interested in what the other has to say, but focuses instead on his own thoughts.

**Objects, Close-ups and la photogénie**

Close-ups of characters, like reaction shots, are rare in *La Grande Illusion*. They are reserved for moments of intense emotion and usually wordless expression: Maréchal’s anguished isolation in solitary confinement, Rauffenstein’s ambiguous mixture of joy and sorrow reading the report of new prisoners, or Elsa’s breathless, illuminating joy when announcing that “Le café est près.” Their rarity adds weight and importance to these moments.
On the other hand, close-ups of objects are the rule rather than the exception. The film begins with a shot that becomes almost archetypal: a close-up of a phonograph whose crank is turned by a hand intruding from out of field. The record begins to spin, the speaker exudes a light, crisp melody and the camera tilts up to reveal Maréchal singing along. The exact same technique is applied to Rosenthal’s place setting at the first Hallbach meal. This moment, in turn, is mirrored by Maréchal’s bowl during his solitary confinement. Earlier, he had been digging a hole in the wall with his spoon; now, its futility is reinforced as it merely lies upon the uneaten contents of the bowl. The Christmas celebration at Elsa’s house begins with an extreme close-up of a baby Jesus carved from a potato, a tight angle that opens to reveal an entire nativity made of food and other cobbled-together objects. The human presence is secondary, placed in the background, yet the humanistic element, the desire for peace, connection and sharing, is foregrounded more effectively in a Joseph made of onions than would be in several minutes of dialogue.

Objects are frequently used as the symbolic starting points of a shot, if not of an entire scene.⁴⁸ The camera’s close gaze imbues them with an almost magical quality, as if questioning the unspeaking material and listening in the only language that both object and camera share: a visual one. This “parti pris des choses” finds its most striking expression in the introduction to Rauffenstein’s opulent and baroque chamber at Wintersborn. The single long take begins with a three-quarters shot of a massive crucifix, then tilts down to reveal a pair of ornamented candle holders, a portrait of a German officer and a baroque cross. The tilt continues to reveal that all of these objects are above the head of a neatly-made bed; a sword hangs from the frame. The camera then pans right and begins a slow track backwards and right to discover: a lonely potted

⁴⁸ “Beginning a scene with a close-up, as Renoir so often does, invariably has the function of establishing the object thus tightly framed as a symbol that seeds the meaning of entire scene to follow” (Faulkner 90).
geranium ("la seule fleur de la fortresse"), champagne on ice and a single glass, a portrait of a finely-dressed woman, a wrist watch, a glove-case, a statuette of nymph, a mortar shell, a pair of binoculars, a series of ornamental sword tassels, another sword, its belt and its scabbard. Only after this long, slow cataloguing of memorabilia does the camera finally reveal a human presence: a thin and officious-looking fellow preparing a set of white gloves; there is an ornate atomizer to his left. A command in German is issued from off-screen. It is another 30 seconds of the same long take before the camera reveals the inhabitant of this chamber, the owner of this collection of objects: Rauffenstein, bitter and haughty, who barely deigns to call the sludge he is drinking coffee.

The length of this introduction may seem gratuitous, yet it is a moment of central importance to this section of the film and to La Grande Illusion as a whole.49 Rauffenstein’s character is exposed meticulously, point by point: a fervent Christian, a patriot, a faithful husband, a lover of fine things, a warrior and an aristocrat. Renoir creates a kind of photo album of Rauffenstein, an introduction to a character who is complex but discernible. Yet, the film does not introduce Rauffenstein here, rather it re-introduces him, and it starts with the objects that reflect his character, not his physical appearance or name. As spectators, we generate a virtual portrait of this man before we are made to reconcile this portrait with the hospitable officer we have already met.

Objects are thus empowered by the camera, given concrete relevance not only to the characters with whom they are associated, but gifted as well with their own signifying potential. The phonograph of the French officer’s mess returns in Elsa’s house. Obviously, it is not the same one, but the simple joy that it produces is a symbol of the freedom of its listeners.

49 “What we are considering here is a faculty for invention, not simple documentary reproduction. The accuracy of detail in Renoir's work is as much the result of imagination as of observation. He does indiscriminately record reality. Rather, he singles out the telling – but not conventional – detail” (Bazin, Jean Renoir 63).
Rauffenstein’s geranium is particularly loved by the camera, and its repeated presence imbues it with tragic symbolism: the only flower of the fortress, it dies with Bœldieu at Rauffenstein’s hand. While other cinematographic techniques express thematic concerns, close-ups transform everyday objects into powerful symbols that are at the heart of *La Grande Illusion* as allegory.

**The Gender Paradox: Answers in Drag**

This allegorical nature allows us to draw parallels more easily between the gender issues expressed in the film and its socio-political concerns. The difficulty one encounters is that despite a marked progressive, humanist tone, the treatment of gender is almost entirely conventional. Despite their interrogation and disruption, traditional gender roles and their concomitant political implications are ultimately maintained in *La Grande Illusion*.

*Les pères*

The parallel between political power and gender roles is most readily apparent when we apply the “incestuous” paradigm presented by Burch and Sellier. Maréchal seems to be the film’s hero, or at least the most central character; and he is the only one to achieve sexual satisfaction. Thus it is tempting to think of him as a *père conforté* but I believe this would be a misapplication of the typology. Maréchal may arguably be the film’s primary protagonist, but he is not a real figure of authority. He orders no one, and only late in the film does he assert any kind of masculinist leadership. Never overtly confronted, he cannot be comforted. On the other hand, Bœldieu and Rauffenstein are more justifiably viewed as a *père sacrifié* and a *père indigne*, respectively.

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50 A parallel that Reader argues should not be difficult to discern. As opposed to “national questions in sexual politics,” he posits that it “might be more appropriate, given the greater importance of nationality in the film’s overall diegesis, to speak of ‘the extremely varied kinds of important of sexual questions in national politics’” (57, my emphasis).
The film establishes Bœldieu and Rauffenstein in many ways as figures of authority. They are the highest ranking officers on either side of the conflict. Though his prisoner status erodes his military authority and he does not abuse his rank by ordering about his fellow officers, Bœldieu establishes his clout by remaining aloof and formal. Rauffenstein is in this respect his opposite. As commandant of Wintersborn, he uses his authority almost to the point of absurdity. Perhaps more importantly, both men are aristocrats; they are members of the highest ranking social class, and their class-related mannerisms constantly place them both apart from and above the other characters. As career officers, the very meaning of their lives is derived from violence and conflict. Equally, their attitudes toward women are almost misogynistic: females are fetishized in their memory, objects recalled with the same attitude as a nightclub or a riding horse.

Their use of this authority is what most differentiates Bœldieu and Rauffenstein. The former sacrifices himself for what he perceives to be a greater good, the perpetuation of his society through the carrying out of a sworn duty. This sacrifice is mediated by two points. First there is Bœldieu’s off-handed attitude towards escape: “A golf course is for playing golf. A tennis court is for tennis. A prison is to be escaped.” In this light, his daring diversion at Wintersborn can be construed as just so much sport. He risks (and loses) his life with the same conviction as he would ride a horse or go hunting on the family grounds. Secondly, there is the idea that it really isn’t his society anymore: he freely admits that the time of the aristocracy has passed. Isn’t that too bad? “Maybe.” It is conceivable that Bœldieu’s sacrifice is not purely a selfless act but the only way he can imagine giving his out-dated life meaning. This father-figure is sacrificed as much for himself as to make way for the new blood – a new blood that will nevertheless carry on many of his values.
Le père indigne is usually the antagonist and in Wintersborn this is clearly Rauffenstein’s role. Interestingly, the struggle here is not nominally of a sexual nature. Unlike in Le Jour se lève, the dispute is not over a woman. Rather it is over freedom, and thematically over a certain social ideology: the concept that the parole d’honneur of a certain Maréchal and Rosenthal are of equal value to that of the aristocrats. Rauffenstein’s role is therefore to portray the authoritarian and nationalistic Other, the paradigm opposed by the fraternal and international Maréchal / Rosenthal / Elsa grouping. Again a mark of the profound ambiguity of La Grande Illusion, Rauffenstein’s defeat is given a tragic tone. After killing “la seule fleur de la fortresse,” he is alone and useless. The film’s efforts to create some kind sympathy between him and the audience lead us to feel, just a little bit, that maybe it is too bad that the aristocracy must die.

Les filles

The presence of father figures in the “incestuous” paradigm presupposes the existence of daughter figures – somewhat problematic with a nearly all-male cast. In the absence of real women, the prisoners in Hallbach make their own. Radically, they become them, cross-dressing for the vaudeville. This flexibility of identity is crucial to Renoir’s intervention. If he wishes to champion a more dynamic society, what could be more dynamic than the ability to change one’s gender?

However, the transformation is only cosmetic. The arrival of women’s clothes in Hallbach grants the characters an opportunity to demonstrate their attitudes towards women, which are not far removed from those of the aristocrats. Like Fifi from Maxim’s, women are fetishized, mainly through clothing. The prisoners rifle through the costumes with equal parts sexual hunger and religious respect. Rosenthal caresses a silken dress, saying, “These things
should be handled with care. With your eyes closed.” The remark is telling: women are delicate
creatures, unknowable, unseeable.

When women – even the proxy woman, Maisonneuve – are visible, their primary role is
the object of the desiring male gaze. When Maisonneuve first appears in drag, there is a
disturbed and disturbing silence from the rest of the men. The moment is captured in a long, slow
pan across the faces of practically drooling men. Matras’s camera goes “prowling” again, but not
to create a sense of fraternity; this time it fixes upon a very particular prey. This relegation to a
role of little more than eye-candy is emphasized in the vaudeville scene as the English “girls”
doff their wigs to sing. Women have no meaningful role in this society: defiance and war, power
and politics, remain the unique purview of men.

Moreover, despite the powerful impact of Maisonneuve’s appearance in drag, gender
confusion is hotly refused. Upon their arrival at Wintersborn, Rauffenstein reads aloud the
various escape attempts of his new wards.

RAUFFENSTEIN: Maréchal […] disguised as a woman… That is amusing! His
mouth twitches ironically. Very amusing!51

MARÉCHAL: Yes, but what was less amusing, sir, was that an NCO really took me
for a woman… and I don’t fancy that at all!

RAUFFENSTEIN ironically: Really?

MARÉCHAL: Right! Absolutely right! (Grand Illusion 59)

Gabin’s delivery is smug and ironic, and Rauffenstein doesn’t really care – he spends the rest of
his time pointedly ignoring Maréchal. But the undertone is serious: Maréchal clings tenaciously
to his gender identity as a heterosexual male.

51 In French, “C’est drôle, c’est très drôle.” Drôle: the remark is the same as Maisonneuve, who can only repeat the
term while nearly skewered with forbidden lust by his comrades. Cross-dressing, like Bakhtin’s carnival, induces a
strange kind of laughter.
Disruption and Resolution

Because cross-dressing has an affinity with Bakhtinian carnival, it fails to address more fundamental questions. Roles themselves maybe reversible – indeed, the prison camp enables, even necessitates, their reversibility and malleability – but the power relations between those roles remain unchallenged.\(^{52}\) Cross-dressing for the vaudeville is more than an ideological expression. Narratively, it is an important psychic safety-valve for the prisoners. Trapped in an all-male setting where homosexual relations are not even considered (and thus tacitly disparaged or even condemned), the prisoners must at least have the chance to lust after imaginary women. Cross-dressing is both symptom and momentary balm for the psychic disruption caused by closeting heterosexual men away from women, by denying them the full expression of their sexuality which is so closely tied to their gender identity.

For the men’s perceived gender roles must include women – women who are not equal partners but objects of desire, marginalization and even subservience. To correct the psychic imbalance imposed by the prison camps, Renoir offers just this kind of woman: Elsa. Maréchal’s desire for the German war-widow is apparent from their first encounter, but a more emblematic scene happens a little later. The escaped officer performs some morning chores, hauling hay, feeding the cow, chopping wood – “men’s work.” He returns to the farmhouse and finds Elsa doing “women’s work”: on her hands and knees scrubbing the floor. His desire is so great that he can only stand there and ogle her and Elsa eventually becomes uncomfortably aware of his gaze. She stands, straightens her clothes and tosses her rag in a bucket. The camera tilts to follow her, mirroring and maintaining the Frenchman’s lustful stare. When Elsa asks for more water, Rosenthal translates, but Maréchal doesn’t need an interpreter. Though it may be true that “free

\(^{52}\) In the scene above, Maréchal’s tenacious defense “serves here perhaps to balance, though emphatically not to eliminate, the gender ambiguities of the concert party scene, thereby preparing the way for the heterosexual couple that provides, tentatively, one of the film's narrative resolutions” (Reader 58).
from relations of domination and subjugation, international communication can develop” (O'Shaughnessy 128), Maréchal’s willingness to understand has an additional cause: his libido. Indeed, though he talks to Rosenthal during most of the scene, his eyes never leave Elsa.

Some critics, especially Serceau, have disparaged the farmhouse romance as artificially tacked on the end. However, “far from being extraneous, [it] is the sequence the most crucial to the ideological value of the entire film” (Faulkner 89). Faulkner emphasizes how the relationship highlights international understanding in a way that is more positive and humanistic than the Bœldieu/Rauffenstein coupling, but within the frame of gender, this observation takes on new meaning. The sequence is a determining one, and not just for its positive social modeling but rather for its narrative role: the resolution and dénouement of the film’s action. It resolves imprisonment with escape, communicative barriers with good will towards understanding and sexual frustration with (hetero)sexual fulfillment. The gender identities problematized by the prison camp – with all their implicit socio-political ramifications – are balmed with a return to a model of society where men are men (that is, physically strong, sexually aggressive and the dominant pole of the binary) and women are women (physically weak, the object of sexual desire and domestically, socially and politically subservient.)

Ultimately, perhaps gender issues are the best example of the ambiguity that permeates La Grande Illusion and the paradox that drives it. Despite a desire to reshape society, Renoir falls back onto traditional power relations: the domination/subjugation binary inherent in the film’s portrayal of gender undermines its challenge to the traditional social hierarchy. This idea, in turn, further justifies the assertions of several people (including Sorlin, Faulkner, Serceau and even Renoir himself) that La Grande Illusion serves as a kind of snapshot of its time, an indirect but meaningful reflection of its society of production. It also hints at a possible weakness of the
Popular Front ideologies in general: its progressive socio-economic policies were largely reactionary and merely posed old answers in a new form to the same old questions. A vision of a horizontally organized society remains utopian because it just shuffles the cards and does not address the inequities inherent in any binary power relation.

**Conclusion**

The motivating paradox of *La Grande Illusion* is thus: in striving for new social categories that are more inclusive and egalitarian, one remains constrained by the need to differentiate. In the place of old divisions, new ones inevitably arise. In order to resolve this paradox, the film offers… sex, of all things, a highly ambiguous gesture: an international and polyglot relationship that remains a traditional heterosexual coupling that is as much *evasion* as *entente* and ultimately reinstates a traditional, patriarchal social model.

Despite harkening to a “more civilized age,” *La Grande Illusion* is too grounded and resonant with its own present to be considered a purely “historical film.” Rather, history and war are used as an excuse to talk about other things. This might initially appear as a travesty, a work that would marginalize the experience of war veterans and the historical concerns of authenticity. Yet, when Jay Winter asked a number of Great War veterans what film most represented their experience, the response was unanimous: *La Grande Illusion* (“Matrix of Memory” 857). The poetic allegory and intimate psychology of Renoir’s film carry more weight, signify and represent more richly than either documentaries or grandiose epic battles. War in film, therefore, plays more than the role of historical reconstruction or vector of collective memory. It can also be turned away from the past towards the present and even the future, the brass frame of a magnifying glass that scrutinizes its own society of production, and the camera obscura that projects hopeful if utopian images ahead of us.
Les Visiteurs du soir: Dreaming the Occupation

Nothing is more revealing of an epoch than the choice and style of its escapism.
- André Bazin, “On Realism”

Meet the new boss, same as the old boss
- The Who, “Won’t Get Fooled Again”

Les Visiteurs du soir may be the most hotly-debated film in French cinema. The flagship of a veritable renaissance in the industry, made under the shadow of foreign occupation, Carné and Prévert’s 1942 epic is surely a powerful expression of… what? Critical examination has raised several hypotheses. Is it a story of moral resistance against an authoritarian regime or the emblem of a new fascistic trend? Is it an allegory at all, or just a sumptuous celebration of the cinematic medium?

It is not without trepidation that I venture into the contentious arena of interpreting Les Visiteurs du soir. The difficultly of this task is that although it is a product of its time, its contemporary reflections are indirect. Its society of production shapes the film negatively, pushes and rubs against it, leaves only indentations and obliquely shapes seemingly unrelated parts. Previous allegorical approaches have tended to apply a binary frame of reference: resistance vs. fascism. Instead, I think that the film carries out an ingenious dual critique of both the torpid corruption of pre-Débâcle society and the violent authoritarianism of the German occupation. An ambivalent representation of resistance further complicates the matter.

Les Visiteurs du soir is a subtle allegory of its society of production, criticizing the injustices and deficiencies of both pre- and post-Débâcle regimes. One of its most difficult aspects is that the possible alternatives it provides are highly ambivalent – there are no clear winners in this mythical conflict of Good and Evil. The present study justifies an allegorical

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53 Others, especially Truffaut and Sadoul, staunchly deny any allegorical meaning.
approach by establishing the associative nature of the film in two steps. I examine first its intradiegetic associations through the themes of song, symbolic objects and animals. This abundance of connections between elements of the text itself leads us to seek extradiegetic linkages, which is accomplished primarily by its hypertextual nature and specifically its status as a medieval film. I demonstrate the specificity of Les Visiteurs as a critical allegory of invasion, capitulation and occupation primarily through the prism of gender, as a torpid patriarchy succumbs to the animated and violent power of the Devil. Resistance to this new regime, embodied by Anne, is not courageous, as Truffaut would seem to want it, but ambivalent.

**Intradiegetic Associations**

“The entire screenplay of Les Visiteurs is colored by [a] rhythmical, atmospheric interlace” (Levy 105). It contains a plethora of meaningful connections between its own elements, an analysis of which establishes its extraordinarily associative nature, a trait that leads the spectator not only to draw connections within the diegesis itself, but to continue that activity beyond the bounds of the camera frame.

The most concrete example of intradiegetic connection is the power of the Devil to narrate Gilles’s discovery and capture.54 This defiance of cinematic convention – that is better to show than to tell – reveals the unique creativity of Carné and especially Prévert. As the Devil says, the story is banal. Additionally, this manner of representing the events maintains the Devil’s monopoly on energy – refusing Hughes and Renaud any expression of violence or

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54 “Une jeune fille doit épouser un jeune homme… mais elle en aime un autre… l’histoire est banale! Il la rejoint dans sa chambre, mais il y est surpris… Quelle tristesse! Ils sont surpris tous les deux!… Que se passé-t-il? Le galant est frappé au visage, meurtri… livré aux hommes d’armes… On le pousse dans l’escalier… Il trébuche… il tombe… il se relève… pour tomber de encore sous les coups… Il fait un geste… Toutes les têtes se tournent en direction de… la porte. Elle s’ouvre à deux battants et GILLES enchaîné, violemment poussé de l’extérieur, vient s’abattre au milieu de la pièce, le visage ensanglanté” (Prévert 63).
animation that might help to recuperate their lassitude. I will return to this idea later, but for the moment, this scene’s importance is primarily as an example of how actions and speech in one part of the film often have a relation to another.

Unlike conventional musical films, songs in Les Visiteurs du soir not only function to advance the plot, but they often prefigure narrative events and also relate to the themes of distance and dreams. Gilles’s first song, “Démons et merveilles” is equally hypnotic and liberating for Anne, capturing her attention and desire while also freeing her from the gilded cage of her engagement to Renaud and the domination of her father the Baron.

Démons et merveilles,
Vents et marées,
Au loin déjà la mer s’est retirée.

Et toi,
Comme une algue doucement caressée par le vent,
Dans les sables du lit, tu remues en rêvant.

Démons et merveilles,
Vents et marées,
Au loin déjà la mer s’est retirée.

Mais dans tes yeux entr’ouverts,
Deux petites vagues sont restées.

Démons et merveilles,
Vents et marées
Deux petites vagues pour me noyer. (Prévert 27)

Note the heavy use of repetition, not only of the eponymous phrase, but of the sound [e]. This reiteration is mirrored by the song’s simple recurring melody, reminiscent of a lullaby – or a spell. Gilles hypnotizes Anne by combining the song with his incessant gaze. But the tune also empowers and liberates her, for the woman of this song may be caught in a dream like the tide, but the power of the ocean waves is also inside her, a power to drown, a power both beautiful and fierce. However, neither of these effects is derived from the good will of Gilles. His aims are
properly demonic as he seeks to woo Anne magically, which entails not only dominating her will, but prying her from the grip of her patriarchal cadre.

This song of love, transformation and freedom is parodied later that evening by the roundelay of the dwarves, whose off-key chant reminds Gilles of his satanic obligations and taunt him with a love that is as deceptive as it is impossible.

Elle est couchée  
Elle dort, … elle rêve…  
Et dans son rêve elle est à vous

Il faut la faire attendre  
Plus elle attendra,  
Plus elle vous aimerà.  
Plus elle vous aimerà,  
Plus elle souffrirà… (Prévert 62)

The awkward cadence of the dwarves’ songs is a manner of characterization, emphasizing their monstrosity through crude rhythm and rhyme. Casting Anne as the dreamer in “Démons et merveilles” is revealed to be less prophetic than scripted – everything, in effect, is going to plan, as much as Gilles reveals his melancholic disgust for it.

The troubadour’s final song, “Tristes enfants perdus,” is more dirge than ballad. Gilles becomes genuinely prophetic when he sings for the executioner rather than the lord of the castle:

Le Diable nous emporte  
Sournoisement avec lui.  
Le Diable nous emporte  
Loin de nos belles amies.  
Notre jeunesse est morte,  
Et nos amours aussi... (Prévert 140)

Repetition remains, but only in so much as it identifies this text as a song. The repeated sounds here are more important as the [e] sound of “Démons et merveilles” gives way to harsher consonants and a plaintive [i]. This difference is countered by a connection with the first ballad, the idea of distance, a common theme throughout the film’s dialogue: ocean currents sway,
remove, drown and hypnotize. Outsiders to the castle come “de si loin.” Distance is emphasized even when it is not physical: the choreography of the ball is a series of defensive postures. As Renaud and Anne move stiffly through each pose, the point is not to woo but to ward.

A second theme full of associations is that of symbolic objects, especially les gages d’amour. In the garden courtship scene that interrupts the ball, Gilles gives Anne a necklace, the size of whose rings evoke chains – mental (even libidinous) chains with which Gilles seeks to capture Anne, and the physical chains in which he himself will be captured later. The themes of distance and freedom here find a counterbalance in proximity and imprisonment. This is an ironic turn of events: supposedly the character enchained, Anne is freed by the awakening of her love for Gilles and he, the supposed “chainer,” is entrapped by his complicity in the Devil’s designs. Dominique’s gift to Renaud is a magnificent ring – almost grotesque in its size – that bears the monogram “D.” The ambiguity of the initial is an important sign of characterization for Dominique; is the “D” her own, or literally the mark of the Devil/le Diable? The ring becomes symbolic of the different relations between Satan and his envoys. Gilles becomes ensnared in his own devices of deception; the chains he bears are as equally tools and cage. Dominique is the duplicitous and willing standard bearer of her master; her impish character is awash in sexual, moral and semantic ambiguity. She comes to seduce the Baron not in a distinctly feminine dress, but in her minstrel’s outfit, in the guise of a young boy seeking asylum. Her gift to Hughes is not a physical object, but the equally false confidences of her true gender and an appeal to the Baron’s generosity to shelter her. There is a perverse gage d’amour as Dominique takes over the portrait of the Baroness, a magical tactic that reveals her immediate triumph over Hughes’s weak will.55

55 It is interesting to note that the Devil himself has no such object with which to woo or convince. He is too mercurial a character to be associated with anything purely tactile. His tools of courtship are either magical or
Like song, the role of beasts also relates to the themes of freedom and imprisonment. In one of the first scenes, a bear-trainer’s animal has been killed by the denizens of the château and is subsequently revived by Gilles.\(^{56}\) As the chain connects bear and trainer, so too is Dominique’s and Gilles’s relationship a beastly one.\(^{57}\) She characterizes it via a cat and mouse analogy with menacing glee; he sees only the absurdity of the hunt, predators tied to their mortal prey by their own short-sightedness, and tied to each other through demonic will.

Birds, the least predatory of all creatures in the bestiary of \textit{Les Visiteurs}, are also the most highly prized. Anne has a special place in her innocent heart for them; to impress her, Gilles assures that none will be killed the day of the hunt:

\begin{quote}
\textbf{ANNE:} Comme c’est triste cette chasse! … J’aime tellement les oiseaux…
\textbf{GILLES:} N’ayez aucune crainte, Anne… Je vous promets qu’aujourd’hui, aucun de ces oiseaux ne sera pris… Les oiseaux sont aussi mes amis. (Prévert 71)
\end{quote}

His connection with birds mirrors his gift for song, perhaps even his sensitive nature, but Gilles cannot protect himself. Ultimately he is enchained himself, singing a melancholy tune as would a trapped nightingale. The final bestiary image “is that of the Bird of Freedom, as the Devil finds himself promising Gilles’s liberty” (Levy 106):

\begin{quote}
\textbf{ANNE:} Vraiment… si je dis oui… il sera libre pour toujours?
\end{quote}

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\(^{56}\) The bear is notably “chained, yet liberated – an ironic preview of Gilles’s own condition much later on” (Levy 105).

\(^{57}\) Dominique practically purrs: “Tu me guettais, comme un chat guette la souris… Mais le chat trouve en face de lui un autre chat… plus de souris…” (Prévert 51).
Anne’s and Gilles’s roles are now completely reversed: she liberates him. Many kinds of reversal are common throughout the screenplay of Les Visiteurs, and each theme is itself ambivalent, the site of a paradox, if not several. For every loss there is a gain, for every victory, a defeat.

**Extradiegetic Associations**

The intradiegetic associations above may appear haphazard, yet their chaotic nature underscores the myriad interrelations that Les Visiteurs du soir establishes between its own elements. This preponderance of connectivity, interpolated with textual clues, encourages the spectator to look outside the camera frame for further associations. The strongest hypertextual affinity is with the medieval theme of amour de lointaine. The connections of the Anne/Gilles relationship with the ideals of courtly romance invest the film with a strong and affirming French romantic tradition; it shapes one of the principal tensions of the narrative. However, the distance inherent to this affinity is an ambivalent theme.

“Maintes genz cuident qu’en songe / N’ait se fable non et mençonge” (de Lorris 42).

Thus begins one of the most famous of all French medieval romances, Le Roman de la rose:

“Many are those who believe that in dreams there is nothing but fables and lies.” This central theme of the Roman is equally important to Les Visiteurs du soir: dreams, lies and their interchangeability. With the gradual slowing of the ball, dreaming – that meaning-rich but logic-poor activity of the human psyche – is first evoked visually. The court is put to sleep and desire overcomes propriety, the demonic id slipping past the paralyzed super-ego. In the garden, Anne’s

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58 “At once an echo of the amorous quest […] and an ominous hint of Hell” (Levy 106).
declaration of love to Gilles is couched precisely in terms of dreaming. Afterwards, both Anne and Renaud are still visibly under the Orphic spell:

RENAUD: Vous paraissez bien songeuse, Anne!

ANNE: Et vous, Renaud, vous paraissez bien rêveur!… (Prévert 45)

In the psychoanalytic tradition dreams are a glimpse at the inner truth of the psyche, but the malefic intent of this dream-like state imposed by Gilles and Dominique attaches it to the theme of lies. Indeed, the very enchantment with which the envoys ensnare their prey is revealed to be all that much trickery. When Gilles first intones, “Dès que je vous ai vue j’ai compris pourquoi j’étais venu de si loin et j’ai remercié le Ciel de m’avoir conduit jusqu’à vous…” (36), it seems an expression of love right from the medieval traditions of courtly romance. Yet when Dominique makes the exact same declaration to Renaud, we are made aware of just how false it is: a script, a spell even. When Anne spies Dominique and Renaud together, Gilles goes so far as to highlight the deceptive nature of men: “Ne soyez pas surprise… la plupart des hommes sont ainsi… des belles paroles… des grandes paroles… et des plaisirs secrets,” and of women: “Mais vous faites de même, vous qui promenez dans la nuit…” (42). Dreams and lies coexist, feeding off of each other, much as they do in *Le Roman de la rose*, as each subsequent scene and, later, discourse, places its predecessor in doubt, the product of a dream or logical fallacy.

A final affinity of *Les Visiteurs* with the medieval tradition is that of gardens and forests. Gardens are traditionally the space of civilization and safety while forests are savage places of danger. This concept is turned on its head in *Les Visiteurs du soir*, as the carefully manicured garden becomes a place of infidelity and conflict while the fountain in the forest glade is a place

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59 “Et même si en ce moment je rêvais, je ne voudrais plus jamais me réveiller” (Prévert 40).

60 Dreams are not entirely negative. Anne’s (erotic) dreams about Gilles invigorate her and protect against the trickery of Devil. When he appears in the guise of Gilles, Anne, bolstered by the positive force of her dreaming, sees through the ruse.
of peace, protection and endurance. The château garden is more than a locale of temptation and infidelity; it is here, too, that the Devil induces Hughes and Renaud to duel, a fatal choice for both men. This symbol of control and protection is revealed to be a mere façade, more Roman coliseum than French garden. The forest glade, on the other hand, is a place of calm and assurance. The water is cool and fresh and the light is brilliant (as compared to the nighttime seduction and the generally darker hues of any scene in the château). It is in the forest that Gilles magically protects birds from the hunt and where Anne offers him water to affirm her dedicated love. Violence must be imported into the forest glade as the Devil projects the fatal duel upon the fountain waters. His own violent will is impotent here: Anne does not submit to his wishes, and he is forced to transmute the lovers into a lasting image of their emotional bond. In a place where traditionally danger lurks, safety and endurance reign.

Four Little Middle Ages

With good reason, many scholars have commented upon the medieval setting of *Les Visiteurs du soir*. For Sims, it is nationalistic and traditionalist. Turk would not disagree, but focuses more upon on a milieu unrestrained psychic space and desire. A healthy number of articles have made interesting investigations of *Les Visiteurs* as a medieval film *per se*, almost uniquely focusing upon Prévert’s and Laroche’s script. The consensus seems to be that though it could hardly be considered a historical reconstruction, its affinities with medieval literature are important. Yet each of these studies speaks of the Middle Ages as through it were a single, unequivocal idea. Even a brief survey of approaches reveals this to be untrue: Sims’s nationalism is Gasiglia-Laster’s hidden date; Levy sees traditional medieval themes used to express Republican values; Turk’s psychic space is a dichotomy of wilderness and civilization for Lemonnier.
In order to reconcile these various interpretations, it behooves us to ask “which Middle Ages are we dreaming?” This is the question at the heart of Umberto Eco’s essay “The Return of the Middle Ages,” and an important one to pose, for he believes that “all the problems of the Western world emerged in the Middle Ages” (64). This claim is somewhat hyperbolic – certainly we have developed more problems since 1000 A.D. – but Eco’s point is simple: the medieval era was the infancy of the Western world, and our fascination with it, our continual return thereto, is an important aspect of artistic expression in the modern world. From Shakespeare to Hugo, *Les Visiteurs du soir* to *Star Wars*, our culture has been marked with a “permanent rediscovery of the Middle ages” (67). However, we have not always been rediscovering the same thing; each return is a reinvention as we invest new needs into the representations of our infancy. In order to explore this phenomenon, Eco creates a brief typology of “Ten Little Middle Ages.”

Out of this catalog, there are four kinds of Eco’s “Little Middle Ages” that apply to *Les Visiteurs du soir*: two of them directly and the others in a more roundabout way. First, there are the Middle Ages as *pretext*, which applies to *Les Visiteurs* in at least two ways. A medieval setting was conceived as precisely a manner in which to make a film with as little censorship

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61 “Modern languages, merchant cities, capitalistic economy (along with banks, checks and prime rate) are inventions of the medieval society. In the Middle Ages we witness the rise of modern armies, of the modern concept of the national state, as well as the idea of a supernatural federation […] the struggle between the poor and the rich, the concept of heresy or ideological deviation, even our contemporary notion of love as a devastating unhappy happiness” (Eco 64).

62 The most important of these, for Eco, is a Middle Ages of “philological reconstruction” (Eco 70). This is a critical idea of the Middle Ages, though not free of association with pop culture, one that is doubting and devoid of “sublimity” (71). These are the Middle Ages of *The Return of Martin Guerre* or *The Name of the Rose* and clearly not those of *Les Visiteurs du soir*, which Carné designates as “flamboyant” (Rouleau 43).

63 In this category, there “no real interest in the historical background; the Middle ages are taken as a sort of mythological stage on which to place contemporary characters” (Eco 68).
interference as possible. But for Prévert’s and Carné’s predilections, the project could have been set in ancient Rome or the heart of the Black Forest, or as in *La Nuit fantastique*, a magical version of Paris. The pretext for a making a film, but also the pretext for talking about things that were… “*Streng Verboten:*” questioning the role of love in society, defying traditional mores concerning family and gender roles, criticizing all manner of socio-political power structures that are unjust and authoritarian.

Secondly, there are the Middle Ages of national identity. The relationship of *Les Visiteurs du soir* with this notion is perhaps not as simple as it may at first appear. Though the film tapped into the public imagination with its escapism, with the pomp and grandeur of its scenery, even a cursory glance reveals that there is nothing utopian about the white château. Its pristine bleached exterior is undermined by the fact that it is as empty of vigor as a blank piece of paper. The subtle genius of the film’s critiques is a pretext within a pretext: notions of national identity, paragons of tradition pushed beyond their traditional barriers, reveal hidden weaknesses (Hughes’s enslavement to Dominique) and unsuspected strengths (Anne’s resistance of the Devil’s will).

Two more “little Middle Ages” may apply, though not as directly as those of pretext and national identity. The third notion is the Middle Ages as a barbaric age, which resounds most strongly with Turk’s analysis: the setting and story are those where desire (especially forbidden desire) is placed in the foreground. In the ambivalence inherent to this type of Middle Ages, Eco sees a grave peril: “These ages are Dark par excellence […] With only slight distortion, one

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64 “Afin d'éviter dans la mesure du possible la censure de Vichy, il pensait que nous aurions intérêt à nous réfugier dans le passé; nous pourrions ainsi joui d'une plus grande liberté” (Carné 137).

65 In which “the medieval model was taken as a political utopia, a celebration of past grandeur, to be opposed to the miseries of national enslavement and foreign domination” (Eco 70).

66 The setting of this kind of Middle Ages is “a land of elementary and outlaw feelings” (Eco 69)
is asked to celebrate, on this earth of virile, brute force, the glories of a new Aryanism. It is a shaggy medievalism, and the shaggier its heroes, the more profoundly ideological its superficial naïveté” (69). One could easily imagine Les Visiteurs du soir, with its Manichean clash of Good and Evil, its knights and duels, its hunts and passion, falling into such a trap. Yet, there are several elements at work to prevent this. The first is the considered pacing of the film, its deliberate constraint and elegance. The second is Anne, whose feminine strength opposes the “virile, brute force” of both Renaud and the Devil. Finally, even for escapism – if it is such a film – Les Visiteurs is too careful and considered a work to be thought of as “superficial” or “naïve.”.

The final Middles Age is that “of so-called tradition, or of occult philosophy” (Eco 71). It is the emphasis on magic and the supernatural that brings us to this area, and connects us to still others. In a way, the relationship of Les Visiteurs to this concept is similar to that of “national identities.” That is to say, we can see an ironic, even hyperbolic affinity. Carné’s film does not, in the end, embrace holistic signification, despite its allegorical nature. Those who prefer magic to science, tradition to progress, those who express a monolithic and exclusionary ideology, are precisely those who are in turn denied success of any kind. The evil in which the Devil takes so much pleasure is defied by Anne’s pure but not naïve love. The sorrow that Hughes attempts to drown, the domination of women that Renaud attempts to impose – both meet equally negative ends. In this light, Les Visiteurs opposes capricious and egotistical power with selfless virtue – but it arrives at neither complete truth nor justice.

67 “Antiscientific by definition, these Middle Ages keep going under the banner of the mystical wedding of the micro- and macrocosm, and as a result they convince their adepts that everything is the same as anything else and that the whole world is born to convey, in any of its aspects and events, the same Message” (Eco 71).
Meta-cinematic Metaphors

The final set of extradiegetic associations is with the nature of cinema itself, fully extricating *Les Visiteurs* from the medieval period and connecting its meaning making with the modern era. The first can be found in the frozen ball scene. Here, Gilles and Dominique transform themselves from spectators into directors (Golopentia 337). The slowing of the action is such that many first-time viewers actually thought that there was a projection error. The Devil’s envoys do more than control the tempo of what they are watching, but change the blocking, direct the acting, and eventually restart the film. Like a film director, they are able to step outside the cinematic illusion and alter its course. Diegetically, this is proof of their magical prowess; extradiegetically, it illustrates the power of human will and the malleability of the cinematic medium.

*Les Visiteurs* also has a metaphoric producer and projectionist: the Devil. Like a producer, the Devil is involved not so much in the daily decision and execution of the film/seduction plot, but in its larger organization and impetus. Like a producer, he interferes only in cases where the director is doing a poor job. Thinking of the Devil as a producer might be a bit of dark humor, but it is also a comment on the nature of power in general – the more important figures pull strings from behind the scenes and use agents to execute their will rather than involve themselves directly. (Let us think of Goebbels and Laval.) The Devil’s role as a projectionist is more concretely portrayed, as he uses the water of the forest fountain to project the duel between Hughes and Renaud. It is at this point that *Les Visiteurs* becomes fully meta-cinematic, a projection within a projection, and this turn of events induces the audience to become aware of the artificial nature of the film itself. Just as the Devil relates a moving image upon a two-dimensional surface, watched by Anne and Gilles, so too does some unknown agent in a booth behind the audience project the same kind of thing. The Devil’s intentions are bitterly cruel – Anne can see that her father survives, but must witness the murder of another human
The intentions of the actual projectionist are probably not so malefic, but how can we know? At least we are aware of him now.

The Devil’s tricks lead us to a third-order meta-cinematic metaphor that may actually prepare the audience to be receptive to those above: special effects. For, as Bazin points out, their effectiveness is ironically based upon cinema’s ontological force (“Film Techniques” 42): they are so special, so seemingly magical, precisely because film creates such a powerful impression of reality. Bazin derives proof of this from poorly executed special effects, which are jarring, and whose violation of natural laws, even of the convention of perspective, shocks us out of the illusion created by moving images on the screen. Special effects in Les Visiteurs range from a simple manipulation of film speed to grandiose dissolves and superimpositions, each time indicating the supernatural powers of the Devil and his envoys. Yet, for the critical spectator, they are also instances in which the cinematic medium breaks from its realistic conventions and reveals its power to represent the impossible, thus tipping its hand as an artificial representation reliant upon signs outside of itself.

The Third Republic: Illness, Insularism and Torpor

The extradiegetic associations analyzed above move Les Visiteurs du soir beyond the stage of an intricately crafted film. They make meaningful connections with other texts and literary traditions, connections that are often ambivalent and sometimes ironic. The medieval setting itself opens the film to an array of associations that ties it less to a historical setting and more to its own society of production. These criteria establishe Les Visiteurs as an allegorical film, but they do not complete the task of illustrating just what it allegorizes.

Identifying Les Visiteurs du soir as a critical allegory of its society of production lies within a study of gender. From the previous decade, the ideology of gender roles changed
sharply in Vichy France. However, this shift was more evolution than revolution as those in power chose to emphasize aspects of older ideas rather than impose radically new ones. Burch and Sellier’s work, introduced earlier, is of particular use in demonstrating the difference and continuity of gender ideologies in France during the 1930s and 40s.

One new aspect seen on the theater screen was the *patriarcat malade* or the “ill patriarchy.” Whereas films of the 30s tended to portray men in positions of power, and most importantly how their authority was maintained, patriarchal characters in films made during the Occupation were more often frail figures of ridicule. These erstwhile bastions of strength, reason and moral order were reduced to tottering fools, their power usurped by a younger generation – a mostly female one. Given the masculinist and authoritarian nature of the Vichy regime, this new trend may seem paradoxical. The resolution of this apparent contradiction lies in Vichy’s aims to see the “National Revolution” succeed upon the ruins of the Third Republic. The Vichy ideal was of a young, healthy, earth bound generation of tradition and moral order, a paradigm in which women played an integral – if severely delimited – role. To see this new ideal come to fruition, it was profitable, even necessary, to see the previous regime characterized as weak, old and infirm.

Hughes and Renaud are two sides of the same coin, an old coin whose time has passed and whose power, anchored in outdated ideas, wanes. To better understand the inherent critique in the Baron Hughes, it is helpful to see how the Vichy government placed itself in opposition to the former leadership of the Third Republic. The propaganda image below is an excellent example:
Figure 5: Vichy Propaganda

The simple, bold call at the top is important: “FRANÇAIS!” reinforces the national identity of the addressee – the French remain French despite a devastating invasion, defeat and occupation. The very nature of the typesetting is not only bold, but fortified, a dark band insulating the word and the idea behind it. The text below is a list of negative adjectives that attack notions of defeatism while they implicitly accuse the former regime of selling out, betraying and abandoning its people. The final line of text is smaller than that of the initial call, but has a similar typesetting: bold, fortified and entirely in capital letters. Starkly masculine in form, the first and last lines stand in sharp opposition to the effeminate text in the center. Indeed, it is not a reassurance/accusation, but an imperative. The figure of Pétain constitutes a full third of the image. His dress, position and gestures all project solid authority. First of all, this is obviously...

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Note that it does not say “FRANCE!” – geographically and governmentally, the old France is gone.
the Maréchal Pétain, clean-cut and experienced, a war hero whose familiarity and strength are meant to be comforting. The outfit characterizes Pétain as a serious figure, educated and upper-class, but the unbuttoned suit coat indicates that he is also a man of action and not as insular or selfish as to refrain from doing what is necessary – perhaps getting to the affairs that lie before him on the desk. His hands may be the most important element, the left one closed in a fist of firm authority, and the right pointing at the addressee, communicating his intentions to remain connected the French people.

Baron Hughes is in many respects the negative of this image. His clothing places him in the traditional role of authority, but a romantic notion thereof, a relic of a bygone age. When he sits, it is never at a desk of papers, but at a banquet table (to feast while the film audience starves) or at a game of chess (to play at a game at which the Devil bests him in a single move). Hughes constantly slouches and his gestures are limpid. His orders are never forceful, his speech never energizing. He has no connection with the people outside the court, much less outside the château. Insular and weak, he is the one that sells out, betrays and abandons his people for a phantom of destructive lust. Like Hughes, Renaud also lacks any meaningful, much less positive, connection with the common people. Indeed, he is even more insular than the Baron, but the weakness of this knight lies primarily in his machismo. Whereas his future father-in-law mopes and pines, Renaud is hyper-virile – to the point where his own ego guides him to take the sly dare of Dominique not to wear his chainmail. His hubris, like the official faith in the Maginot Line, is a fatal flaw.

This frailty extends beyond Hughes and Renaud to the court that surrounds them, which is hedonist, insular and predisposed to subservience. Like the egotistical aristocrats of Renoir’s *La Règle du jeu*, the nobles at court do nothing but feast lavishy, hunt with murderous intent,
and play frivolous games. They do nothing, in effect, but follow the model of their leaders, no matter who those leaders might be. For, in the absence of Hughes or Renaud, they laugh along with Satan himself—without really knowing why.\textsuperscript{69} The Devil knows, and his accusation is biting: they laugh at the sorrow and pain of others. It’s only human, he may say, but we can be assured that no one in French theaters in 1942 was laughing at the pain caused by their erstwhile leaders, the sorrow of privation and occupation.

The final key to understanding \textit{Les Visiteurs} as a critique of pre-Débâcle society is its deliberate torpor. Turk ties the film’s tempo to the backwards military thinking that led to France’s defeat in 1940, but I believe that one can push the parallel beyond purely military thinking and apply the sense of near-immobility to a critique of greater scope.\textsuperscript{70} It is here that \textit{Les Visiteurs} lends itself to the pictoralism that characterizes many Occupation-era films.\textsuperscript{71} This characteristic plays a dual role in Carné and Prévert’s movie. First, it fascinates the viewer, bedazzles him with spectacle, with representations of pomp and grandeur of which the cinema is uniquely capable. Yet this hypnosis is not ultimately beneficent. Rather, it reveals a focus on the shape of things, the materialism and shallowness of the château’s inhabitants. For, as we have seen, it is not only Hughes and Renaud who are caught up in the torpor and insularism of the film, but the court at large, the figures of all of French society’s elite. Things move slowly,

\textsuperscript{69} “LE VISITEUR: …Peut-être vous avez ri simplement parce qu’il faut bien rire un peu de temps en temps… pour se distraire!… Mais aussi sans doute, vous avez ri aussi parce que vous pressentez qu’il va se passer ici des choses d’une grande tristesse… Hélas! Les meilleurs d’entre nous se réjouissent du malheur des autres… que voulez-vous? C’est humain! Mais vous n’auriez pas osé rire si je n’avais pas ri le premier…” (Prévert 109)

\textsuperscript{70} Turk uses Marcel Bloch’s novel \textit{Strange Defeat} to draw a striking parallel between the slowness of the French officer corps in 1940 and the “closed-film esthetics in \textit{Les Visiteurs du soir}” (204). Clinging to “their memories of 1918 and the lessons about Napoleon learned in military school,” the French military leaders were caught completely unprepared for the modern, mechanized swiftness of the German blitzkrieg (204). Military ideology is thus made manifest in Carné’s almost obsessive attention to detail, compositional balance and slow pacing.

\textsuperscript{71} “These films subordinate text, characterization and other narrative elements to the composition of the images, generally composition of a highly stylized kind” (Ehrlich 97).
magnificently, with a sense of grandeur and balance achieved only by a focus inwards that ultimately leaves the society of the château vulnerable to the Devil’s swift, laughing invasion.

**Occupation: Violence, Duplicity and Indignation**

The physical and ideological torpor of the château contrasts sharply with the animated, deceptive violence of the Devil and his envoys who “displace and relocate themselves at miraculous speed” (Turk 202). Indeed, the Devil’s arrival not only ignites the final third of the film, but can easily be interpreted as a representation of *Blitzkrieg*. It has always struck me as odd that previous studies have made so little of this sequence. Does its over-the-top manner seem just too obvious and heavy-handed? Let us look at it more closely. Gilles declares his love to Anne, swearing “personne – vous m’entendez, ‘personne’ – ne pourra m’empêcher de vous aimer” (Prévert 96). At that precise moment, there is a brilliant flash of lightning and the deafening roar of thunder. The lightning crash is a tactile shock to the spectator. The camera cuts from Anne’s chamber to a long shot of the château. A bolt of lightning arcs from the clouds and sets a tree in the foreground ablaze. Another bolt of lightning illuminates the entire frame creating a flash cut to the dire silhouette of a rider in black. Inside the château, the members of the court are doing what they always do: playing games. A simple game of bowling inhabits the lower left of the frame. In time with a roll of thunder, pins fall. The reference here to *Blitzkrieg* seems almost too obvious.

Commenting insouciantly about the odd change in the weather, some noblemen continue their games of dice. Hughes and Renaud play chess. A page announces the arrival of a traveler caught in the storm and seeking shelter. Baron Hughes greets the visitor, who succeeds in saying a great deal while revealing nothing. After parading down the great hall – a victorious march into Paris if there ever was one – he arrives at the game of chess that Hughes and Renaud have been playing. Renaud is losing, even worse: “J’étais battu d’avance,” he says off-handedly. Nonsense
– the Devil moves a single piece: “échec et mat” (Prévert 100). The old order is beaten and the place of the heir usurped.

This is the key scene of Les Visiteurs du soir, the linch-pin for both plot and interpretation. Violence, physical, psychological and magical, is the new name of the game. From here to the end, the film accelerates and Berry’s animated Mephistopheles is – strangely enough – a welcome presence for the spectator, injecting movement into the languor that has characterized the movie up to now. Of course, such animation reveals a possible cause for the previous delicate torpor: the order of the château is an extremely fragile thing. Acceleration devolves into chaos and fragmentation in the Devil’s wake. Gilles is caught in Anne’s chamber and imprisoned. Hughes and Renaud are incited to duel for Dominique’s affections. The excitement that the Devil conjures about him is tempered by its malefic intent: the point of a tournament is the death of one combatant; the aim of a seduction is equally fatal; the Devil turns flowers into serpents, water into blood and lovers into stone. Whereas Hughes’s reign was characterized by endurance, tradition and a suffocating sense of control on many levels, under the Devil’s sway, the world moves from defeatism to nihilism in a lightning-fast swoop.

Connected to this animated destruction is a slippery manner of signification. The Devil’s speech is ambiguous in the strictest sense: there are often two meanings to what he says, meanings to which the spectator is made privy by knowing looks from Dominique or Gilles. The Father of Lies lives up to his name, but with a modern twist – everything he says has some truth to it. “J’ai horreur qu’on me désobéisse” (Prévert 106): a very general statement, one father to another, on the subject of children. Yet the Devil talks quite liberally through the entire scene

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72 This welcome nature of such an obviously nefarious force may also provide some insight into the seductive power of the occupying forces and fascism in general.

73 Gasigilia-Laster argues that the order of château has already crumbled and that the Devil comes to establish order!
about Gilles without ever naming him, down to the point of narrating his very capture. His
promise to Anne that “il n’arrivera rien de fâcheux à votre père” (121) is an appropriate half-
truth: Hughes survives the tournament, yet loses himself to the chase of Dominique. Gilles’s
freedom has a double price, Anne’s servitude and the minstrel’s memory.

The idea of the *patriarcat malade* would trouble the simple binary of mortal-
positive/demonic-negative. Under the single lens of a critique of male authority, the Devil would
be placed alongside those he so easily defeats. Yet his role is different: there is nothing ill or
even frail about Berry’s robust and animated Mephistopheles. However, there certainly is
something indignant about him faced with Anne’s defiance. Highlighting a continuity with the
films and styles of the 1930s, Jules Berry still embodies the idea of *le père indigne*: the primary
antagonist of a film’s hero (or in this case, heroine). The Devil’s relationship with Anne is not
too different from Valentin’s with François in *Le Jour se lève* (1939). His desire for her
notwithstanding, they inhabit diametric poles of morality and character, related more by a
common connection to Gilles than anything else.

Yet, the simple switch of the protagonist from a man to a woman makes all the
difference. The entire landscape shifts when the desired female becomes the Agent. Rather than a
smirking Arletty or Françoise who can only watch and faint in the crowd, Anne is empowered.
She asserts the right to gaze at and desire the man who pleases her; she denies the shaming
power of traditional mores; she is as smart as Satan himself, and her sense of self-confidence
gives her the unique power to withstand his will – to a point. Even more than the flawed pair of
Hughes/Renaud, Anne is characterized in opposition to the Devil – and she is imbued with those
characteristics that Vichy sought to instill: women as intelligent guardians of a moral order, as
responsible citizens, and as productive, obedient mothers and daughters. Carné and Prévert
leverage this dichotomous idealization against itself in Anne, pushing intelligence and morality to the point of disobedience, even of open defiance – the danger of which the film does not fail to highlight.

The Possibility and Problems of Resistance

Anne is certainly our résistante, but it doesn’t get her very far. For all of her intelligence and moral fortitude, the film functions only to reintegrate her in its system of ambivalent reversals. She gains Gilles’s freedom, but loses his memory; she regains his love, but they both lose their freedom to Satan’s ire. That their loving hearts nonetheless beat on, that this drives the Devil to an explosive tantrum, seems a poor recompense – certainly not the aim of most active résistants during the Occupation. Nonetheless, perhaps we are already pushing Les Visiteurs as far as we may dare. Its profoundly associative nature creates intradiegetic linkages that spill out of the frame to esthetic and even historiographic meditations. By extension, it leads the spectator to draw critical parallels between its fantastic setting and the nefarious forces at work in its society of production. Though it maintains an allegorical remove, this is already an audacious project for an Occupation-era production. The furthest extent of its critical program is not to see resistance successfully carried out, but merely to suggest its possibility.

In this light, perhaps it is more beneficial to characterize Anne in contrast not with the Devil, but with Les Visiteurs’s resident collaborationist: the executioner. This character is a man of violence who doesn’t think critically but only cares that he can inflict pain upon others. Who is in power, and how that power is employed, is immaterial to him, so long as he can gratify his own selfish desires. Anne is just the opposite: her critical sense of selflessness forces her outward in a caring manner. Injustice and suffering actually cause her physical pain and her capacity for sacrifice is unparalleled. However, sacrifice is all that Carné and Prévert seem to offer. A path
out of the château’s shadow-filled garden of duplicity is nowhere to be found, and this lack of
direction seems to reflect larger trends in the cinema of the era.\textsuperscript{74} A reflection of popular
restlessness, many French films of the 1930s and 40s are ill at ease with the problems they see
about them, but can only grope about in the shadows of ideological conflict for a resolution.

\textsuperscript{74} “Entre 1936 et 1946, les films ne reconduisent qu’apparemment les valeurs admises; sans jamais le formuler
explicitement, ils en dénoncent l’inadéquation aux réalités sociales. Les Français ne se voient plus tels qu’ils sont,
mais ne savent pas ce qu’ils deviennent” (Lagny 97).
Chapter 3 Conclusion

If in 1919 Gance posits that traditional stories and forms are no longer sufficient and sets out to create a new language to describe war, then *La Grande Illusion* and *Les Visiteurs du soir* answer his challenge and continue his project. More comfortable with the tools proper to the cinema, they are works in search of a new mythology. In various ways, war is hidden in their stories, often tangential to the primary level of signification.

The strategy of allegory places both of these movies squarely in the category of *films sur la guerre* and thus renders them less direct historical investigations and more vivid snapshots of their respective societies of production. While we may glean some ideas about World War I from Renoir’s 1936 masterpiece, *La Grande Illusion* is much more illustrative of France during the heyday of the Popular Front: a society of contentious and destructive divisions along class lines. *Les Visiteurs du soir* tells us nothing, really, about its supposedly historical setting of 1492; but by reading it allegorically, we may learn a great deal about the conflicts of the Occupation.

It may not be surprising that Carné and Prévert create an extended metaphor, since they are so renowned for their social commentaries of the 1930s like *Le Jour se lève* (1939) or *Hôtel du nord* (1938). However, this trope continues to resonate profoundly with audiences in 1942. Though not everyone may have agreed about the meaning of *Les Visiteurs* (it was hotly debated), the fact that French spectators responded so strongly to it is remarkable. By extension, we arrive at a certain quandary. The need for allegory during the censorship of the Occupation is justifiable – but why is this strategy so popular with audiences of the 1930s? It would seem that in times of crisis and conflict, the French cinema and its spectators have learned Gance’s lesson: they express their discontent by placing it at a remove, by adjusting the paradigm on one level and crafting new stories for themselves in order to reevaluate the present situation.
While we may most fruitfully read allegories as documents of social history, *La Grande Illusion* and *Les Visiteurs du soir* can still teach us something about the past. Veterans of the Great War hold Renoir’s film in high regard; they perceive an unparalleled authenticity in its tone and its message. The movie’s discretion certainly plays a role, eschewing the carnage of the trenches for the day-to-day struggles of prisoners of war. Moreover, like *J’Accuse*, it acknowledges a profound transformation in French society. *Les Visiteurs* presents a challenge, for it is a pure allegory, as are all legends. Nonetheless, it carries important lessons about the German Occupation. A daring move for a film made in 1942, it squarely points the finger of blame for the Débâcle at France herself. Vichyites could spin this message as proof of the torpid corruption of the Third Republic, but what Carné and Prévert really indict is a more widespread insular apathy. Through the breach opened by this indifference steps the Devil himself, and with this figure the filmmakers demonstrate that the misuse of power is easy – and destructive.

Another idea ahead of its time is their illustration of resistance. Contrary to popular myths that would arise after the Liberation, Carné and Prévert are lucid about the fact that resistance to power is difficult, and almost always has personal rather than ideologically or abstract motivations.

If the films examined in Chapter 2 stray from the conventional definition of the war film, here in Chapter 3 we seem to have completely lost our way. Allegorical movies involving war are per force *films sur la guerre* and therefore we might venture that war films, oddly enough, do not have to concern themselves with war. As in *La Grande Illusion*, they can be about social conflict contemporary to a movie’s creation; or as in *Les Visiteurs*, they can use one fight to talk about a different one. If a film is not necessarily about armed conflict, or if a work whose subject is such an event but it does not really treat it, does the term “war film” still apply? It does when
war remains an identifiable and important part of the message, whether as subject or context. When the forms of a movie and the ideologies they express still inevitably lead to ruminations about a specific, real conflict, we are talking about a war film. The richest of these works can function in both directions. *La Grande Illusion* manages to comment meaningfully on both the Great War and its society of production. *Les Visiteurs du soir* provides unusual insight into French society during World War II and leads to meditations on political power that remain relevant today. Indeed, allegory, with its inherent abstraction, ambiguity and even misdirection, is vital to this dual function.

Although both *La Grande Illusion* and *Les Visiteurs* work to disrupt a simple notion of Us versus Them, they ultimately fall prey to Manichean divisions. Renoir’s work actually has two bifurcations: the robust working class replaces the hollow, decaying aristocracy and the “naturally” stronger masculine dominates the “naturally” weaker feminine. The divisions in *Les Visiteurs* are even more profoundly mythic. Yet in the confrontation between Anne and the Devil, Carné and Prévert highlight what Renoir may ignore: the fatal outcome of binary thinking for all involved. Alas, this fatality is not something the French readily learned from either film or other experiences of the Occupation. Instead, the next twenty-five years see a sometimes willful return to divisions even simpler than those we may divine from *La Grande Illusion*. As Rousso has demonstrated, French society tells itself myths of nationalistic heroism and resistance to balm the difficult (and often self-inflicted) wounds of 1940-44. Though these myths are shaped both by their content and their elisions, the following chapter seeks to investigate how form plays a crucial role in the transmission and perpetuation of myths – myths that extend beyond Resistancialism to affect even such an anti-hegemonic work as *The Battle of Algiers*. 
Chapter 4: Myth

Show me a liar and I will show you a thief.
- George Herbert, *Jacula Pendentum*

Myth is more potent than history.
- Robert Fulghum

The subject films of this chapter, Clément’s 1946 *La Bataille du rail* and Pontecorvo’s 1966 *The Battle of Algiers* may initially seem separated by a vast gulf of differences. The former is a celebratory epic of the railway workers’ resistance during the Occupation; directed by a Frenchmen and produced by a patchwork of French organizations, it was received by a tsunami of critical and popular acclaim and remains a cherished work by French critics even today. The latter depicts a much more shadowy chapter of French history, a pivotal moment in the Algerian War. *Algiers* was co-produced by an Algerian (Yacef Saadi) and an Italian company, was directed by an Italian and received a chilly, even violent reception on French screens – when it finally arrived, five years after its initial release.

Yet, what relates them transcends this chasm. For different reasons, each film partakes in a documentary-like esthetic and eschews the Western convention of an individual protagonist for a collective one. These two common elements are key to their status as Barthecean myths. The figure below illustrates the function of this semiologic process: by replicating the arbitrary process of the Sausurrean sign (Level 1), the myth elides the human will behind the mythic concept, naturalizing the meaning within mythic signification (Level A).
Based upon the binary Sausurrean sign, Barthes elaborates a meaning-making process wherein a second-order signifier, the “mythic signifier,” is added to a pre-existing sign, resulting in mythic “signification.” The process, however, is neither transparent nor simply additive. In fact, the form steals meaning from the original sign, camouflaging it with new sense and erasing itself by appearing to be a natural, arbitrary part of the signification process. Both *La Bataille du rail* and *The Battle of Algiers* function in this manner, constructing a strong impression of realism that works to elide their artificial nature. The result is that a fiction that communicates a specific ideology (all French citizens were Resistant; third-world independence is inevitable), is couched in naturalized terms, rendering these ideologies implicit, almost invisible, beneath a mask of striking naturalism.
La Bataille du rail: “the mythic film of the Resistance”

The resistance of the German Armies was undoubtedly prolonged in this fashion, but in the end the persistence of our troops had its natural effect.

- Douglas Haig

If you've wrecked one train, you've wrecked them all.

- Charles Samuel Addams

It is interesting to consider La Bataille du rail in the light of critical opinion concerning Les Visiteurs du soir. In 1944, André Bazin laments that Les Visiteurs is too specific, predicting that it “will surely age” (French 72), a sentiment French film historian Jacques Siclier echoes nearly forty years later. In contrast, Bazin heralds Clément’s film as one finally “worthy of its subject” (122), praising in particular the director’s “artistic honesty. René Clément has treated a great subject with an intellectual modesty, a tact, and a simplicity that command esteem and straightaway provoke warm support” (125). Siclier’s comments are again an echo. While Carné and Prévert’s highly stylized effort, one that carefully avoids direct contact with its society of production, is too particular, Clément’s documentary-like film, engaged in an effort to represent its own time authentically, is an enduring statement. Les Visiteurs is sure to age and fade; La Bataille du rail is just as certain to resound throughout cinematic history.

My own reaction to each film is nearly the direct opposite. For this American spectator more than sixty years later, the intelligence and technical virtuosity of Les Visiteurs du soir is infinitely more expressive than the renascent realism of La Bataille du rail. More than just dated, the latter is uninspired, unfocused and despite a laudable will towards authenticity, a display of


76 “L’événement que fut Les Visiteurs du soir est, à bien des égards, incompréhensible hors de l’époque où il s’est produit. Le mythe qu’il représente n’a cessé de se dégrader” (Pétain 144).

77 “La maîtrise technique, la rigueur de style de Clément et son sens de la progression dramatique font que le film, témoin à son tour d’une époque, n’a pas vieilli” (Cinéma 24).
mere technical competence. Yet, in 1946 it was a resounding success beyond the expectations even of its distributors; and it continues to command the admiration of French film scholars. In light of these facts, we may ask: why is this film so popular? What about its subject, and more importantly its treatment of that subject, resounds so powerfully with a French audience?

Recently scholars have considered *La Bataille du rail* as a marker of a shift in French attitudes towards their own identity after the Liberation. Philip Watts posits that it was seen as the flagship of “a new classicism” (215). This return to a set of esthetics is much more than formal nostalgia. Just as French cinema during the Occupation sometimes evoked the fantasy of Méliès, now it conjures different symbols of past French glory in order to project them onto the screen and into the future.\(^78\) Moreover, this “renaissance” of realism and classic sensibilities was in direct reaction to the stylized excess considered to be characteristic of the Occupation era: “French cinema associates a rhetoric that foregrounds performance and excess with moral turpitude and the perceived sobriety of cinematic realism with virtue” (222).\(^79\) There is even more at play here than the possible association of esthetics, morality and national identity. *La Bataille du rail* offered a different kind of escape to a French audience, especially one of 1946: “it also made possible a *post hoc* identification with the Resistance – precisely because of its documentary look which privileged no particular railway worker. The French could all become Resistance fighters with hindsight” (Hayward 190). By espousing a subtly nationalist esthetic and providing a soothing balm to a troubled French conscience, *La Bataille du rail* struck a major chord with the French audiences of 1946.

\(^78\) To “evoke rhetorical simplicity, to praise a film for its sobriety is also to draw upon a discourse of stoicism, virtue, righteousness and national identity” (Watts 215-16).

\(^79\) Writing shortly after the Liberation, Bazin calls for a rebirth of realism on the screen. Occupation cinema was about escapism, about forgetting or avoiding the question of French identity. “The public wanted the screen to be its window and not its mirror. The result was this paradoxical phenomenon: the social art par excellence – the one that drew together the greatest number of people, the most realistic art in terms of its means of expression – is the one to least express contemporary French society” (*French* 98).
Clément’s first feature film began as a documentary, cooperatively funded by the largely communist Resistance network *Résistance-Fer*, the SNCF and the *Commission Militaire*, to celebrate the achievements of French railway workers during the Occupation. Clément was tapped to direct the project not for his resistance experience (of which he had little to none), but rather for his previous short works, especially the documentary *Ceux du rail*, and their exemplary technique. The initial screening in May of 1945 was so well received that the budget was expanded in order to transform Clément’s documentary into a full-length fictional feature film. These are two of the most important points about the making of *La Bataille du rail*: an evolutionary creation and the diverse sources of its funding. These forces pull the film in different directions and interact in surprising ways. At the time of its premier, much praise centered upon Clément’s virtuoso technique. Critics lauded *La Bataille du rail* for a visual sophistication rivaling that of Hollywood. This style privileged the cinematographic image above all else: “René Clément a eu le mérite de comprendre […] qu’au cinéma, l’image doit emporter sur la parole et que celle-ci ne doit intervenir que pour expliquer ce qui sera incompréhensible sans elle” (Dumas 71).\(^8\) It was, then, as much the film’s form as its patriotic content to which critics responded.

I believe that this is the key to understanding the success of Clément’s first feature-length venture. Though audiences at the time may not have developed a critical habit of film-watching, they were not easily duped: a formally perfect film void of content would have undoubtedly been a *navet*. Ironically enough, it is not so much what is present in the film as what is *absent*. The characters of *La Bataille du rail* are collective and barely sketched: they are identifiable as types and audiences are quickly led to give them either their allegiance (in the case of the French

\(^{8}\) Nonetheless there are a number of instances where *La Bataille du rail* makes use of very straight-forward verbal exposition, notably the voice-over towards the beginning of the film, and the maquis leader’s explanation of the Apfelkern convoy.
characters) or enmity (for the Germans). There is more at work here than simplification (a common trait of nearly any historical reconstruction). Rather, it is notable how much discourse surrounding *La Bataille du rail* makes use of the term “myth” – both positively and as a subtle pejorative. The film carries out a semiotic process that marries form with a self-effacing ideology to create a Barthesian myth, namely that all of France during the German Occupation was engaged in some form of resistance. More specifically, let us consider *La Bataille du rail* as a hybrid film: one which combines two formal strategies, the first being a collective and documentary approach and a second, more personalized and conventional style that elides the former under a guise of historic authenticity (cf. Lindeperg and Langy).

**A Will Towards Authenticity**

Though it is relatively easy to divide *La Bataille du rail* into two narrative sections, its visual style is more difficult to dissect, since some documentary-like cinematography is present in the second section while at the same time there are obvious fictional flourishes in the first. The result of this admixture is an insidious blurring of the lines between (quasi) objective reporting and fully fictional invention.

The documentary roots of the project imbue *La Bataille du rail* with a will towards authenticity, a will that is largely fulfilled by an eye to detail, location shooting and the inclusion of non-professional actors, many of whom were active members of the Résistance-Fer organization. There are many details that are not only quite accurate, but authentically representative of the variety of resistance activities during the Occupation. Most Resistance cells were initially born out of pre-existing labor unions or political parties – the resistance activities of the railway workers of the Chalon-sur-Saône region are among the most well known. Clandestine publications played a very important role in the Resistance, spreading propaganda
and creating a subculture of Resistance sympathizers who in turn rendered many forms of resistance possible in the first place. In *La Bataille du rail*, this aspect of life during the Occupation is understated, but the careful passing of what is undoubtedly some kind of journal is given center stage for just long enough to be of symbolic importance. Also, resistance activities were highly diverse: smuggling mail and/or people, clandestine publication, the gathering and relaying of military intelligence, sabotage and even guerilla warfare. Though cells tended to specialize, the railways did play a central role in many of these activities since it was almost uniquely on a train that one could pass the demarcation line. Clément’s film does an admirable job of displaying each and every kind of activity. Moreover, because each of these tasks is completed by a different person, the idea that a single Resistance organization would successfully undertake them all is not part of the myth espoused by this film.

However, the guise of documentary objectivity and its primary placement in the narrative lends ontological and historical weight to even wholly fictive sequences and images. The opening itself demonstrates the film’s divided loyalties between historic authenticity and film spectacle:

*La musique prend un ton plus nostalgique, puis un texte défile du bas du cadre vers le haut, en lettres majuscules, comme suit*) EN JUIN 1940, / BRISANT L’UNITÉ DU PAYS / SÉPARANT LES FAMILLES, / BLOQUANT DERRIÈRE LA / LIGNE DE DÉMARcation / L’OUTILLAGE ET LE RAVATILEMENT / LES ALLEMANDS COUPENT / LA FRANCE EN DEUX : D’UN CÔTÉ LA ZONE / OCCUPÉE, DE L’AUTRE / LA ZONE PRÉTENDUE LIBRE / ENTRE CE DEUX ZONES / UN LIEN ENCORE SOLIDE / MAIS QUE L’ENNEMI / CONTRÔLE ÉTROITEMENT / (en plus
grosses lettres) **LES CHEMINS DE FER** / (en plus petites lettres) **LA FRANCE DOIT / MAINTENIR À TOUT PRIX / SON UNITÉ INTÉRIEURE / ET SES RELATIONS / AVEC L’EXTÉRIEUR. / IL FAUT QUE LA BARRIÈRE / DRESSÉE PAR L’ENNÉMI / SOIT FRANCHIE / PAR LE COURRIER / COMME PAR LES HOMMES / LES CHEMINS DE FER / S’Y EMPLOIENT. / ET, PEU À PEU, SOUS LA / TERREUR, AU COURS D’UNE / LUTTE DE QUATRE ANS / ILS FORGENT UNE ARME / REDOUTABLE. / LE JOUR DU DÉBARQUEMENT / ELLE CONTRIBUTERA / À LA DÉSORGANISATION / DES TRANSPORTS, / À LA DEFAITE ALLEMANDE / DANS LA BATAILLE DE LA / (en plus grosses lettres) **LIBÉRATION.**

(Clément 7-8)

Already we encounter an introduction that owes more to epic historical films than to documentary reconstructions. While the text ostensibly recounts a series of historical facts, the use of capital letters and a symphonic, “nostalgic” score set a mood of fanfare and epic action. The typography emphasizes “the railways,” and “liberation,” subtly relating the two terms in a causal manner. The lexicon is full of hyperbolic, almost superlative, expressions that immediately inform the viewer of this film’s allegiance. Nonetheless, such introductory tactic could be set aside with relative ease. After all, despite its accompanying fanfare, it is primarily a moment to provide context and a quick summary of the film to come.

The voice-over commentary of the first part is more indicative of the authority that *La Bataille du rail* seeks to create via a call to authenticity. In a purely documentary film, its role would be (in a certain way) insouciant: a nameless authority explaining the images presented. This is precisely what the commentary does at the beginning, introducing us to a “mécanique
extrêmement précise” (Clément 12), the inner workings of the train station, the jargon and technical functioning of train inspection and traffic surveillance and control. Yet, the parti pris of this commentary quickly becomes evident: “Les cheminots, on le voit, veillaient sur les TCO avec une sollicitude toute particulière… et ne négligeaient rien pour infliger des retards considérables. Toujours avec la plus grande discrétion” (12-13). A little later: “Les Allemands utilisent pour numéroter leurs trains… des codes indéchiffrables que les cheminots… ne tardent pas à déchiffrer” (14). This ironic mode clearly demonstrates the allegiance of the film and contributes to an identification of the spectator with the French railway workers, all of whom, it seems, engage constantly if discreetly in small moments of resistance. As the camera pans about the control room, various Frenchmen diligently working at their respective desks and posts, the commentary goes so far as to beg the question: “En un mot… entre les rouages de cette mécanique précise de dispatching, les cheminots introduisent des cailloux… qui font grincer la machine. Elle ne tourne plus rond. Elle résiste. Cette résistance, qui en fait ?… ici, qui en est ?… nous allons le savoir. Moi, je n’ai plus rien à vous expliquer” (14).81 The implication is fairly clear: everyone is part of the resistance here, from the station manager to the dispatcher to the maintenance workers – even, as we shall study more carefully later, la machine, the train itself.

There are two more aspects of this sequence to highlight. Firstly, the voice-over commentary is ostensibly a disembodied voice of authority. It has no diegetic source and can thus make a certain claim to an omniscient kind of objectivity. However, it is interesting to note that the commentary is subtly associated with a character, the station manager whose nom de guerre is “Athos.” The commentary begins with our first sight of Athos and follows him into the

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81 However, the voice commentary does have more to say. It returns to explain the role of the radio, not in the functioning of the railway system, but rather its integral part in the transmission of coded communiqués from London.
control room; it ends when he leaves. Though we are probably not listening to Athos’s thoughts, the script and the editing nonetheless place these two elements of authority in relation to one another. The revelation, in the very next scene, of the station manager as a Resistance fighter further allies their sensibilities.

The second aspect of the control room sequence is a rare moment of poetry that may or may not be intentional on Clément’s part. To explain the regulation of train traffic, the voice-over brings our attention to

([…] *une grande feuille de papier, les lignes horizontales tracées dessus*) Ce graphique établit par avance le parcours de tous les trains prévus. (*Panoramique rapide vers le bas à droite*) Ça c’est la théorie. (*L’opérateur, de profil gauche en plan poitrine serré, traces des lignes à la règle sur une grande feuille de papier posée devant lui*) La réalité ? […] C’est cet autre graphique où l’opérateur trace au fur et à mesure de leur passage […] la marche des trains tels qu’ils circulent réellement sur le réseau. (Clément 13)

This brief moment has a clear narrative role: preparing the spectator for its use later in the film and demonstrating how the railway workers could use it to interfere with the traffic of German trains. The “real” graphic becomes not only a symbol resistance but, in the final scene, a concrete image of the French retaking complete control of their own railway system. However, in a Barthesian sense, this moment of dual representation is equally a symbol of how *La Bataille du rail* works as a whole: there is the planned, advertised path (an authentic historical reconstruction) and then there is what’s really going on (an partisan manipulation of history).
Characterization

La Bataille du rail engages in a very different kind of characterization and psychology than American films of its kind. Instead of an individual superhero protagonist motivated by personal love (let us think of Casablanca or even The Train), the hero here is a collective motivated by a moral priority (cf. Heil). On one hand, this difference from more traditional characterization would seem to be an important step towards authenticity and realism. It demonstrates that the fate of the French Resistance lay not in the hands of a small collection of misfit supermen, but in the cooperative efforts of everyday individuals. Here, we remain close to historic fact. However, characterization seems to work not by combinative synergy, but rather by reduction, establishing just enough information for the spectator to recognize a character, but also leaving enough of a lacuna to place himself in the role of a Resistance member.82

As the narrative develops, Resistance membership stretches credulity. The voice-over commentary discussed above initially establishes the common cause of nearly every railway worker, from the simple maintenance men to the station head himself. Much later, amid the Apfelkern debacle, Athos/Roussel meets with a chief engineer, whose authority we can infer from both his impeccable business suit and the deference of others.

**INGENIEUR:** […] Voilà plus de 15 jours que ça dure, ça tient du tour de force!

M. ROUSSEL: Vous savez que mon travail au PC ne me permet guère que de constater aussi.

**INGENIEUR:** Ça tient du tour de force! C’est d’ailleurs l’opinion de mon ami Castenet. Il m’a chargé de vous féliciter d’avoir si activement constaté.

Plan poitrine de M. Roussel qui sourit.

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82 “Clément’s documentary-like approach means that few characters are clearly delineated, while the idea and practice of resistance is elevated to the status of a kind of nationalist fugue” (Danks, “Border Crossings”).
Thus, the Chief Engineer and his comrades are also Resistance members. Even those not part of a given cell are sympathizers, demonstrated by the aid easily procured from the station chief of Saint-André and the elderly Jules and Victor. Collaboration with the Germans is almost categorically impossible. The very notion is given only a single line of dialogue, as Carmargue recruits a mechanic, Lampin, to help derail the Apfelkern convoy. Vichy is nonexistent. Effectively, members of the Resistance are everywhere in the railway system. Yet none of them – apart from perhaps Athos, Carmargue and the Saint-André station chief, Leroux – are well defined, and what definition exists is entirely positive.

This is in binary opposition to the characterization of the Germans, who can be described by combinations of pejoratives: incompetent, brute or sloth. Even in the first part of *La Bataille du rail*, instantly recognizable silhouettes depict the Germans: the officers’ sharp dress uniforms and the iconic helmet of the common soldier. Their presence is military, violent and oppressive and their unique occupation seems to be intimidation, but the film quickly sets out to undermine this status. After a series of escalating sabotages, a German officer addresses the entire work force of the train station. The words of his speech are relatively unimportant; they are in German – the railway workers do not understand and do not really want to. Of more significance are his mannerisms: the impassioned discourse, with sharp arm motions, is delivered from a German office in a full dress uniform from a height – all of which powerfully summons a Hitlerian image. The juxtaposition of this speech with the dispassionate, even defiant stare of the workers

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gives the sequence a sense of irony, even of caricature. Nonetheless, the threats are not empty: further sabotage results in the arrest and execution of ten hostages. Ineffectual brutality and increasing frustration continue to characterize the German officers for the remainder of the film as they are thwarted at every turn by the quiet resistance of the Frenchmen around them. Some sequences, like the series of cranes, border on the comedic.84

Perhaps the most fully developed character in the film is not a person at all but rather the train. It dominates entire sequences, traveling un-manned through the countryside, complicit in every effort of Resistance, and even sacrificing itself for the cause. The figure of the locomotive has a long history in cinema. As the subject of some of the Lumière’s first shorts, its presence, lines and treatment form part of the basic vocabulary of the movies. It is difficult to see the train arrival at the beginning of *La Bataille du rail* without immediately thinking of several Lumière shorts with nearly identical composition (without, of course, the presence of Nazi soldiers.) The train has more than just an esthetic legacy; in features such as Gance’s *La Roue* and Renoir’s *La Bête humaine*, the train has by 1946 become a central figure, an anthropomorphized presence and carrier of complex meditations on modernization and the human condition.

It is into this legacy that Clément inscribes the train of *La Bataille du rail*, and thus we can examine the hostage execution scene not just as homage to the Soviet school and Eisensteinian montage, but also as a moment of personification. The scene is constructed by an intercalation of the hostages, shot one by one, and a series of images of the train yard. The first few train inserts include railway workers, human witnesses, who pull the train whistles as the

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84 The common German soldier receives a similar treatment, though it is even more general and collective. Never personalized, he is a brute with a rifle who leads railway workers to an unjust execution; or he fires at the attacking *maquis* from the cover of an armored train and chases them through the forest in a tank. When not killing Frenchmen, he is lazy, lying out in the sun, writing letters and playing the accordion during the many delays of the convoy. Officer or foot soldier, the rubric is Manichean: the Germans’ helmets are black hats, the French berets are white.
execution continues. Yet soon the editing dispenses with human figures, focusing on the smoke rising from the engines and the whistles themselves. Human agency is systematically elided and the act of lamentation is transferred to the now apparently autonomous trains. Just as the lions in Potemkin rise to their feet, a symbol of popular revolution, so too do the trains of Chalon-sur-Saône come to life, offering their vociferous wail in sympathy with the hostages. From this point on, the train can be seen in a new light: not just a machine, but a willing participant in the Resistance.

The German modification of the armored train is cast as something of a desecration: the transformation of a French citizen into a German soldier. As the maquis leader explains, it is merely “un train de marchandise. Enfin tu vois ce je veux dire quoi, des wagons à bestiaux,” though this one carries STO workers (hostages) and anti-tank artillery (rifles) – “tout ce qu’il faut pour se défendre” (Clément 45). This is more than modification: it is a kind of dehumanization of both the train and the hostages that she carries.

Like the two versions of the railway traffic graphics, this transformation of the train by both the film and the Germans can be read in a Barthesian sense. The train itself is a simple sign, just a machine for carrying goods and people. Its arbitrary meaning and use can be usurped by adding another dimension of signification. In the latter case above, this theft of meaning is accomplished by modifying the train physically; in the former, the transformation is accomplished by editing. Clément seems unaware of the possible parallels.

**Spectacle**

As La Bataille du rail progresses, it (d)evolves from its communist-inspired collectivity and documentary-like objectivity towards specification and what Lindeperg calls “enterprise logic” (Les Écrans 84). A handful of characters are better defined (especially Carmargue and Leroux),
and the narrative schema itself falls into a more conventional western style of heroic action. Indeed, the final twenty minutes of the film are largely occupied by two sequences that one can only classify as pure spectacle: the maquis attack on the armored train and its famous derailing. What began as a supposedly objective look of the common man’s resistance efforts is given over to the cliché of the Hollywood war film: expletive violence.

The attack on the armored train lasts for more than ten minutes, a substantial part of an eighty-six-minute movie. Yet, its two purposes are really quite simple: it provides whiz-bang action (Bazookas! Tanks! Grenades! A real fire-fight!), and it reestablishes the threat posed by the Nazi troops, a stature that most of the film has worked to undermine. For nearly half of the movie, the Occupiers have been depicted as either incompetent cogs in a despotic chain of command or lazy sunbathers. Some maquis (not railway workers) are heroically sacrificed to the German war machine to demonstrate that the soldiers are still dangerous. This is the anti-execution scene on several levels. Now the French, rather well armed, are directly and unwisely antagonizing the Germans. The train is no longer a sympathizer, but an innocent bystander at best and enemy combatant at worst. The entire sequence is almost devoid of poetry, or even tension, a purely technical exercise in pyrotechnics that fails to have any real pathos.

Most critics in 1946, and even many thereafter, praise the spectacle of the train derailment. The story – that Clément set up nearly a dozen cameras to capture the event – has become something of a legend in the history of French cinema. There is more tension here than in the attack on the armored train, since Clément looks back to the intercalation technique of the execution sequence, using the kilometer markers along the track to act as a countdown, as well as the matches failing to light the fuse of the explosives. Yet, any feeling is forced. Lampin, the mechanic, is presumably in great danger since the track will explode directly beneath the train.
The dialogue dips into clichéd sentimentality when he addresses his coworker before their departure:

**LAMPIN:** [...] J’ai oublié un pneu de vélo dans mon armoire, c’est pour ma femme.

**COMPAGNON DE LAMPIN:** Demain?! (55)

Considering the strict rationing in effect towards the end of the war in France, a bicycle tire would have been a far more significant gift than one might imagine today. Nonetheless, the dialogue, the acting and the cinematography all give only a dim flicker of heroic bravado. Lampin is able to leap from the locomotive long before it derails. The spectacle of the train flying from the tracks and tumbling down the hill repeats at least three times, each from a slightly different angle at different speeds. It does not reach the hyperbole of contemporary fetishized violence, but the spectacle itself is unfulfilling.

**Conclusion**

On many levels, *La Bataille du rail* engages in a deft cinematic slight of hand: foregrounding a documentary style of cinematography while presenting a fictional story based on true events. Plenty of movies have a similar basis; the adaptation of past fact to filmic fiction is the very nature of historical films. However, *La Bataille du rail* includes important lacunae. It simplifies the complexities of Occupied France with Manichean divisions and distorts historical fact. In 1944, when membership in the Resistance reached its peak, less than 2% of the adult French population was either actively or even potentially involved (Murriacole 98). Not only is nearly every French character an active résistant here, but the film also engages in a style of characterization that allows its audience to do more than recognize and align with the ubiquitous French Resistance: one can easily imagine himself in a similar role. Moreover, the film lacks
critical distance from both its subject and its medium. It questions neither the story that it recounts nor the historiographic limitations of film. In several places, it unreflectively represents the very process of mythification that it carries out on a public scale, the theft of meaning by form.

It is not without a certain irony, then, that we may examine some thoughts of Bazin in 1946. In an article celebrating a rebirth of “realism” in French film, he puts as much distance as possible between the films of the Occupation and those being currently produced, of which *La Bataille du rail* is a key work. Bazin is keenly aware of the cinema’s revolutionary potential, especially in those works with a realist “will to exactitude” (*French 85*). The irony is this: instead of spurring some kind of revolution, Clément’s “will to exactitude” played instead into the hands of the hegemony, forming the foundation of the Resistancialist myth. Furthermore, though it legitimized a brief flurry of war time subjects for a few years after the Liberation, its realistic style never garnered much of a following in French film.

Given the numerous agencies involved in its production and the explosive popularity of *La Bataille du rail*, I believe we can conclude that in 1946 this was a story that the French wanted to tell and be told. Its continued popularity with Francophone cinema scholars presents an intriguing problem all of its own. The Gaullist myth of Resistancialism, it would seem, never completely died and even remains alive and well in contemporary France.

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85 “Moralists should realize that the chief danger of cinema may reside in this demagogic mythology in which society believes itself represented and to which it ends by subconsciously conforming. We eventually become so accustomed to this falsification that we have trouble imagining what a revolution this will to exactitude [that modeled by *Rail*] would bring about” (Bazin, *French* 84-85).

86 An entire issue of *L’Avant-Scène du cinéma* was devoted to it as recently as 1995.

87 Books dedicated to the subject continue to appear long after Rousso’s period of the “Dominance of Resistancialism,” including Maurice Choury’s *Les Cheminots dans la bataille du rail*, 1970 and Alain Vincent’s *Les Blès rouges: la bataille du rail à Laroche-Migennes: de la résistance à La Libération*, 1996. As we shall see in Chapter 6, even Tavernier’s 2002 film *Laissez-passer* contains traces of this myth.
The Battle of Algiers: History as Camouflage

The MAS 56 is an excellent rifle, and it’s a pleasure to use the weapon of the French against them.
– FLN leader Baubaker Salem, All Saints Day, 1954

The French have a plan. It succeeds tactically but fails strategically.
– Pentagon Memo

It is impossible to be unmoved by The Battle of Algiers. Alternately horrifying and engaging, it is an unsparingly visceral experience that seeks to represent events in the city of Algiers from 1954 to 1957: the rise of the Front de la libération nationale (FLN), the escalating violence between the colonizers and colonized, the arrival of French paratroopers to police the Casbah, the general strike of 1957 and the eventual downfall of the FLN. A coda, set in 1960, depicts the successful popular uprisings that (according to the film’s logic) led to Algerian independence. Formally, there are three striking, even innovative aspects: 1) the documentary style of cinematography; 2) a collective Algerian hero, what Pontecorvo calls a “choral protagonist”; 3) a narrative dialectic that works to achieve a sense of balance between the two opposing forces without being Manichean. 88

If The Battle of Algiers is “an attempt to re-write the colonial, ‘Orientalist,’ narrative – in which the native, colonized culture is represented as depraved and violent, in need of the civilizing hand of the colonizer” (Smith 106), how successful is Pontecorvo in this task? In other words, is The Battle of Algiers as revolutionary as many seem to believe? Returning to Murray Smith: “The answer is not straightforward and cannot be captured with facile formulas of either traditional humanism or poststructuralism” (110). Yet, the film’s basic, dialectic logic relates

88 Two of these “innovations” may seem familiar, since they have a certain commonality with aspects of La Bataille du rail. However, whereas these aspects constantly problematized Clément’s film, they are uncategorically successful here.
surprisingly to Barthesian myth, and understanding it as such leads us to a greater appreciation of not only the text itself, but of historical films in general.

Since scriptwriter Franco Solinas was an active member in the Communist Party and filmmaker Pontecorvo had heavy Communist leanings, it is no surprise that this project of theirs should be inflected with a Marxist dialectical approach to history. This is evident in the plot: French oppression leads to discontent and native attacks on police stations, which leads to the Rue de Thèbes bombing, which leads to the bombing of French civilians, which leads to the intervention of the paratroopers, etc. The underpinning idea is a causal chain, one thing leading to another, the latter superseding the former in importance.

This is the point where we find a certain parallel with the idea of Barthesian myth, which is in its own way also a dialectical process. A second-level signifier is added to the first in order to create a new, third-level sign. In *The Battle of Algiers*, the documentary-like esthetic naturalizes the artificial nature of the film. Ideology is camouflaged as history. PierNico Solinas celebrates this “theft of meaning.” Pontecorvo’s didactic purpose, which leads him to deploy objective fact in order to make a subjective statement, renders *The Battle of Algiers* a groundbreaking film on several levels. However, what the present analysis endeavors to investigate is the way in which the film and the FLN, metaphorically, share both means and ends. Just as the FLN uses the French army’s own rifles against them and ultimately fail to bring about Algerian independence through force of arms, so do does Pontecorvo use the forms of Western thought against the colonialist hegemony, and so too does he ultimately fail to create as revolutionary a film as many purport it to be.

89 “The most stunning feature of the film is its ability to make a subjective statement employing objective fact. For Gillo Pontecorvo the remaking of history […] is not simply a re-creation of past events through cinéma vérité technique, or the repiecing of history for history’s sake; it is, rather, a deliberate rearrangement of chosen facts for a didactic purpose” (Solinas ix).
To highlight the paradoxes of Pontecorvo’s “dictatorship of truth,” I will begin with some background information about the making of *The Battle of Algiers* and its various receptions. The central part of this section consists of a three-part analysis that illustrates the film’s naturalized artificiality, including the (in)famous “Three Women, Three Bombs” sequence and the “ballet” of the coda. In conclusion, through a close look at French critical reception, we may derive some surprising lessons not only about French attitudes towards the Algerian War but also about what this movie can teach us concerning historical film in general.

**Background**

Pontecorvo and his partner, screenwriter Franco Solinas, originally envision a film entitled *Parà*. To star Paul Newman, it is the story of a French paratrooper, a veteran of the Indochina conflict, who finds himself in Algeria during the war. As they develop this project, they meet with two representatives of the nascent Algerian government in 1964. Salah Baazi and Yacef Saadi propose a film also about Algeria’s fight for independence, but with a script that the Italian filmmakers consider too propagandistic. They settle on a compromise: based on Saadi’s published memoirs, Pontecorvo and Solinas begin researching and writing the script for what is to become *The Battle of Algiers*.90

None of the major personages involved has ever made a secret of his ideological aims for the project. Saadi’s motivation was more than just nationalism, but also a truthful account.91

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90 A provisionary title is *Thou Shalt Deliver in Sorrow*, a biblical reference from Genesis 3:16. It is important to note that Pontecorvo and Solinas did not rely uniquely on Saadi’s memoirs, but researched the project like a documentary for an entire year, including several trips to Algeria.

91 “What we really tried to do was show the horror of the situation in its most raw state, in the most honest and frank way that we could” (Crowdus 33), a movie that “did not stint, either, on [its] depiction of terrorism committed by the FLN” (31).
Solinas had a particular view of colonialism;\textsuperscript{92} since he was a staunch member of the Communist party, it should come as no surprise that he used “Marxist procedures in preparing and writing the film. […] \textit{The Battle of Algiers} is the result of those procedures: an analysis of two conflicting forces motivated by contingent rather than idealistic terms” (Solinas 198).

Pontecorvo, having quit the Communist party by 1964, was not so rigidly Marxist in his approach, but nonetheless felt a historical mandate in the project.\textsuperscript{93} Moreover, this mandate did not spring from the specifics of the Algerian War: “What Gillo and Franco wanted to convey wasn’t simply a moment in the Algerian struggle for independence […] [They] were determined to relate, through this crucial episode, a war of independence that at the time seemed to embody for so many Third World nations a model for the course of liberation from colonialism” (Bignardi 16).\textsuperscript{94} From this confluence of interests arose a film that dedicates itself to authenticity, one whose logic is based on a Marxist dialectical understanding of history and society, as well as one that carries a universal message.

To reconcile these various aims, the film is made in a unique way. Principal photography is in the neo-realist style: on the streets of Algiers, with mostly non-professional actors, and with a very small crew, most of whom are Algerian and newcomers to the cinema industry. The most striking formal aspect of \textit{Algiers} is its innovative cinematography, a style that Pontecorvo dubs “the dictatorship of truth,” and to which many scholars and film critics refer as a “documentary-

\textsuperscript{92} “A confrontation between the human reality of a country of the third World awakening to history though sufferings, hardship, ugliness, racial and physical destruction and Europe, a race that had been able to become handsome, elegant, refined at the other’s expense” (Solinas 193).

\textsuperscript{93} “You must judge who is historically condemned and who is right. And to give the feeling that you identify with those who are right” (Mellen, “Interview” 3-4).

\textsuperscript{94} Indeed, in an interview with Edward Said, Pontecorvo states: “I was mainly interested in showing this unstoppable process of liberation, not only in Algeria, but throughout the world” (Said 24).
like esthetic.” There are a number of elements that give Algiers such a unique look, including the frequent use of a telephoto lens, misjudged focus and hand-held camerawork.

The most important technical innovation is how Pontecorvo achieves the soft, grainy tone of the image. This involves a special process, similar to the developing of television actualities and newsreel prints. The original negative, already on soft film stock, is “duped”; that is, the negative is copied directly to a second negative and in turn, this “duped” negative is the one ultimately developed. The result, according to Irene Bignardi, is “the tone of truth” (20): a soft, grainy, black and white image that closely resembles the tone of 1940s newsreels. This process was difficult to develop, but a central aspect of the film for Pontecorvo. The director was aiming not only for a universal message that spoke both about the Third World and from its point of view, but for one that could also speak to the First World, couching its message in terms with which the latter was already familiar.

These “terms” are not only visual ones, but musical as well. During post-production, Pontecorvo worked closely (and not without some friction) with composer Enrico Moriconne. Music is central to Pontecorvo’s filmmaking, an element that can become even more important than the image it scores. Algiers boasts an impressive hybrid of Western and Arabic music influences, ranging from the native Algerian baba-salem to variations on Bach’s “Passion According to Saint Matthew.”

Perhaps the most politically important innovation has nothing to do with form but rather with content, more specifically, with what Pontecorvo dubs a “choral protagonist” (Solinas 166). The use of crowds in political films has a long history, stretching back to Eisenstein, but The

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95 “The only way to win over an audience to a film so different from the ones they were used to was to impose a dictatorship of truth. That is, to give the impression of a documentary, a newsreel. This despite the fact that is was a work of fiction. So the photography you get in documentaries … the kind you have in newsreels – a grainy photography – was crucial” (Pontecorvo).
Battle of Algiers does not carry the descriptor “première grande production de l’Algérie” for naught. It prominently figures a formerly marginalized population and does so in an unconventional manner, bringing forth individual characters from time to time only to have them fade away again into the background, focusing on the collective enthusiasm rather than individual heroics. These characteristics set it apart.

Algiers’s reception is nearly as full of passion and violence as the film itself. Debuting at the 1966 Venice Film festival, it won the Golden Lion, and was considered “a work of the utmost importance” (Bignardi 21). The French delegation at the Festival, Truffaut among them, walked out on both the screening and the award ceremony. The film was officially banned in France for a year after its release, and OAS bomb threats kept it off screens until 1971 when Louis Malle and several other artists arranged for its Parisian release. Even a decade later, during a revival festival, a French theater with the movie on its marquee was fire-bombed.

International, especially American, reactions were much more positive. Algiers won the 1967 New York critic’s award for Best Foreign Film, and its innovative look prompted U.S. distributors to add a striking title to the beginning: “This film is a work of fiction. Not one image is archival footage.” Its anti-Western stance and intense impression of realism led many left-wing militant groups in America, most famously the Black Panthers, to use Algiers as a training film for urban insurrection.96 Critics, even today, focus on the film’s important innovations: a (collective) authentic Arab protagonist, the arresting documentary-like imagery, and an unusually “balanced” critique of colonial hegemony.97

96 Most screenings of this nature were utterly decontextualized, and the “main movement reading of the film went like this: ‘Don’t bother to organize,’” or, if “‘you’re going to organize, limit it to cadres. And then, once you’ve gotten the organization together, it is justifiable to plant bombs in cafés’” (Gitlin 16).

97 “It is possible to produce a narrative that undermines the myths and topoi of ‘colonialist discourse,’ if by that we mean a system of representation which upholds and justifies the colonizing culture’s actions, and this is possible
However, critics also highlight the film’s shortcomings. First among these is the fact that “Pontecorvo’s film elides many contextual factors, including the violent rise to dominance of the FLN, the triangular conflict between pieds noirs, Algerian nationalists and metropolitan France; evidence of sympathetic French collaboration with the Algerian cause; and class-related factors of the struggle” (Moore 58). A major figure of Franco-Algerian collaboration, Germaine Tillion, is the “absent presence of Gillo Pontecorvo's The Battle of Algiers” (Reid 93), whose many “ambiguous, dialogic and emotional” meetings with Yacef Saadi are an important omission (105). Yet, let us remember that this kind of condensation and/or omission of historical events and exigencies is typical of a historical reconstruction, where a sense of narrative tends to dominate the treatment of detail. For all its lacunae, Algiers still performs an important historical function as a “the door to an understanding” of the Algerian war (“Remembering”). The specifics of French reactions to the film will be developed in the conclusion of this section.

The variety of scholarly approaches to The Battle of Algiers testifies to its richness. For decades now, Joan Mellen’s Filmguide to the Battle of Algiers has been an indispensable reference and even textbook. Yet, I believe that a great deal of the work has become rather dated, surpassed by such approaches to film as those proposed by Deleuze and Rosenstone, and the superb “making-of” written by Irene Bignardi. Several scholars (Lezra, Orlando and Pears) have critically investigated the role of women in both the film and the Algerian revolution in general, analyzing the complex ways in which female identity was (sometimes violently) transformed only for the colonized” (Smith 105). This statement seems to represent a majority opinion amongst scholars and popular audiences alike.

98 Conversely, Peter Sainsbury and Ellen Dowd both argue that only a radically unconventional form of filmmaking could sufficiently critique colonialism. Though the current study shares some affinities with these critiques, Sainsbury, and especially Dowd, reject Algiers out of hand. Pontecorvo himself supplies a great response: “I believe in the contradictions of the capitalist system. I believe that a producer will make a political film, even if it is against his class sense, as long as he thinks he can make money from it” (Rubenstein 95). His aims are to engage, not to alienate, Western mainstream moviegoers as well as an Algerian audience.
when they joined the FLN. A common theme here is the lamentable failure of the revolution to bring about any real change in the status of Algerian women after independence. Valérie Orlando proposes an analysis that understands *Algiers* as “historiographic metafiction,” one that retells Algerian history in a mode whose “prevalent features are its manipulation of time and space, and use of parody,” along with a decentralized point of view and a rejection of linear, causative time (262-63). However, despite an expressed affinity for Deleuze, Orlando’s understanding of the function of the flashback is the weak point in her argument. While *Algiers* may treat time plastically, its temporal rearrangement nonetheless falls squarely in the realm of the organic regime: the flashback asserts causality rather than calling it into question.

**The Many Faces of Ali la Pointe**

![Image of Brahim Haggiag as Ali la Pointe](image)

**Figure 7: The Myth of Ali La Pointe**

This image of Brahim Haggiag as Ali la Pointe accompanies nearly every article about the 2004 re-release of *The Battle of Algiers*. It is iconic: in a dynamic pose suggested by the diagonals, Haggiag’s expression is fierce, even animalistic. His arm is drawn back, as if preparing to throw
something, akin to many images of contemporary rioters throwing Molotov cocktails or rocks. Yet, upon careful inspection, this is one of La Pointe’s few non-militant moments in the movie, as he holds back the angry mob after the Rue de Thèbes bombing. Reading the scene in the published script reveals that this is a pivotal moment for the character.

*The crowd is shouting, pushing, rushing forward with him, like a raging stream, tumultuous and unrestrainable.*

*Ali is together with his men, five boys, none of them older than twenty. All of them are armed. The crowd forces them to quicken their step to a run.*

*Petit Omar is furthest in the rear. […]*

PETIT OMAR (shouting): Kader says to stop them! He says we’ve got to stop them!

*Ali slows down as much as he can with the crowd pushing him from behind.*

ALI: Where’s Kader?

PETIT OMAR: With the others. They are trying to stop the people.

ALI: Go away.

*Their voices can hardly be heard or understood amid the loud noises.*

PETIT OMAR: But he says that if we go on like this, we’re playing their game, and they’ll murder everyone… Stop, Ali!

*Ali continues to run. His face is sullen, frowning, as always when he must choose between instinct and reason.*

*Omar calls him again. His voice is hysterical, repeating again to stop. He is hanging on one of Ali’s arms. Ali jerks himself free violently; he strikes the child. Omar sways and falls against the wall.*
With this movement, Ali seems to release his anger at not being able to carry out his actions.

He slows down, speaks to his men, a few words in Arabic, his voice cold and bitter.

Ali extends his arms and the others imitate him. Each man grabs another by the arm, forming a chain. They check the flow behind them and hold back the crowd that is pressing forward. (64-66)

Rather than an icon of revolution and colonized violence, this is a pivotal moment of both catharsis and choice: catharsis as La Pointe unleashes his instinctual anger on Petit Omar (the moment of the production still), and choice of accepting the leadership and direction of the FLN, sublimating personal will to that of the collective, or at least to the leaders of that collective.

What we have, then, is a kind of double mythification. One process happens at the filmic level, using La Pointe as a stand-in for the Algerian population that not only chooses reason over vengeful instinct but in the same action also chooses the FLN to guide that reason. The second process happens at a second level of discourse, as a single image embodies the film as a whole, an image that embeds itself in a wholly different set of associations.

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99 On the screen, all of this happens in the space of a few seconds. Indeed, without a closer look at the script, this central moment for La Pointe is nearly imperceptible. Interestingly, the scripted scene ends here, whereas on the screen, Ali and his “men” bring the crowd to halt just in time to meet Kader, who gives a short speech assuring the crowd that they will be avenged.
Figure 8: The Truth of Brahim Haggiag

This next image, a production photo from the 1973 English translation of the script, underlines the mythic nature of the first process – that is, the artificial nature of it, as Pontecorvo gives direction to Haggiag. Note how closely the actor mimics the director’s facial expression and gestures. This illumination of artifice is all the more interesting when we consider the number of analyses made of this scene, especially that of Robert Stam, who meticulously demonstrates how the form of the scene, the unstable hand-held camera work, the quick cuts, the misjudged focus and the use of zoom, provides an incredibly believable impression of cinéma vérité. But it is only an impression, for the film never leaves “la prééminence du discours, et c’est ce qui permet aujourd'hui l’éventuelle réinstrumentalisation du film par d’autres rhétoriques” (Mondzain et al. 69). The mythic signifying strategy at the core of Algiers allows for its constant re-appropriation. Form trumps content to the point that this pivotal moment has been entirely divorced from its original context and imbued with new, even more powerful meaning: an icon of anti-colonial violence. It would seem that Pontecorvo’s desire to imbue the film with a universal meaning succeeded, to a point, though the first image seems to perform a
more mundane function, namely that of advertising, a capitalist venture that Pontecorvo is happy
to exploit.

**Three Women, Three Bombs**

In retaliation for the Rue de Thèbes bombing, carried out by *pieds noirs* with help from the
colonial police, an act that killed scores of innocents in the heart of the Casbah, the FLN arranges
the bombing of three civilian locations in the *cité européenne*: the Cafétéria, the Milk Bar and
the Air France Terminal. To plant these bombs, three Algerian women (known as *fidayate* or
“fire-carriers”) disguise themselves as Europeans. This pair of sequences illustrates the skillful
use of highly conventional forms at work in *Algiers*, ones that despite their anti-colonial aim
make use of Western modes of representation (and therefore reasoning), camouflaging ideology
in a faux-naturalism of historical reconstruction.

The “make-up scene” is dominated aurally by a *baba-salem*. There is a telling anecdote
behind the role of music in this scene. Pontecorvo was never satisfied with the dialogue written
for it, so much so that he had no idea how to shoot it. On set, he had a sudden inspiration; he
rushed back to his hotel room, fetched a recording of a *baba-salem*, and played it throughout the
filming, completely replacing the dialogue. Here, a second-level sign literally replaces another,
infusing the scene with an entirely new signification. It is critical to note what the women are
doing and how they are doing it: they are camouflaging themselves. This is not military grease-
paint and desert fatigues, but they are still transforming themselves to appear otherwise than they
are to blend into the background of the environment that they are invading. This camouflage

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100 “A typical tune that Arab beggars execute with drums and castanets, a piece that closely resembles a heartbeat”
(Bignardi 18).
allows them to pass through the checkpoints surrounding the Casbah, to pick up their basket-bombs and, virtually unnoticed, place them in their assigned locations.

During much of the bomb-placement sequence, the baba-salem continues to play a major role; the women’s heartbeats, and ours, are still racing. However, music becomes more complex as the sequence develops. The baba-salem stands in sharp contrast to the jukebox music in the Milk Bar, and is overtaken – for a moment – by a lighter, actually more suspenseful motif in the Cafétéria as the bombs are about to detonate. After the thunderous explosions in the Milk Bar and the Cafétéria, an elegiac theme takes over for the baba-salem; this is the same theme played after the Rue de Thèbes bombing, making an overt connection between the innocent victims on both sides of the conflict. Music especially gives the spectator indications on how to feel.

Cinematography and editing are just as important here as the score. Pontecorvo maintains a concrete sense of space, with either the zoom back in the Air France terminal or eye-line matches during the faces montage. This montage is in itself of central importance. As Hassiba arrives at the Milk Bar, the establishing shot is with a telephoto lens, from a distance across the street. This establishes a visual continuity with the rest of the film’s documentary-like esthetic, an important integration since the following scene is a marked departure. The fidayate enters the Cafétéria, accepts a seat from a French man at the bar and orders a coke. A close-up of her face is followed by a pan as she looks over her shoulder. The editing shows us what she is looking at, accompanied by the thunderous baba-salem: a woman’s face, a child eating ice cream. The

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101 These events are very close to historical fact. Careful observers will note that the explosion of the Air France bomb in the film is not shown; historically, it failed due to a faulty wire in the timing mechanism.

102 Francesco Cavilgia states “we are not told what to feel: indeed, viewers have found support in this scene for visions of violence quite different from those held by Pontecorvo” (14). But we are told how to feel; the baba-salem and the elegiac music are powerful indications. What we are not told is what to think, how to rationally process the conflicting allegiances and alignments suggested by this scene and the movie in general.
*baba-salem* stops abruptly when the image returns to Hassiba, who looks up; another cut: a clock. The rest of the montage follows the same contrapuntal procedure: only background noise of the Cafétéria when Hassiba is shown, the *baba-salem* when we see the various faces of the clients about her or the clock, making a countdown of which only the audience and the woman are aware.

After tucking the basket discretely under the bar, Hassiba pays and leaves. The sequence moves to the Milk Bar (with the ironic jukebox song repeating “Hasta mañana!”) and the Air France terminal. A montage of faces in the Cafétéria, whose intensity crescendos, precedes the actual explosions. The clientele is engaged in conversation as the camera pans down to the hidden basket-bomb; the clock continues to tick; lighter, tenser music replaces the *baba-salem* for a series of faces, all distinctly European, smiling, talking, smoking; the child is finishing his ice cream; one face looks almost directly into the camera; the clock reappears, accompanied by a violent zoom-in; cut immediately to the street outside for the explosion that blows out the windows and sends debris flying.

This sequence leads the spectator to an ambiguous engagement. For a better understanding, I find Murray Smith’s three “levels of engagement” to be an excellent tool.\(^{103}\) In applying this matrix, there are a few questions to answer. Whom do we recognize? Everyone: the *fidayate* and their victims alike, including a small child eating ice-cream, the epitome of innocence. A more important question might be: how do we recognize them? Both sides of this violent divide look remarkably similar. The “make-up scene” allows the audience to recognize

\(^{103}\) “The first of these, recognition, concerns the way in which we individuate and identify characters – that is, perceive them as unique and distinct from other characters, and as continuous across the narrative. [...] Alignment is the second level of engagement and describes the way in which our access to the thoughts, feelings and actions of character is controlled and organized by the film [...]. By contrast, the third level of engagement, allegiance, describes an emotional reaction which arises out of the moral structuring of the film, that is, the way the film invites us to respond with regard to characters morally [...]. While alignment denotes our knowledge of a character’s actions, feelings and states of mind, allegiance refers to our evaluation of an emotional response to such actions, feelings and states of mind” (Smith 108).
the *fidayate* and understand their actions. We are thus more closely *aligned* with the Algerian women, given a privileged, even voyeuristic access to their actions and states of mind, even throughout the placement of the bombs, as their nervousness and doubt are telegraphed by their body language. This alignment is problematized by our *allegiance*, for while the previous scenes have brought us closer to the Algerian women, we still cringe at the inevitability of the bombings, at the impending death of innocent people. The ambiguity created by this conflict is not without a certain irony, for since we are so closely aligned with the *fidayate*, we share their moral uncertainty, and this further humanizes them and the Algerians in general, working to mitigate the moral revulsion of the bombings, and to gain the audience’s allegiance.

We can consider this pair of sequences, especially the latter, as a metaphor for the rest of the film. Patterns of recognition, alignment and allegiance remain largely constant, as we recognize, even appreciate the French (especially Mathieu), but we more often side with the Algerians. Music and cinematography play fundamental, often contrapuntal roles, but only rarely become obvious enough to remind us of the artificial nature of the discourse before us. Thus, what we have here is an engaged cinema camouflaged as a conventional one: a film which seeks to bridge and/or subvert traditional, Western discourse by using its own forms against it.

**Coda Ballet**

This camouflaging of ideology as history, via the illusion of documentary-like realism, is strongest in the final portion of *The Battle of Algiers*. The coda begins with a precise date:

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104 Though “the scene does generate a certain sympathy for the French, it by no means severs the sympathetic emotional allegiance formed with the Algerians. If the scene suggests a moral ambiguity, it is a moral ambiguity that the bombers themselves are presented as experiencing” (Smith 115).

105 “Superficiellement, elles semblent troubler la rhétorique dominante, elles paraissent interroger sinon l’affirmation de la nécessité de la lutte pour l’indépendance, du moins le recours à cette stratégie. Pourtant, y compris au cours de ces scènes, on est dans un régime rhétorique ; les scènes *disent* ‘il faut aussi montrer ça’ (l’humanité des victimes des attentats) pour pouvoir tenir le discours de la guerre de libération et de ses méthodes. On ne sort pas de la prééminence du discours” (Mondzain et al. 69). This is in contrast to Smith’s conclusion (114).
December 11, 1960, recalling similar such titles earlier in the film. Popular uprisings and protests in Algiers not only benefit from the film’s peculiar visual tone, but are photographed in a style that would certainly seem to justify the American disclaimer title. Stationary cameras use telephoto lenses to follow the action of various crowds, close-up work is done with hand-held cameras that, like the violent reaction to the Rue de Thèbes bombing, place the viewer directly within the tumult. A voice-over, eventually revealed to be a journalist, provides narration for the latter part of the sequence:

…it seems that the Government has issued strict orders not to use arms except in emergency situations. But this afternoon there were attempts to enter the European city by force: as a result, the first casualties… Now calm has returned, although from the Casbah continue to be heard those cries… incoherent, rhythmic, nightmarish cries…

*And then, from time to time, in the by now dark night, the shrill and angry ju-jus.*

JU-JU-JU. (Solinas 158)

The voice-over accompanies images, filmed from a distance and height, of a crowd of Algerians rushing down the streets and of the police firing upon them. Some fall where they are shot, others limp away. The sequence ends with a long-shot pan of the Casbah while the noted ululations dominate the soundtrack.

The overall impression here is squarely that of a newsreel: a precise date, off-the-cuff photography accompanied by an authoritative (if biased) narration to explain the events

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106 Though the script indicates that the journalist is English, the accent on the soundtrack would indicate otherwise. It is smoothly French, and his description of the Algerian ululations certainly represents a colonialist, perhaps even *pied noir*, stereotype of the colonized.
unfolding on screen. The content is filled with details that increase the sense of both realism and drama: huge crowds of identifiable Algerians carrying banners in French, English and Arabic, the French police in gas-masks, armed with submachine guns and using tanks to try to disperse the demonstrators.\(^{107}\) Despite this “tone of truth,” these scenes are the most choreographed of the entire film: Pontecorvo mapped the movements of the crowds to follow with chalk diagrams on the streets (Mellen, “Interview” 4).

The coda’s second section begins with another date: December 21, 1960. Smoke fills the streets. Seen from behind in a long shot, a helmeted police officer yells desperately through a bullhorn: “What do you want?” The smoke slowly clears, and the camera cuts closer to reveal a throng of Algerians emerging from the cloud. “Freedom!” they scream, waving all manner of flags and banners. “Long live Algeria!” In the foreground are two women, one of which is Zohra, the *fidayate* who placed the Air France terminal bomb. Waving an Algerian flag and dancing, she advances to clash with the police, is pushed back and dances forward again. This moment, characterized by hand-held camera work, shaky zooms and misjudged focus, is the “apotheosis” of the film’s visual esthetic (Smith 119). However, like the carefully prearranged movements of the crowd before, Pontecorvo conceived the scene as a “ballet,” even going so far as to set its filming, just like the “make-up scene,” to the *baba-salem*. Here is one of the very few moments where *Algiers* deliberately engages in abstraction and metaphor, as Zohra embodies the defiant solidarity and desire for freedom of the entire Algerian people, a metaphor that runs counter to the “dictatorship of truth,” established during the past two hours.

Pontecorvo admits as much, and his reason is illuminating: “I think it’s clear to everyone that an ending where the police push the crowd back, but these women keep coming back, is not

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\(^{107}\) Tanks that, many historians have pointed out, are Czechoslovakian, and submachine guns that are Italian: weapons purchased by the nascent Algerian government after its independence.
necessarily realistic or the truth. […] What is important is that when the audience sees this, it
doesn’t feel that there is an interruption in the stylistic continuity of the film” (Saïd 25). Form
literally trumps content yet again, the desire for stylistic cohesion overriding and over-writing the
historical authenticity of the film. Most importantly, this stylistic continuity succeeds. Rare is the
analysis that highlights this moment; indeed, it is more often Pontecorvo that brings up the
subject in interviews.

Conclusion

Yet, at what price this camouflage? Although *The Battle of Algiers* treats a taboo subject and
gives voice to the previously muted colonized, it ultimately fails to break free of the modes of
thought that it seeks to undo. As a response to the insidious nature of myth, Barthes forwards the
concept of the “artificial myth.” The process is elegant: it begins by adding a third-order,
counter-mythic signifier to mythic signification. I believe that *The Battle of Algiers* succeeds
admiringly in doing so. But an artificial myth must *also* be represented in a language that is
actively aware not only of its artificial nature, but of the creator’s ideologies that shape it. Here,*The Battle of Algiers* fails, for despite a non-linear plot, its story is still causal; despite a
revolutionary project, its form is predominantly Western; most importantly, its ideology is
naturalized by its form, sustaining the same process as previous myths, even colonial ones.

A logical, causative notion of time is the basic underpinning of Western modernist
thought, of the kind of thinking that spurred colonialism in the first place and allowed for its
post-facto justification. *Algiers* continues takes part in this mode of signification and reasoning
through its use of a flashback structure, through its carefully crafted newsreel esthetic and via
various other conventional forms analyzed below. Most importantly, this empiricist (and
imperial) mode of thought conflates form with content while hiding the human intentions behind
the construction of a discourse. Instead of attacking the forms that relate to and shape colonialist ways of thinking, Pontecorvo couches his anti-colonial argument using those same forms, changing only the content. The ideas behind this mythifying strategy remain constant, and Pontecorvo falls into the same semiotic trap as the self-effacing realism of *La Bataille du rail*. More real than reel, its ideology is hidden in bad faith beneath a veneer of historic authenticity and explosive subject matter.

Nonetheless, critiquing *The Battle of Algiers* in this manner does not undermine its importance. Indeed, it can enrich our appreciation of the film in specific and of historical reconstructions in general. For, with these “failings” in mind, we are aware that this is only one way to represent history, and the film’s innovations, including a laudable will towards authenticity, are important contributions to the cinematic medium. Furthermore, we can now understand *The Battle of Algiers* as a critique of its own sources: the limits of a dialectical understanding of history, the fatal tunnel vision of both sides of the Algerian War – and the capacity of film to represent history in a traditional manner.

Finally, what does this have to do with French identity? I have purposefully used the English title of this film rather than the French because it is problematic to identify *The Battle of Algiers* as a French film, or even as a Francophone one. *La Bataille d’Alger* may have been the Algerian release title, but its primary title is Italian: *La Battaglia di Algeri*. Its funding was Algerian and Italian, as was its production crew. Nonetheless, its presence highlights an absence of French films that directly address the Algerian war. In 1981 one French critic posits that “le film sur la guerre algérienne reste sans doute à faire” (Bosseno 53), a sentiment echoed more than 20 years later: “le ‘grand film,’ le plus complet et impartial possible, sur cette tragédie reste toujours à faire” (Langlois 86).
French reticence to accept this film was very strong at its release, and even today French critics are quick to marginalize it, skeptical of its ideological stance. Interestingly, one can see their own ideological bias in approaches to characterization. The French Colonel Mathieu is “un homme complexe, tourmenté, mandataire, loyal d’un pouvoir politique qu’il ne comprend pas toujours, chevaleresque, respectueux d’un ennemi auquel il sait rendre hommage, non dépourvu d’un certain progressisme, bouleversé de devoir, par efficacité, faire œuvre policier ou de prendre des décisions qui l’affectent” (Bosseno 52). Compare this portrait to that of Ali la Pointe: “jeune délinquant, ancien proxénète et trafiquant de drogue […] cet analphabète touché par la grâce militante” (51-52). The former is longer, sympathetic and even eloquent, whereas the Algerian hero is gifted only with “militant grace” after a long string of pejorative.

Though some Anglophone critics have drawn parallels between French attitudes towards the Algerian war and the “Vichy Syndrome,” the former may have less to do with a collective amnesia or repression than with a real lacuna. For the story of the Algerian War was carefully controlled during the conflict itself; in effect, it never sufficiently permeated the national consciousness. Unlike La Bataille du rail, The Battle of Algiers is a story that the French never wanted to tell or be told.108

108 “L’échec commercial de la quasi-totalité des films sur la guerre d’Algérie est un indice que cette histoire-là n’est pas désirable, parce que, pour la très grande majorité de nos concitoyens, elle ne leur dit rien. C’est à dire que, pour eux, elle ne leur dit rien d’eux” (Frodon, “De l’Algérie” 76).
Chapter 4 Conclusion

As *La Bataille du rail* and *The Battle of Algiers* demonstrate, cinematic mythmaking is often a matter of form that hides as much as it purports to reveal. Moreover, this effect is intensified by film’s ontological force, its seemingly undeniable link to real life that lends its prevarications (however slight) so much power. The presence of this semiological process may grant important insight into these movies as documents of social history, but at the same time it presents challenges when we attempt to use them to learn something approaching the truth about past events.

What do these films tell us about French society during the middle part of the twentieth century? In sore shape after the Liberation, the French psyche was in need of healing in 1944.109 Works such as *La Bataille du rail* did precisely that while hiding ideology in the cross-cut. The chronic uncertainty in *Les Visiteurs du soir* is answered not with judicious self-reflection but with polarizing revindication of one side over the other. Perhaps in the late 40s and early 50s this was appropriate and even necessary. Yet that against which later generations would rankle is the quasi-systematic continuation of Clément’s cinematic sleight of hand, a practice shared by many other artists and carried out for more than two decades after the dissolution of the French State. The myth of Resistance outlived the Fourth Republic and even – as we shall see in Chapter 6 – the regime of General de Gaulle.

Equally, mythmaking outgrew Resistancialism, which is not surprising when one considers that many of the basic narrative forms found in French myths are borrowed from mainstream Realism, the most popular of modern narrative artforms in the Hexagon. What is

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109 Indeed, both *La Grande Illusion* and *Une Affaire de femmes* demonstrate it was already in unhealthy since the Débâcle if not beforehand.
surprising is to find it so prevalent even in burgeoning postcolonial discourse. In 1966, Pontecorvo encounters a difficulty that marginal Francophone filmmakers have had more and more frequently since at least the late 1980s: how to give voice to a subaltern without engaging in the dialect of the master discourse? Pontecorvo goes beyond simply making a mainstream film about the Algerians; he adopts Western colonialist forms wholeheartedly in an attempt to engage Hexagonal (and Yankee) audiences in the visual “language” to which they were already accustomed: the newsreel, its grainy, duped tones, its off-the-cuff camerawork and sudden, shaky zooms. This is the embodiment of Bazin’s “ontological force” and thus we may glean that audiences inferred the authority of newsreels at least in part from film form. The Battle of Algiers further associates traditional, nineteenth-century narrative reasoning with colonialism. It demonstrates how the appearance of reason, how the illusions that the West crafted for itself, led to a disasterously unjust state of affairs.

This last observation leads us to consider the historical lessons that we may take away from Rail and Algiers about their respective subjects. The particular challenge here, especially in regard to Clément’s film, is that the identification of a work as a Barthesian myth almost wholly invalidates its value as a critical, objective investigation of the past. But no work may pretend to complete objectivity, and even the most fanciful lie may contain truthful sediment. In this way, Rail preserves the knowledge of some very important points about the Occupation. First of all, it states proudly that there was a Resistance (though its roots and causes remains a mystery for Clément here). Second, it demonstrates that the French railways played several critical roles (though not as a central a part in the success of Operation Overlord and the eventual liberation of France as Rail would have us believe). Third, for the attentive spectator it is a useful catalogue of the many kinds of resistance that the French undertook (though it fails to acknowledge that
different cells tended to specialize in specific activities). Finally, it stands as a memorial to the many résistants who died unjustly at hands of German soldiers (though many more innocent civilians died during the Occupation because their neighbors did nothing – or worse.)

*The Battle of Algiers* does not have such egregious tunnel vision, but it nonetheless is more a “doorway” film to the Algerian War than an exhaustive treatment. One of its greatest achievements is to highlight the fact that FLN resistance arose from (and alas, perpetuated) a cycle of colonizer/colonized violence. The Algerians’ actions, while extreme and not morally unproblematic, originated from righteous indignation instead of a purported “barbaric” nature. *Algiers* also leads us to understand that there was significant support for the FLN amongst the indigent Algerian population at large. This was not some small, freakish band of extremists; it was an expression of popular will. Just as important is the idea that the French military were not the monsters that the Algerians (and some leftist Frenchmen) may have wanted to believe. With reasonable and sympathizing leaders like Mathieu, it is clear that they were tools of a larger system of injustice – a system that permitted, even encouraged, torture, that fed upon the cycles of violence in the colonies, and that spun events in the media in order to support the “civilizing mission” of French colonialism.

Now that we have considered how these movies contribute to our knowledge of history and its writing, how do they help to define the French war film? Here, at last, we have a pair of straightforward *films de guerre*. Or do we? On one hand, *La Bataille du rail* and *The Battle of Algiers* fit comfortably into Daniel’s definition. Yet there is much that separates them from the conventional Anglophone war film. Foremost in their difference is an emphasis on the mass over the individual. If these works have the crafting of a myth as a primary function (if not objective), then it is most often a collective one. In conjunction with a choral protagonist, which requires a
unique kind of establishment and development, neither movie has conventional plot. While the basis of their storytelling may be a logical, causative and knowable universe, Rail and Algiers take steps away from totally linear, comprehensive plot structures. Perhaps the most appropriate way to recount a story does not have to be in a straightforward, chronological manner. Thus, beyond reinforcing the basic precepts of defining the war film by content, these works also stretch the boundaries of the sub-genre, demonstrating that movies adapt to their audiences and that for the French war film, collective or at least ensemble protagonists and non-traditional plot structures are more rule than exception.

By mid-century, despite a will to hide ideology within form, French and Francophone cinematic treatments of war have become more complex than their predecessors. It is this complexity that the subjects of the next chapter will pick up and extend, pushing historical filmmaking to forward its artificial nature while at the same time rendering it a more appropriate tool of investigation with equal parts creativity and critical spirit.
Chapter 5: Artificial Myth

At most the book represents what I think sometimes, some days, about some things. So it does incidentally represent what I think. But I don’t drag the millstone of totalitarian, i.e. inflexible, thought around with me. That’s one plague I’ve managed to avoid.

– Marguerite Duras, *Practicalities*

Every tool is a weapon if you hold it right.

– Ani DiFranco

It may be most beneficial to consider the four films of Chapters 4 and 5 along a range of “mythic intensity.” The blatant Resistancialism of *La Bataille du rail* places it quite firmly within the strategy of Barthesian myth. *The Battle of Algiers* makes important strides away from hegemonic thinking, but nonetheless remains merely counter-mythic. Likewise, it is not difficult to categorize Ophüls’s landmark documentary *Le Chagrin et la pitié* (1971) as an artificial myth, with its eschewal of narrative and even documentary convention. Melville’s *L’Armée des ombres* (1969) is not so radically unconventional, but through its estheticism, pushes beyond the counter-mythic function of *Algiers*. It both leads the audience to new historical understanding and illustrates a mode of thought that realizes the paradox at the heart of historical filmmaking: the more one (openly) lies, the truer the discourse becomes.

French film historians agree that “the reality of the Occupation was left unspoken until Marcel Ophüls’s *Le Chagrin et la pitié* and that the sacrosanct image of the Resistance was untouched until Jean-Pierre Melville's *L'Armée des ombres*” (Hayward 193). These films perform more than a counter-mythic function; rather, they work to lay bare the lacunae and misdirection of popular myths. If works like *La Bataille du rail* and *Algiers* ultimately elide their ideological aims and perpetuate hegemonic ideas via content (*Rail*) and/or form (*Algiers*), how could cinema respond to this process, this “theft of meaning”? This chapter suggests that they adopt the strategy of Barthesian artificial myth.
Just as Barthesian myth requires a source sign, artificial myth requires a target of its own. The target myth of both *Armée* and *Le Chagrin* is Resistancialism, an amalgamation of processes and practices, one that through association with more developed ideologies constitutes a naturalizing narrative that is less about historical fact than a perceived socio-political necessity. It is a Barthesian myth wherein the Resistance (a historical fact) is taken as a "mythic signifier" to which is added a new, second-level signified – the mythic concept of national (or class) unity. Notably, this association occurs via the elision of other important historical facts: the atrocities of the Vichy regime and the very small number of active Resistance members.

As illustrated below, the first step to creating a Barthesian "artificial myth" is to continue the process, taking the mythic signification as the counter-mythic signifier and adding a counter-mythic concept to create a counter-mythic sign (Level I).

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1. **Language**

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110 Rousso defines Resistancialism as: “first, a process that sought to minimize the importance of the Vichy regime and its impact on French society, including its most negative aspects; second, the construction of an object of memory, the ‘Resistance,’ whose significance transcended by far the sum of its active parts (the small group of guerilla partisans who did the actual fighting) and whose existence was embodied chiefly in certain sites and groups, such as the Gaullists and Communists, associated with fully elaborated ideologies; and, third, the identification of this ‘Resistance’ with the nation as a whole […]” (10).
This structuralist process is relatively simple; in a way it is similar to parody or satire. Its primary function is to reveal the artificiality of the mythic base, laying bare the naturalizing process of mythic signification. However, while this first step is important, it is insufficient. Beyond revealing the willed nature of a discourse, a Barthesian artificial myth must also be transparent about its own ideology. The spectator/reader/receiver must be able to decipher the director/writer/speaker’s world view and agenda. Here is one of the primary challenges of this chapter, for neither Melville nor Ophüls is as artless as to declare openly his counter-hegemonic intentions. Rather, part of their ideology is to trust in the intelligence and imagination of the spectator. The tools to discover the filmmakers’ ideologies are present in each film, but one must pick them up and use them first.

Melville’s 1969 *L’Armée des ombres* estheticizes the Resistance in order to reveal the artificiality of its own discourse. Moreover, through both hypertextual references and a combination of classicism and *film noir*, it constantly sends the spectator elsewhere. Validating polyphony and subjectivity, it turns the myth of Gaullist Resistancialism inside-out rather than replying to it directly and negatively, portraying a very austere, sober and personal vision of the Resistance. In the minor tones of the Wermacht march down the Champs Elysées, *Armée* sounds the death march of Gaullist Resistancialism in specific and more generally of conventional manners of historic representation.

Fully in the spirit of May ’68, *Le Chagrin et la pitié* in many ways picks up where *Armée* leaves off. If the old manners of thinking about the Resistance and the Occupation are dying, Ophüls’s film addresses the question: how do we think about them now? Part documentary investigation, part artistic creation, *Le Chagrin* embodies the inherent paradox of historical films:
that to use the cinematic medium to its limit in historical investigation, one must fabricate – one
must lie – just as much as one wishes to tell the truth. Scientific method and subjective creation
are brought into synergistic harmony.

**Historiophoty**

This chapter signals an important shift in the focus of my approach. Up to this point, my analyses
have been by and large in a Sorlinian vein. That is, they have examined the subject films as
reflections of their societies of production. For the past nearly thirty years, this has been the
“safe” route, the most legitimate approach to the congruence of history and film. In this chapter
and the next, as the examined films become more complex and even self-aware, they also
become more appropriate investigations and representations of History itself. My analysis in
general thus shifts to a Rosenstonian one: films, even feature-length fictions, not only as
historical evidence, but as historiography – or, more appropriately, “historiophoty.”

Coining the term in 1988, Hayden White defines historiophoty as “the representation of
history and our thought about it in visual images and filmic discourse” (1193). On the surface,
then, this is simply the imagistic counterpart of historiography. Indeed, White elaborates the
important similarities between these two modes of historical representation: 1) reliance on
“condensation, displacement, symbolization, and qualification” (1194), 2) the constructive nature
of conventional history, that historical “facts are constituted by the subsumption of events under
a description, which is to say, by acts of predication” (1196) and 3) the similar manner of
signification via “typification,” that is, authenticity based upon the historical likelihood of
represented events (1198). Yet, there are matters that are proper and unique to the cinematic
medium, to historiophoty. Some of these are common-sense: film’s unsurpassed capacity to
represent the landscapes and items of the past, to engage the audience emotionally and create
psychological portraits, to represent historical events with a scale and concreteness impossible in written or verbal accounts. However, a more important distinction lies in the realm of semantics, in the antithetical nature, for historians, of “narrative” and “analysis.” Though neither *L’Armée des ombres* nor *Le Chagrin et la pitié* abandons narrative completely, they both subordinate it to esthetic and/or analytical concerns. Via both form and content, they embody, circulate and encourage new ways of thinking not only about Resistancialism, but about history and historical thought in general.
\textbf{L’Armée des ombres: Melvillian Resistancialism}

The war period was awful, horrible and ... marvelous!
– Jean-Pierre Melville

On meurt et on tue avec naturel.
– Joseph Kessel

In an interview with Rui Nogueira, Jean-Pierre Melville elucidates his concept of the director/spectator relationship: “A film-maker is like a master of the shadow-show. He works in the dark. He creates through “effects.” I am perfectly aware of the extraordinary dishonesty it takes to be effective; but the spectator should never be allowed to realize the extent to which everything is manipulated. He must be spellbound, a prisoner, in a state of submission” (11). This idea gives rise to a paradox for the audience of \textit{L’Armée des ombres} and of Melville’s cinema in general. In spite of the director’s wish to elide the manipulations necessary to craft a film, Melville’s style is constantly apparent: austere, bleak, tightly controlled. \textit{Armée} wears its artifice on its sleeve while at the same time making this “dishonesty” indispensable to the “effect” of the film. In the attempt to rescue Félix, we are spellbound, as much tense, waiting prisoners of the film as the Resistance member is of the Gestapo. With static camera movement and long (long) takes, events pass almost in real time, that is, with excruciating slowness, only to resolve in failure. Félix doesn’t get out – and neither do we.

The ready identification of a text as artifice through style is a requisite characteristic of Barthesian artificial myth, but is Melville’s style in \textit{Armée} enough to categorize the film as such? I believe so, for as we shall see, the style is as rich as it is rigorous, one that not only renders itself apparent, but that also sends us elsewhere, making connections (sometimes overt, sometimes subtle) with other discourses. Seventeenth-century classicism collides with references to \textit{Nuit et brouillard}; \textit{film noir} intersects with history and popular myth.
Yet, this apparent artifice is only one prerequisite; the other is an overtly identifiable ideology, an acknowledgeable authorial presence, one that recognizes the artificiality of the text and the “situatedness” of its point of view. This aspect of Armée may be more difficult to locate. Is Melville’s vision Gaullist? Misogynist? Nostalgic? There are as many theories as theorists. The primary difficulty here seems to be that Melville has created “a self-conscious cinema that lacks self-consciousness” (Danks, “Border Crossings”); while a given film may be openly artificial, it is no stoolie. However, the status of a text as an artificial myth does not require the artist to beat us over the head with his point of view, only to make it denaturalized, identifiable as willed, one vision amongst other possibilities. L’Armée des ombres accomplishes this by subtly juxtaposing itself with Gaullist Resistancialism. Alongside this myth of a unified, glorious and nationalistic uprising, Armée gives us a vision that insists upon isolation, anti-heroism and “the impression that the entire French resistance could fit comfortably into a four-door Citroën” (Dargis, “Behind” 49).

This section begins with an overview of Armée’s critical reception, which despite a remarkable heterogeneity, shares a common focus on form. This observation leads into my two-part analysis. The first part takes a close look at the cinematography of the movie, the decisive ways in which Melville’s mise-en-scène, camera movement and editing not only create meaning but also continually present themselves as visible and essential parts of the film’s signifying process. The second part seeks to identify the myriad pertinent connections that this style makes with other texts, as it sends the spectator outside of the film time and again, accruing further layers of meaning with hypertextual references. The section concludes with an overview of the French critical reception of L’Armée des ombres, with particular attention to those of the Cahiers du cinema and Henri Rousso. In the end, I am seeking to demonstrate how, typical of Melville

111 Melville points out that the Resistance, for many, “was not a matter of patriotism” (Nogueira 149).
the filmmaker and the man, *Armée* is in its own camp: a deeply felt, personal project of equal parts despair and nostalgia that did not upend but rather turned sideways some views of its society of production, striking up the death march of the Gaullist myth of Resistance.\footnote{“Armée is a passionate but lucid portrayal of the end of the Resistancialist myth. It may have felt badly timed in 1969, but today it appears amazingly clear-sighted” (Vincendeau, *Jean-Pierre Melville* 91). Thus, strictly speaking, *Armée* is not some kind of Nemesis for Resistancialism, but an exploration and reworking of it.}

**Critical Receptions**

While *L’Armée des ombres* never fails to provoke strong sentiment from critics and scholars alike, there is a remarkable heterogeneity of opinion that reflects the richness of the work. While trying to avoid essentialism, I believe the key facet of Melville’s craft is his faith in the intelligence and imagination of the spectator. For example, most of Melville’s characters have no past, no traditional psychological motivation – and the director could care less. There is no need to pander to the audience; he feels them intelligent enough to connect the dots alone, to understand the subtleties of cinematic “language” without a primer course every time they sit before the screen.

In a very Sartrean manner, Melville frees himself as an artist by acknowledging the freedom of the spectator. What results is a style of “rigorously precise classicism and formal beauty” (Flitterman-Lewis 69), where “la sobriété, le naturel” (Duran, *Le Canard enchaîné*) reign in stylized harmony. The director refuses to make it easy, to provide us with mere eye-candy.\footnote{“Melville se moque du réalisme, bien que sa photo soit d’un réalisme proche du dénuement – mais dénuement sublime dans son parti pris de refuser l’effet, le morceau de bravoure, l’image qui amuse l’œil” (“Revue de presse” 15).} Instead, he creates a style “so specific to the movies that it borders on abstraction” (Hoberman 43), and in this abstraction is a puzzle to be solved where the spectator may find a
certain kind of pleasure. But in *L’Armée des ombres*, there is also an unrelenting pessimism, and the muted palette of *Armée* seems to be the primary marker of the film’s dour outlook.114

This gloom connects with another characteristic, for *Armée* is “dark as pitch and utterly without compromise” (Dargis, “Hard Look”). Formal rigor has an echo in ideology, leading *Le Canard enchaîné* to superlatives: “le plus vrai, le plus beau, le moins complaisant” (Duran). Even *Cahiers du cinéma*, forever the staunch critic of Melville the Gaullist, links form and the film’s uncompromising nature.115 There is a certain irony in this category of praise, for Melville declares “un créateur, un artiste, ne travaille pas pour lui, mais pour plaire” (Barat 21).

“Complaisance” would seem to be the embodiment of Melville’s idea. Yet, given that so many critics and scholars praise Melville’s uncompromising vision in *Armée*, it would seem that he succeeds after all; he pleases his audience by refusing to please them, to pander to simpler desires for Manichean divisions and heroic grandeur. The uncompromising nature of *Armée* connects with yet another characteristic – its moral ambiguity.116 Again, the film’s stylistic asceticism is evoked to illustrate a different aspect, that “in *Army*, the code of the Resistance is antiheroic and morally ambiguous” (Breitbart 176).

These twin characteristics of uncompromising vision and moral ambiguity lead to *Armée*’s commonly heralded status as a counter-myth. This status hinges on the fact that *Armée* “neither sentimentalizes nor sensationalizes war” (Manolha, “Behind” 49). This is a common feature of Melville’s style in general: “ses interventions sont constamment démystifiants et,

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114 “An atmosphere of despair so enveloping that it threatens to swallow the story and its characters whole” (Dargis, “Behind” 49); this is “an exceptionally dark film, a twilight vision of the Resistance” (Vincendeau, *Jean-Pierre Melville* 78).

115 “Sur le terrain de la mise en scène (tout aussi politique, comme on sait), le film ne cède à aucune complaisance” (Frodon, “L’Armée” 69).

116 “Jamais, en si peu d’images, de regards, on n’avait montré ce que l’héroïsme peut avoir d’ambigu, de paradoxal, de dégradant dans ses nécessités” (Veillot 62).
pourtant, d’une profonde vérité” (Zimmer and Béchade 9). I believe that Zimmer and Béchade’s analysis is the closest to what is really going on in Armée. As we have seen in the previous chapter, being merely counter-mythic, replacing an existing myth with another, using the same forms with a different message, is not sufficient. Rather, Armée demystifies Gaullist Resistancialism, turning the public myth not on its head but sideways, showing a new facet of the same event. And it is the same event, from a very personal point of view. Though many critics hail it as a triumph of historic recreation, it is important to remember that the film “ne prétend pas être une évocation historique des véritables réseaux de la guerre secrète” (Veillot 62). Instead, it renders through abstraction “perhaps the greatest cinematic testament to the lived experience of the French Resistance” (Danks, “L’Armée des ombres”).

Film Form

The common factor in most evaluations of Armée is a focus on form: static, sober, restrained, it marks nearly every aspect of the movie. As film criticism goes, perhaps this should not be too surprising, but its ubiquity is noteworthy, especially for the present analysis. In an artificial myth, the visibility of form as unrepentant artifice is crucial.

What constitutes this remarkable form? How does it not only shape the film itself, but often send the spectator elsewhere, to disparate other discourses? I shall begin by identifying some key points of Armée’s cinematography. Much hinges on the celebrated “austerity” of Melville’s style, expressed primarily through constrained camera movement that renders mise-en-scène particularly important. Contrariwise, when the camera does move, these moments are

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117 As Vincendeau points out for the generation of Melville and Kessel, lived experience was “paramount as a guarantee of authenticity” (Jean-Pierre Melville 50).
invested with special meaning. Additionally, static framing tends to make editing all the more significant, especially Melville’s use of shot/reverse-shot to isolate the speaking subject.

In conjunction with this stylization, Armée is rich with hypertextual moments for the attentive spectator. Obviously, Kessel’s novel plays a large role, but Melville’s adaptation references a plethora of other discourses. A theme shared by both novel and film is the use of myth and manipulation, and a key form is the voice-over, rendering both works polycentric. Melville’s film reaches beyond the novel, referencing other cinematic works, including La Bataille du rail, Paris brûle-t-il? and even Nuit et brouillard. Critical language surrounding L’Armée des ombres often evokes seventeenth-century classicism, creating a matrix of references that invests the film in a long tradition of French cultural achievement. Perhaps the most important hypertext of Armée is Gaullist Resistancialism, which Melville appropriates for his own aims and in doing so turns the popular myth inside out.

**Mise-en-scène**

Melville’s paucity of camera movement and proclivity for long takes both make mise-en-scène a focal point of analysis. In particular, Armée often presents us with striking tableaux, whose static nature invests the image with an emblematic quality. The first of these is in the office of the interment camp commandant. The composition is dominated by straight lines and right angles, along with the muted color palette that characterizes most of the film. To the left stands Gerbier, swallowed by a dark overcoat, hands folded in front of him, a single suitcase on the ground, between the camera and his feet. The commandant sits at his desk to the right, a lamp providing all of the light. Between these two rigid figures is a gulf of space: the wall is grey, with horizontal lines that run perpendicular to nearly every other silhouette in the shot. Amenities are sparse and uniformly black: a coat rack, a stout filing cabinet and an iron stove. The emphasis
here is on stillness, silence and separation: two men, whose dress and demeanor are so alike, yet who have situated themselves at opposite ideological poles. Formalized austerity (a single long shot and long take of a nearly bare room) encounters realism (a prisoner would have not been permitted to move or speak) to create intense richness of meaning: the stoic Gerbier, half-hidden in shadows, facing his enemy in a milieu that tells us everything about the deprivation and constraint of the era.

The triangular composition of this first tableau (Gerbier standing, the commandant sitting) is recalled and reversed in the Marseille apartment where the traitor, Paul Dounat, is brought to be executed. The camera’s position is similar: a long shot, the characters and bare furnishings arranged along a horizontal line. While Dounat lies on the ground in the left-hand corner, Gerbier, Le Bison and Lemasque stand around a chair to screen-right. Again, a solitary lamp illuminates the scene, its soft golden glow in sharp contrast to the shadowy greys of the room’s décor. The three Resistance members look at the traitor in the same way as the commandant regarded Gerbier: equal parts judgment and regret. Again, silence reigns while distance and binary oppositions are signified via mise-en-scène. The distinct parallels to be drawn between the collaborators and the Resistance are a significant part of Melville’s overall aim in *Armée*. Just as the film insists upon binary separations, so too does it constantly blur lines of demarcation.

This synergy creates a desperately bleak universe, one that finds its own emblematic tableau somewhat late in the film, after Gerbier has been captured by the Milice and turned over to the Gestapo. Even more than the tableaux above, the shot of Gerbier and his fellow prisoners in their cell is one of severe austerity: three grey sides of a cube, barely illuminated by diffuse light from a slit, the prisoners spaced equally along walls, all of them sitting, waiting,
despondent. Symmetry, connoting containment and regimentation, and emptiness are the overriding visual aspects here. The colors are muted and silence pervades once again. The take is not long, but it doesn’t have to be. In less than ten seconds, we are told everything about the prisoner’s experience: subjugation and interminable waiting. The previous tableaux have been moments of judgment and so too is this one. However, now the spectator is in the position of power, literally the perspective of a Nazi guard as he peers through the peephole of the cell door. The association is unsettling; Melville, having related a certain function to tableaux in this film, assimilates the spectator into the movie’s diegesis, placing him in the sickening position of passing judgment on those with whom he would rather be complicit.

Another significant aspect of Armée’s mise-en-scène is an essential part of Melville’s filmmaking in general: clothing. In the Melvillian universe, clothes literally make the man (or woman). The fedora, the trench coat and the business suit all become indexical signs, metonymic symbols of a given character and/or type, and more. Félix’s bowler hat plays just such a role. He is uncomfortable with the accoutrement, doffing it as often as possible. Yet when the hat is knocked from his head during his arrest, the image of the bowler on a barren street is imbued with intense meaning, becoming not merely a figure of characterization, but a symbol for his fate and by extension of every Resistance member in the film: utterly alone, the victim of violence without (diegetic) witness, forgotten, detritus that would be meaningless in just about any other context.118 This point is hammered home by the Nazi officer who interrogates Jean-François, who apprises us of the possible fate that awaits him: “Etre fusillé sous un faux nom sans que

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118 “Melville knows how to transform the most minute concrete detail into an abstract philosophical proposition” (Flitterman-Lewis 68). Objects in Melville’s film “résument et sacrélsent un univers dont les symboles sont portés au niveau archétypal, nettement détaché du réel et de l’actuel, constituant un fonds mythique de la représentation, qui assure partiellement la portée universelle de message” (Bantcheva 123).
personne ne le sache.” As courageous as they may be, there is no glory in these Resistance operations, only oblivion.

This indexical property also has a subversive use in Armée. Like all clothing in any fiction film, it is synonymous with “costume,” with disguise; and like any code, it can be falsified. Mathilde is the master of this property; a disguise figures prominently in many of her plans to rescue Félix, and her final tactic hinges directly upon disguising herself, Le Bison and Lemasque as Nazi soldiers in order to infiltrate the Gestapo headquarters. Disguises are amongst the best manners of lying, for they allow the liar to do a minimum of work. There is no need to create intricate prevarications; instead the interlocutor fills in the lacunae with his own assumptions. Indeed, the Nazi guards are more concerned with the transfer papers than with those carrying them. The officer in charge of the gate doesn’t even look at Mathilde and company, but examines the documents. Disguised as a grieving woman in black, Mathilde infiltrates the headquarters for reconnaissance with hardly a glance from the myriad nurses and doctors she passes in the hallways.119

Camera Movement

Though mise-en-scène plays a principal role in the “language” of Armée, the relative scarcity of camera pans and tracking shots actually renders them all the more meaningful. Like their static counterpart, the tableau, they call attention to themselves and by consequence highlight the importance of what is happening (or not happening) within the frame. Also like the tableaux above, they are used in conjunction with long takes. The key difference is a double movement:

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119 This relates to another of the main themes of Armée: lies and misdirection. For Resistance members in the film live lies, ones that are mainly silence and non-communication. Knowing is everything, and sharing intelligence is fatal: Dounat sells out Gerbier, the Nazis learn of Mathilde’s daughter and their fates are sealed.
while the static nature of the tableaux in Armée is matched by static composition, shots in which the camera moves frequently also have movement within the frame.¹²⁰

Camera movement has three main roles in Armée. The first, characterized almost purely by tracking shots, is that of exposition. A pair of shots lead up to the third tableau discussed above, Gerbier in the Gestapo prison: a Nazi soldier walks down a prison hallway towards the camera, which pans slightly right as he turns, opens a panel on an iron door, and looks through. Cut to an over-the-shoulder shot that tracks forward, past the solider to see what he sees: the slot, the cell and prisoners beyond. The camera, though a deft trick of editing, keeps going, passing impossibly through the door to arrive at the prisoner tableau. This is the only time in Armée that Melville makes use of this Renoir-esque technique, using a “single” camera movement to traverse from one space into another. The effect has an unsettling expressivity. Without a word of dialogue or titles of any kind, we not only understand immediately where and when we are, but we slide with disturbing ease from one point of view (that of an “invisible narrator”) to another (that of the Nazi soldier) to yet another (that of the prisoners).

A more clearly expository moment occurs inside the Majestic Hotel. This sequence begins with an ornate clock on a white stone wall, with thick black cords beneath it; track right to reveal the cords’ destination: a bank of hideous black telephone switches, manned by a busy Nazi soldier; the camera reverses direction and tracks left to reveal an elegant hallway of white marble. On their hands and knees, a few women clean the floor as Gerbier and his escort come down the hallway, approaching the camera; pan left and track away as they turn in that direction, to reveal a desk manned by another solider who processes Gerbier. The overall effect is grotesque hybridity: the elegant neo-classical style of the hotel has been invaded and infected by

¹²⁰ Examples include Gerbier fleeing the Majestic, Jean-Francois descending the Metro stairs and Mathilde reconnoitering the Gestapo headquarters.
black, angular Nazi technology; the local population has been subjugated; German is the only language heard, as harsh on the ears as the wires and modern office trappings are out of place for the eyes.

Connection and juxtaposition form together the second role of camera movement and long takes in *Armée*. Mathilde explains her final plan for rescuing Félix in a scene that is one long take, the camera tracking (and eventually panning) slowly along to the left. This scene makes excellent if subtle use of *hors-champs*, as Le Bison and then Lemasque enter and exit frame, being drawn into the conversation or delivering bowls of hot chocolate. The city of Lyon remains ever in the distant background, sprawling away in its characteristic creamy tones. The emphasis is on connection: Gerbier and Mathilde forever in frame, the coming and goings of the other cell members; the plan has gelled and everything is coming together – or so we may initially think. The cinematography intimates connection via continuity of space-time, shot composition and blocking, but also connotes juxtaposition via the mise-en-scène. Once Gerbier approves the plan, he and Mathilde move to the background, leaving Jean-François – without a word of dialogue in the entire scene – in the foreground, his expression uncertain, perhaps troubled. It stands in stark contrast to the confidence of the other cell members. Jean-François knows something the others do not, and in the paranoia that the film has established, this can only mean one thing: betrayal. Melville’s scenarios are filled with daring plots, but ones that as often as not fail, and part of his art is subtly revealing the small part of the machine that will bring the entire affair to a grinding halt.

Of course, Jean-François does not betray the cell. Quite the opposite, he accomplishes the one thing that Mathilde needs done: get in to warn and prepare Félix. This brings us to the third role of camera movement: “l’art de la mystification, de la fausse piste, du retournement de
situation, bref, du suspense” (Zimmer and Béchade 24). Nothing in *Armée* is more understated yet more torturously suspenseful – and ultimately heart-breaking – than the failed attempt to rescue Félix. Action in almost real time characterizes the entire sequence. Yet, it has its apoteosis at the end, as when the doctor crosses the courtyard. The camera doesn’t track from its position next to Mathilde, but it follows the doctor with a slow pan as he steps out the doors, as he descends a few steps, as he traverses a walkway, as he steps down again, as he slowly approaches Mathilde… and tells her that Félix is too fragile to be transported. The crossing seems to take forever, pushing the strained nerves of the spectator to the limit, and all the tension resolves only in bitter disappointment. The Resistance members climb back aboard the truck, pass back through the gates, have their papers checked yet again and finally roll away down the street: total non-spectacle that loses one cell member and futilely sacrifices another.

**Editing**

*Armée* is brutally non-spectacular, but frequently the editing obliges us to witness this brutality. Melville uses shot/reverse-shot or eye-line matching conventions, but he does so on his own terms. Instead of allowing the audience a moment of easily recognizable film form, the director uses editing and framing to articulate larger themes of isolation and anti-heroism. Conventional shot/reverse-shot composition not only respects the 180-degree rule, but also frequently includes both interlocutors in the frame. Most often, we see the speaking subject from over the shoulder of the listener. At the very least, reaction shots of the listener are sprinkled throughout longer stretches of speech. In this way, the spectator is aware that the dialogue is a conversation, a collective and interactive activity. In contrast to this convention, the shot/reverse-shot technique in *Armée* more often than not isolates the speakers in the frame, and cuts quickly, even forcefully, between them. For example, late in the film, the Resistance leader Luc convinces Le
Bison of the necessity of killing Mathilde. The entire exchange has only two kinds of shots: that of Luc or that of Le Bison. There are no reaction shots, and the camera remains static, keeping the speaking subject tightly in the center of the frame. This is not an exchange of ideas, or a moment of sharing, but one of domination and separation: Luc imposes his will upon Le Bison. The same style of editing is used in the commandant’s office as the collaborationist officer reads over Gerbier’s file. The two parties are separated visually one from the other, conveying a sense of difference and hierarchy.

Melville also uses eye-line matching is an unconventional way. Normally, the technique is a two- or three-part process: an image of a person looking at something off-camera; cut to the object they are (supposedly) regarding, creating the illusion of the subject’s point of view. The optional third part is to cut back to the subject for a reaction shot, giving the audience an indication of how the character feels about what he is witnessing (and perhaps how we should feel about it as well). Melville does more than suggest with his eye-line matches during Dounat’s strangulation: he imposes. Like the shot/reverse-shot style above, Melville doesn’t move the camera a millimeter, but alternates shots of Dounat’s slow death by kitchen towel with the reactions of his executioners. It seems as if Dounat takes forever to die, and only Gerbier manages to watch the entire time; Félix stares into the distance as he tightens the tourniquet, and the young Lemasque finally looks down in heart-broken chagrin. The effect is not spectacle but just the opposite. What is really important is that as spectators, we are given nothing else to see. There is no last-minute panning or cutting away, no train whistles to mourn Dounat’s sad demise, no fabulous explosion or gunshot to satisfy a fetish for violence, only silence, chagrin and stony resolve. We are forced to witness the basic precept of Kessel’s novel: dying and killing are normal now.
Finally, there is a moment that completely breaks with the editing conventions of the organic regime. Imprisoned a second time, Gerbier is marched to his execution. During the walk, there is a montage of previous images from the film. Coupled with Gerbier’s voice-over, we can understand this as a fairly conventional “memory montage” – the cinematic equivalent of having your life flash before your eyes. All of the images are easily recognizable: Legrain, the Communist from the internment camp; walking with Mathilde; a female British officer at a hop in London. All, except one: the image of a book by Luc Jardie. This is an image that we have not yet seen and for which we have no context. It springs unbidden and unexplained to the screen. Contextualization comes much later, when we learn that Luc Jardie is the cell leader “Saint Luc” and that the book is one of the five Gerbier has in his hideout. But, at the moment of its first appearance, it is a perfect example of an irrational interval: time and space erupting, breaking a logical chain of signification. Melville is too meticulous a filmmaker to think of this as merely a fluke or a moment of laziness. Instead, here we have a hint at a more complex world, not only a cinematic approximation of Gerbier’s panicked “final” thoughts, but the opening of the film itself into a Bergsonian Whole, where the human perception of linear time breaks down in a way that only cinema can represent.

Hypertextuality

Just as Armée, in that one moment, tears a rift in logical causality and references a different moment/point in space-time, so too does it frequently break from its own diegesis to call upon myriad hypotexts. The two primary hypotexts of the film, Kessel’s novel and Gaullist Resistancialism, are related in a very oblique way, an unexpected and subtle encounter that reveals how much myth and manipulation have in common. Additionally, there are a few surprising moments where Melville evokes other films about the war era. Finally, much of the
emotive and, dare we say, subversive power of Armée resides in its Melvillian hybridity that uses diverse genres and categories of discourse in a way that is both defamiliarized and defamiliarizing.

**Myth and Its Antidote**

There is a passage in Kessel’s novel that did not survive adaptation to the screen, a moment of remarkable poetry in which Gerbier explains to Legrain what is “resistance”:

> Tu comprends, ils sont venus dans leurs chars, avec leurs yeux vides. Ils pensaient que les chenilles des chars sont faites pour tracer la nouvelle loi des peuples. Comme ils avaient fabriqué beaucoup de chars, ils avaient l’assurance d’être nés pour écrire cette loi. Ils ont en horreur la liberté, la pensée. Leur vrai but de guerre c’est la mort de l’homme pensant, de l’homme libre. Ils veulent exterminer tout ce qui n’a pas les yeux vides. Ils ont trouvé en France des gens qui avaient les mêmes goûts et ceux-là sont entrés à leur service. […] En même temps ils publiaient que le conquérant était magnanime. Un immonde vieillard essayait de suborner le pays. « Soyez sages, soyez lâches », enseignait-il. « Oubliez que vous avez été fiers, joyeux et libres. Obéissez et souriez au vainqueur. Il vous laissera vivoter tranquilles ». Les gens qui entouraient le vieillard calculaient que la France était crédule et qu’elle était douce. Qu’elle est le pays de la mesure et du juste milieu. « La France est tellement civilisée, tellement amollie, pensaient-ils, qu’elle a perdu le sens du combat souterrain et de la mort secrète. Elle acceptera, elle s’endormira. Et dans le sommeil nous lui ferons des yeux vides ». […] La résistance, elle est tous les hommes français qui ne veulent pas qu’on fasse à la France des yeux morts, des yeux vides. (32-34)
This passage highlights Kessel’s and Melville’s common belief that the Resistance was not so much about patriotism but rather an intellectual concept, an ideological battle of those who were “free thinkers” versus the empty-eyed, soulless followers of fascism. This is Gaullist Resistancialism avant la lettre: a nationally unifying call to arms that is based not so much on practical or individual concerns but rather on “une certaine idée de la France” – a France that is proud, combative and virulently free-willed. It is a very rousing myth, complete with a naturalizing but slightly abstracted narrative and Manichean divisions that induce the reader to ally with the Resistance. However, a few pages later, we become aware of Gerbier’s cynicism. After Legrain arranges for Gerbier to escape, the latter “avait son sourire habituel. It atteignait pourtant au but qu’il avait poursuivi à travers les récits et les images dont il avait patiemment enivré Legrain” (Kessel 41). Myths are a rhetorical device, and Gerbier is not above making recourse to them in order to achieve his ends.

This same idea survives in the film, appearing towards the end rather than the beginning, and, interestingly enough, in dialogue lifted directly from the novel. Luc convinces Le Bison to kill Mathilde by arguing that Le Bison would want the same thing if he were captured. Le Bison relents, and departs with Lemasque, leaving Gerbier and Luc alone:

– « Vous êtes sûr de ce que vous avez avancé au sujet de Mathilde? »

 demandada Gerbier.

– « Est-ce que je sais… », dit Jardie. […]

– « Il est possible que cette hypothèse soit juste », reprit-il. « Il est possible aussi que Mathilde ait voulu revoir ses enfants et qu’il lui soit devenu plus difficile de mourir… ». (Kessel 249)
The truth of the matter is unimportant: Luc has just cynically played upon the beliefs of Le Bison towards a murderous, and even Machiavellian, end. Mathilde has gone from trusted ally and object of unparalleled admiration to a possible security leak. Like Dounat’s execution, it isn’t a matter of sentiment, but of cold reasoning. In this case mythification is the most expedient way to get the job done. Even the heroes of the Resistance will baldly lie to their own in the interest of a greater good, voiding the eyes of their countrymen to achieve their aims.

In a certain way, a second transformation from Kessel’s novel contains an antidote for the first. If myth is an effective and insidious rhetorical device due to its naturalizing function, to its elision of an authorial voice, then the polycentric nature of both novel and film serves as a counterpoint, creating a discourse with a plethora of authors. In the film, voice-over expresses this polycentricity. There are at least three identifiable authorial voices in *Armée*. Gerbier is the primary source, but we also hear the camp commandant (“A mater, à ménager”) and Jean-François. The voice-over has two main roles. First, it reveals the inner thoughts of the characters, usually in situations where dialogue would be inappropriate (such as Gerbier’s assessment that “Le commandant du camp n’est pas si maladroit. Il m’étouffe entre trois imbéciles et deux enfants perdus”). It is also expository, especially in the sequences after Félix’s capture, where Gerbier explains all the myriad events of reconstituting his cell.

Overall, Melville makes sparse use of voice-over in *Armée*, and despite the sketch of its two main functions above, it is relatively unsystematic. Rather, it is a practical tool, the most effective way of transmitting information – and an effect of transforming Kessel’s novel. Let us consider the voice-over here in contrast to its uses in *La Bataille du rail* and *The Battle of Algiers*. In the former, the voice-over is a trace of the film’s documentary genesis, and pretends

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121 A fourth voice-over source is not readily identifiable, the one that introduces Paul Dounat. I believe that we can assume this is Gerbier, but we cannot be sure.
to be impartial while it clearly is not. In the latter, the role is not that different, lending a
documentary-like objectivity to the film, masquerading as a journalist or some dispassionate
commentator. To the contrary, in Armée the voice-over is primarily literary, and its source is
almost always diegetic. This characteristic, in conjunction with its polycentric nature, reminds
the spectator of the artificiality of the film he is watching, of the various points of view that were
really present during the Occupation. Ironically, by pushing artifice, by refusing realism,
Melville arrives at a more authentic representation of the Resistance experience, one that
demystifies previous unitary discourses.

Other Films
And previous discourses are in abundance, even within the framework of Armée itself. A
common work of contrast for Armée is René Clément’s Paris brûle-t-il?(1966). Where Paris is
epic, Armée is intimate; the grandeur and heroics of Paris have their counterpoint in the moral
ambiguity and anti-heroics of Armée. Much of Paris is in black and white, but strives to be
vividly colorful; Armée is in color, but has a despairingly muted palette. The chronological
proximity of these two films makes for a tempting ease of contrast, but there is little overtly
present in Armée that evokes Clément’s 1966 film.

However, Armée still highlights and calls into question Clément’s brand of
Resistancialism. When Jean-François travels to Paris, the arrival of his train at the station is shot
in almost exactly the same way as the opening scene of La Bataille du rail, complete with Nazi
soldiers and little children. This scene opens a realm of very interesting responses of Armée to
Rail. Whereas Rail suffers from a schizophrenic purpose and form, Armée has a laser-like
exactitude. Rail is a spectacular myth of resistance against an enemy, the Nazis, that is at turns
brutal or comedic; the enemy of Armée is more plural (we see the French Milice at several
points), rarely inept, and much more vicious. Most importantly, *Rail* is a story of fraternity, of the working-class French united in a common victorious cause. *Armée* focuses on solitude, even a pat refusal of aid. “Surtout pas,” “C’est pas la peine,” “Absolument pas,” “Défense de revenir avant un mois”: Resistance members consistently drive away their fellows and isolate themselves; and the camera, as we have already seen, does the same. Neither are the Resistance members of Melville’s film either working-class or victorious. Though their successful operations outnumber their failures, these successes include the murder and/or sacrifice of four of their comrades.122

Finally, the introduction of the internment camp makes a surprising reference: Resnais’s *Nuit et brouillard* (1955). All the elements are present: a palette dominated by browns and greys, the ascetic observation tower, the barbed-wire fence, and most importantly the slow, meditative tracking shot. In conjunction with *Armée*’s marked stylization, this reference opens a series of connections rather than binary oppositions. Both films are highly stylized looks at the past, ones that do not seek to reconstruct the visual reality of history, but to create a new kind of historiography through the cinematic medium. A literary style characterizes each work, one that serves to abstract their primary subject in order to meditate not only on history but also on the human condition. Both can also be oppressively bleak, using muted palettes and a slowness of cinematography to reflect (upon) an equally bleak era of French history.

**Classicism and film noir**

Much of the authenticity of this historical meditation takes place in *L’Armée des ombres* via the hybridity of classicism and *film noir*. *Armée* does not reproduce the past in a documentary

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122 Le grain the Communist, the man at the Majestic, Dounat the traitor and finally Mathilde. Further Resistance casualties include Jean-François, Félix and the Baron de Ferte Talloire.
fashion, giving the spectator an impression of “you are there” visual detail and historical facts. Instead, it uses “effects,” relying upon archetypes and abstraction to recreate the psychological and emotional atmosphere with effectiveness and authenticity. Distilling the functions and forms of seventeenth-century classicism and American *film noir* and then blending them together in a unique way is essential to this effect.¹²³ Let us remember that for Genette, a successful adaptation masters not only the hypotext, but also its genre, that fluid and intricate set of relationships between both the reader/spectator and various similar discourses. Through a process common to both of classical tragedy and the *film noir* genre, *Armée* seeks to communicate a universal message via stylistic abstraction, an abstraction so pronounced that its subject is rendered archetypal, sent almost into the realm of Jungian myth.

Archetypes abound in *Armée*, notably in its characters. Each Resistance member is quickly identifiable: the canny, cynical leader (Gerbier), the tough (Le Bison), the jaded right-hand man (Félix), the new kid (Lemasque), the mystical leader (Luc Jardie), even the smart, duplicitous moll (Mathilde). The events of the film closely resemble both the typical gangster flick (heists, smuggling, assassinations) and the Classical stage (internal struggles of sentiment versus duty, spiritual epiphanies and tragic turns of fate.) However, these archetypes are not merely transplanted from one genre/medium to another. A further step in adaptation requires a change that makes the best use of the hypertext’s medium. This step not only reveals Melville’s

¹²³ “L’une comme l’autre manifestent une rigueur formelle indispensable pour développer sans la dénaturer leur base référentielle. L’une comme l’autre se distinguent par un degré de stylisation, d’abstraction ou d’irréalisme très élevé. Ils mettent en jeu des archétypes à fort potentiel symbolique plutôt que des images ambitionnant la vraisemblance. Ils s’adressent à l’imaginaire collectif à travers un système de signes permanent relativement restreint qui correspond à un univers mythique. [Ils ont] une démarche esthétique et intellectuelle similaire. Elle est profondément universaliste de sa participation du niveau archétypal de l’imaginaire comme par sa dominante symbolique” (Bantcheva 101-02).
virtuosity as a filmmaker, but it also helps to qualify Armée as an artificial myth. Where film noir is often filled with fast-paced shoot-outs, Armée’s tempo is torpid and the bullets only ever fly in one direction; where the plot of Classical tragedy advances by dialogue and the genre concerns itself with the most noble of sacrifices, Melville’s characters interact as little as possible, and their sacrifices seem increasingly futile.

Thus these familiar elements are defamiliarized in their adaptation from their source into Melville’s cinema. In this admittedly nebulous zone of generic hybridity and stylization we can find the heart of Melville’s myth and the artificiality that is essential to it, the presence of a stylized authorial voice that speaks from its own point of view while admitting, even necessitating, others. This is how Armée responds to and speaks through Gaullist Resistancialism, by abstracting it, denaturalizing its message, showing us the cracks in its brilliant armor.

Conclusion

In Le Figaro, film critic Louis Chauvet takes Armée to task for its length and torpor. But these are minor, esthetic, concerns compared to a more pressing problem, a repulsively analytical form that overtakes the grandeur and virtue that Chauvet wants in a film about the Resistance. It would seem that he remains a staunch believer (even after May ‘68) in the Gaullist myth of epic glory. Not that those opposed to Gaullism rose to support Melville. Jean Comolli, in Cahiers du

124 For, Melville “prend à revers à peu près toutes les lois du genre. […] L’Armée des ombres est une véritable machine infernale contre les cannons du genre” (Frodon, “L’Armée des ombres” 71).

125 “Le projet de Melville tint à radicaliser la démarche, à rendre plus explicites les éléments du genre, et sa passion formaliste poussa l’entreprise jusqu’au commentaire” (Fieschi 40).

126 “Si Melville obéissait à la noble intention de rendre au spectateurs le goût des récits de résistance dont ils se détourment depuis quelque temps, à tort ou à raison, il devait surtout rétablir ces récits dans leurs vertus épiques, revaloriser leurs motifs d’angoisse, au lieu de leur prêter la forme analytique la plus rebutante” (Chauvet, Le Figaro).
cinéma, takes two paragraph-length sentences to label Armée with the greatest of Cahiers insults: Gaullist art. Melville commits the greatest sin of filmmaking: placing form over substance, scrubbing the dirtiness of the Resistance clean only to fill it with “affectation.” Thirty years later, opinion at the Cahiers hasn’t changed much. Interestingly, this idea runs directly counter to Henri Rousso’s estimation that Armée fails the litmus test as a Gaullist myth of Resistance. It showed “too much of the actual diversity of temperaments and types and was therefore incompatible with the abstract and timeless idea of ‘Resistance’ honored by de Gaulle and Malraux” (232). Armée, it would seem, is an aberration: already an anachronism for some, for others Gaullist propaganda and for others still a failure to revive the Resistancialist myth that was fading in the late 1960s.

However, I do not believe that these are failures of the film itself, but rather of the individual critics’ ideological aims for it. L’Armée des ombres “appropriates the Resistance myth through a process of narrative abstraction and mise en scène minimalism” (Vincendeau, Jean-Pierre Melville 81) in order to express Melvillian Resistancialism. This is an artificial myth of the Resistance, in its own camp despite Melville’s personal affinity for General de Gaulle.

Stylized to the point of commentary, one could never mistake it for anything but a filmic reconstruction, an imagined version of the past. Hybrid and plural, its stylization seeks and sends constantly outward, addressing, appropriating and often defamiliarizing other discourses, making this process as essential to its own signification as its stylized austerity. This strategy results in

127 “Une mise en scène (à l’unisson) qui se veut suprêmement digne elle aussi œuvrant dans la mesure, le chic, le soigné, le grave, jouant la réserve, mimant la noblesse, joignant avec la sobriété, se parant de dépouillement, faisant vertu de toutes les castrations, maniaque de a propreté, multipliant les ‘vides’ mais les remplissant aussitôt de l’affectation du vide: bref, la résistance telle que jouée et vue par les gaullistes, et le premier et plus bel exemple cinématographique de l’Art gaulliste, fond et forme” (Comolli 63).

128 “Si le cinéma français ne manque pas, depuis la Libération, de films évoquant l’Occupation et la Résistance, il n’a pas réussi à se doter de la grande œuvre monumentale [...] L’Armée des ombres accomplit la commande officielle (qu’elle ait été ou non formulée) que n’a pas su réussir René Clément” (Frodon, “L’Armée” 69). Making up for Clément’s lukewarm Paris brûle-t-il? is hardly praise.
neither the destruction of Gaullist Resistancialism nor the embodiment of it, but rather in a weakening of its hegemonic position, in its fragmentation and opening up to different interpretations.

This weakening has repercussions wider than targeting a popular myth and discrediting the hegemony. Armée subtly questions many basic assumptions of historical representation in general. If the film demonstrates that these assumptions are false, or at least much more flexible that previously believed, what might be a better way of thinking about and representing the past? Le Chagrin et la pitié points the way, assaulting the myth of Resistancialism as never before while also modeling a radical way of representing history on film, fully embodying the analytical potential of historiophoty.
Le Chagrin et la pitié: Seek Your Own Truth

This, to me, is the ultimately heroic trait of ordinary people; they say no to the tyrant and they calmly take the consequences of this resistance.

– Philip K. Dick

Non, non, les Allemands, on ne les a pas vus.

– Géminiani

In 1971, Jean-Pierre Melville went to a Paris cinema theater with Rui Nogueira to screen Le Chagrin et la pitié. The former resistance fighter was profoundly moved by the epic-length documentary, pronouncing it “the faithful portrait of an age as complex as it was tragic” (181) and immediately recognizing that “explaining to the French over four and a half hours that they were not all of them heroes is in itself a bold undertaking” (207). Given the film’s sympathetic view of the French Resistance, Melville’s affinity for it isn’t surprising. However, his statements categorize the common-sense reception of Le Chagrin ever since: a ground-breaking historical film that is as important for its challenge to Resistancialism (both Gaullist and Communist) as for its historic authenticity and scope.

Nonetheless, does Le Chagrin et la pitié still pass historiophobic muster today, almost forty years later? Have its shocking lessons become banalities and do its errors overshadow the importance of its historic investigation? Despite its landmark status, over the years critics and scholars have highlighted several lacunae and elisions: a missing proletariat, a misleading title, a male-centered discourse, and all manner of missed and/or distorted details. While some of these critiques are partisan or shaded by personal interest, others raise significant problems; combined, they place the “faithful portrait” of Le Chagrin into serious question.

Yet Le Chagrin remains an important historiophobic document. First, many criticisms of its history seem to misunderstand that the film never purports to be History, with a capital “H.”
Much to the contrary, it is unabashedly subjective (without being propagandistic) and holds in high regard those interviewees who admit the subjectivity of their own testimonies. Second, even in the face of more significant problems, like those raised by Pollard and Reynolds, *Le Chagrin* continues to demonstrate a laudable model for the construction of history on film as a diversified, critical and necessarily creative exercise.

The following analysis unfolds in three parts, beginning with praises and criticisms. It is important to identify and situate the positive majority opinion in order to better understand the main criticisms of the film, which are three-fold. Writing for *Cahiers du cinema* in 1971, Pierre Baudry criticizes Ophüls’s class-blindness and historical “illusions.” Stanley Hoffman, in his introduction to the English translation of the film’s script, is among the first to articulate various historical distortions and lacunae. Some of the film’s most important problems are not raised until the 1990s, when Miranda Pollard and Siân Reynolds examine it under the lens of gender studies, revealing an unquestioned male-centric discourse at the heart of the affair.

The next two sections respond to and synthesize these problems. Many critiques, especially those of Baudry and Hoffman, assume the natural superiority of the classic, nineteenth-century approach to History – that it must be objective and all-encompassing. But if May ’68 taught Ophüls et cie. anything, it is that this objectivity is impossible and the all-encompassing nature of conventional history deals more with hegemonic exclusion than a will towards plurality. However, Pollard and Reynolds demonstrate that *Le Chagrin* commits its own sins in the name of masculine hegemony. While their analyses must be taken into account, the third and final section attempts to recuperate the film as a historiophotic model – specifically as a Barthesian artificial myth. Since *Le Chagrin* is more sympathetic to those who think critically about their motivations during the Occupation and portrays negatively those who are not
reflective, it openly values and embodies a self-critical mode of historic thought, one that recognizes its own subjectivity and artificiality. In the end, *Le Chagrin* masters one of the inherent paradoxes of historical films: the more one (openly) lies, the truer the discourse becomes. Hoffinan and Rousso both accuse Ophüls’s work of being merely a counter-myth, replacing one set of distortions with another. I contend that it is instead an artificial myth, one that invites questions and encourages critical thinking.

**Praises**

Positive critical and scholarly responses to *Le Chagrin et la pitié* have remained remarkably constant throughout the years. At its premiere on French movie screens in 1971, *L’Express* declared: “Par son ampleur, son propos démystificateur, sa portée historique et politique, c'est un film qui échappe aux critères habituels de la critique cinématographique” (Pons). As unique as *Le Chagrin* may be, other film critics were quick to identify its importance: “Il y avait un documentaire objectif, captivant, bouleversant, à réaliser sur l'Occupation. André Harris et Marcel Ophüls l'ont réussi. Ne le manquez pas,” urged Grosset in the April 21 *Le Canard enchaîné*. And despite a daunting four and a half hour running time, the critic for *Le Nouvel Observateur* found that “pas une minute ne paraît de trop” (Manceaux 40).

Anglophone opinions abound with superlatives. *Le Chagrin* is heralded as a “monumental documentary” (Doherty 50) that is “staggering, captivating, and above all, disturbing” (Jackson 37), “a grand, astonishingly comprehensive document, recorded with unfailing persistence and intelligence” (Klawans 36).129 While intellectual rigor and a wide collection of voices and viewpoints remain key characteristics lauded about *Le Chagrin*, writers

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129 Klawans’s assessment of *Le Chagrin’s* comprehensiveness, as we shall see, has been challenged by some scholars, but it remains a commonly-held opinion.
also identify the formal aspects that lead to the film’s success and unique status: “This epic account […] is a humanist masterpiece, thanks to an artful assortment of film technique and pacing” (Daly).  

Praising a documentary for its creativity may appear to some as a contradiction, but the combination of subjectivity and objectivity in *Le Chagrin* is crucial to its innovative status for many critics. More than just unique, Ophüls’s documentary operates with “such a depth of feeling and compassion, with such complexity and intellectual rigor, that his work marks a quantitative leap forward for the form” (Jackson 35). *Le Chagrin* not only challenges the attitudes of Resistancialism or older forms of historiography, but form, especially ironic editing, is where the film’s ideology comes to light: underscoring moments of bad faith or failures of memory with archival footage that often demonstrates the contrary. This four-part blend (past/present, subjective memory/objective footage) creates moments of either harmony or dissonance that call out for judgment on the part of the spectator. It is this function, and its moderation, that leads Rousso to state that *Le Chagrin* “marked the beginning of a new phase” in not only cultural reflections but filmmaking in general (233).

Critics appreciated the cultural and historical importance of *Le Chagrin* from the very beginning. In the face of endemic ignorance, “les auteurs ont littéralement mise en scène la

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130 “Humanist masterpiece” is a phrase that resounds through several articles, yet no one ever pauses to explain exactly what that means.

131 Jackson’s judgment, in the 1975 *Film and History* journal, echoes a more eloquent presentiment in the French press four years earlier: “Il se pourrait bien que cette forme de cinéma rénove complètement les méthodes des historiens. Quels livres, quelles équipes de chercheurs pourraient jamais égaler cette authenticité du témoignage, en rassembler un aussi grand nombre et se garder de tout jugement tranchant?” (Mazara).

132 “Le retournement que le film opère tient tout autant à sa forme: il ne s'agit pas d'un discours (de plus) engagé ou contestataire, tenu par un commentateur faisant parler des images d'archives muettes, mais d'un montage contrapuntique de paroles vécues et vivantes, de témoignages contemporains à la fois des faits contés et des spectateurs appelés à en juger vingt-cinq ans plus tard” (Niney).
matière historique dont ils disposaient. Ils l’ont rendue chaude et vivante” (Baroncelli).133 More than just relevant and accessible, the film had a vital psychological role to play on a cultural scale, creating a social psychological portrait was as important for the French audiences of 1971 as it is for historians today.134 Moreover, the portrait it paints is one full of erstwhile hidden partisan motivations. Mazière’s “reminiscences indicate the often determining role played by ideology in those years, even as they demonstrate that contrary to popular conception, in many cases collaboration stemmed not from moral turpitude or greed, but, indeed, from political passion and even (as in his case) idealism” (Greene, “La vie en rose” 286-87). Recognizing the role of ideology in one’s actions, especially actions undertaken in extremis, plays a key role in laying bare the elisions of Resistancialism, but also grants those interested in the two historical periods of the film an important insight into both.

Indeed, Le Chagrin is just as much about the Occupation of 1940-44 as it is about the historical moment in which it was created. This is how it has become “a classic in the sense that it can be read in a way that widens rather diminishes its portée” (James 84). Skillful, even artful, film form combines with a plethora of objective material to create an unparalleled work that acts as both critical historical reconstruction and as an important cultural artifact.

**Criticisms**

Despite all its accomplishments, Le Chagrin et la pitié has never escaped negative criticism. For Pierre Baudry, writing for Cahiers du cinéma in 1971, while the film’s primary interest is the

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133 “France’s younger generation was growing up in a mixture of indifference, ignorance and exasperation toward these crucial years” (Hoffman xiii).

134 “Ophuls tente d’éclairer une partie honteuses de l’Histoire de France, de tendre un miroir salutaire à ses concitoyens, en faisant un ‘portrait psychologique,’ humain, du pays” (Seknadje-Askenazi 102). The metaphor of the mirror is also a common trope in literature about Le Chagrin: “Comme en un miroir, confusément, ils [les cinéastes] y contemplant le reflet de leur pays, les dangers de la passivité en période d’oppression et le pouvoir de l’oubli qui recouvre le passé” (Ciment, “Nouvelle” 18), and of course Rousso’s most famous extended metaphor of the “shattered mirror.”
ideological role that the Occupation plays in its society of production, “ce n’est pourtant pas le programme” (51). Baudry’s critique is two-fold. First, “l’enquête ne définit jamais son statut du réel, et s’entretient de l’ambiguïté d’un discours toujours décalé” (51). Where others sense a synergistic interplay of present-day testimonies and archival footage, Baudry sees only reductionism wherein the archival footage is subordinated to the interviews, losing its status as historical fact. By attempting to accomplish two things simultaneously (historic reconstruction and interrogation of popular historic memory), *Le Chagrin* succeeds at neither. Moreover, and here Baudry sides squarely with a critique from Sartre, *Le Chagrin* presents Clermont-Ferrand as a reductive model of France as a whole, an artifice that it is bound to transgress by trips to Paris, the Maginot Line and elsewhere.

Baudry’s second critique is that “s’inscrit dans le film une série de manques, au premier rang desquels on peut pointer l’absence de la classe ouvrière” (51). The disproportionate screen time between Jacques Duclos (ex-leader of the PCF) and Mazière the former Nazi also sublimates the increasing politicization of the Resistance. In effect, *Le Chagrin* performs the same kind of selective remembering that it sets out to indict. “Bref *Le Chagrin et la pitié* n’est pas, comme on aura pu le croire, l’analyse d’une situation et d’une période historiques; il est leur mise en miroir, chacun des deux éléments réfléchissant de l’autre les occultations tout en en constituant l’effet de reconnaissance par l’illusion d’être la vérité de son discours” (52). In attempting to be more real than real, it would seem that *Le Chagrin* both overshoots and falls short of its goal.

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135 For the very Communist *Cahiers* of the early 1970’s, this is of course a serious fault. Ophüls, on the other hand, is quite lucid about this lack: “It is very significant that *The Sorrow and the Pity* was made six months after 1968, when the middle-aged - and this film is about the middle-aged French bourgeoisie - were caught off base, and therefore were more likely to be self-critical” (Yergin 20; my emphasis).

136 In response to this genre of critique, Ophüls posits “that documentary is too much a lie – the invading camera destroys too much – and that fictionalized forms of history are much more honest” (James 89).
A more nuanced critique of *Le Chagrin*’s historiographic weaknesses comes from Stanley Hoffman’s introduction to the English translation of the script. After he highlights the important complexities that the film brings to the table – namely underlining that “the dividing lines were far from straight” and that each side was “an unstable and unhappy forced coalition” (viii) – Hoffman acknowledges the important role played by Resistancialism in French society after the war.137

The primary danger *Le Chagrin* poses is not so much to the Establishment, but that “a myth was in danger of being replaced by a counter-myth […] and two excesses do not make one truth” (xvi). As for Baudry, the primary fault of *Le Chagrin* is its reductionism: Clermont-Ferrand, in its specificity, stands in for France as a whole and this leads to serious omissions. The film represents too static a portrait of Occupied France;138 class lines (and the equations bourgeois = collaborationist, lower class = Resistance) are too sharp, the portrait of the Resistance too broad and sympathetic; important moments, like Laval’s return to power in 1942 and the Allied landings in Italy, are glossed over; the role of the intelligentsia in the Resistance is elided. However, Hoffman admits, “omissions bother me less than what I would call a subtle distortion” (xxii): by various details and remarks, the French nation as a whole is equated with Vichy and its oppressive policies (anti-Semitism not being the least of its atrocities). Effective Resistance efforts are more often attributed to the British, leaving the heroics of those small, diverse bands of initial résistants de sol in the shadows.

Hoffman attributes this fault to autobiography. *Le Chagrin et la pitié*, like all good art “reflects its author” (xxiii). Thus, the second half of the film, which focuses on the later years of

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137 “The official version may not be the total truth, but it has the essence of truth in it, and it has a vital function,” which may be self-serving, but also “a therapeutic mission” that had its place in rebuilding the nation (xiii-xiv).

138 “The parties, salons, theaters and collaborationist movie starts of occupied Paris remained representative of French slackness or corruption throughout the period” (xxi).
the war and the growing Resistance movement, suffers because Ophüls was not in France during that time. Oddly, what seems more important to Hoffman is not the exact details missed or the semantic distortions but that *Le Chagrin* fails to capture the ambiance of the era.  

Hoffman *was* there in the waning years of the Occupation, he speaks with the same authenticity of experience as Kessel and Melville, but his suddenly nostalgic tone throws his critiques into a new light. Is he wary of *Le Chagrin* because of its questionable historiography, or because it paints a drab picture of an era that he remembers in enthusiastic colors?

Siân Reynolds and Miranda Pollard criticize *Le Chagrin et la pitié* in separate essays within the frame of gender studies instead of as a purely historical counter-myth. Their arguments highlight perhaps one of the most serious problems with the film as the “construction of a ‘revised version,’ one that becomes the new orthodoxy” (Reynolds 157). This new orthodoxy, instead of redefining and demystifying occupation, collaboration and resistance, in fact reifies and reworks them “as masculinist phenomena” (Pollard, “Whose” 155). The film unreflectively but systematically reproduces attitudes that elide women’s active participation in history. It also portrays them negatively through a direct association with collaboration and/or attentisme.

*Le Chagrin* methodically genders the categories of resistance and collaboration. Resistance is a wholly masculine domain (Gaspar, the Grave brothers, Rake, Eden, etc.), whereas “women re-present and embody the very passivity – *l’attentisme chez soi* – that the film silently

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139 “These were the days of hope and fervor, when even those who were not heroic began to live vicariously with the heroes, in an atmosphere of passionate anticipation that makes anything in the post-war world seem drab and drained by comparison” (xxv).

140 This is a critique shared by Michel Foucault in a *Cahiers du cinéma* interview entitled “Anti-Retro,” published in 1974. Foucault and his interviewers take a harsh look at the “Mode Retro,” instigated by *Le Chagrin*, as a popular myth that has be adopted and refigured by the political Right in order to distance itself, yet again, from the specters of collaboration. The argument of Foucault et al. is largely class-based and somewhat equivocal: the *Cahiers* interviewers seem intent on lambasting a whole category of film-making whereas Foucault is more interested in larger socio-political phenomena. He is not above criticizing his interlocutor’s ignorance of history.
indicts” (Pollard, “Whose” 150). Men (especially Resistance members) are characterized as intelligent, articulate and pro-active. They can exercise critical reflection and heroic courage, whereas we see “nothing about the resourcefulness of women during the war, in terms of material survival; there is no footage of women in the factories in the 1st year of the war; we have nothing about the dependence of the Resistance networks on women for supplies and communication” (Reynolds 156). *Le Chagrin* applies, post-facto, the social constructs of “masculine” and “feminine” as categories of activity and sociopolitical thought.

There is more at work than a gendered view of the Occupation. Male voices dominate *Le Chagrin*, often in a setting that figures the *pater familias* telling a story to his progeny. The film thus associates History, with a capital “H,” squarely with men; they are the primary source of authenticity, even if their version is subverted by the film. Verdier, Tausend, Mazière, Gaspar, Mendès-France: these male voices are the ones that we hear the most often. Women may be present, but they are sidelined, silent, given the stage for a moment only if addressed directly (Fraulein Tausend) or vociferously interjecting if provoked – from the kitchen, no less (Mme Grave). The few women present are uniformly submissive and unintelligent. Their sporadic appearances lead up to Mme Solange, the single female witness, who

in some ways, stands in for *women, the category of historical Other*. She confirms the marginal relationship of all women to the really significant plot, to the proper business of history. Twitchy, inarticulate, *emotional*, Mme Solange underlines the historical gullibility and the potential danger that women represent to mainstream political culture. (Pollard, “Whose” 153)

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141 “The most poignant moments of the film, even when tragic and/or ironic, confirm the link between masculinity and solemn historical reality” (Pollard, “Whose” 145).
Here Pollard reveals the dark underbelly of *Le Chagrin’s* gender politics. In a work that on the surface has a demystifying agenda and values critical thought and action over unreflective passivity, we find that it has its own lacuna, one that is not just about missing details or a failure to align with a certain political ideology but that paradoxically reflects a very conservative manner of thinking.\textsuperscript{142}

Worse still, Ophüls seems both lucid and unapologetic about these shortcomings. In a 1974 *Sight & Sound* interview, he admits that using Mme Solange as a stand-in for all collaborators is “a show biz device” (Yergin 21). As we shall see, creativity has a key role in Ophüls’s historiophoty, but his sexism creates a double standard: *Le Chagrin* is “a film about individual choice in time of a great political crisis. Where does resistance start? Why do some people do opportune things? When and what is an act of individual heroism? These are difficult questions, but the women did not really confront them. It was permissible at the time for women to stay at home” (21). The film’s scathing portrayal of Mme Solange is at odds with this statement. Women did confront these questions, and *Le Chagrin* would teach us that they chose poorly. One would not induce from the film that it should be permissible for men to have stayed at home – that is, avoid the problems of collaboration and Nazi occupation – though many did.

Class-blindness, a misleading title and purpose, historical elisions, semantic distortions, misogyny: the list of weaknesses and failures of this “monumental documentary” has suddenly become long and weighty. Have we finally nit-pecked this film out of relevancy? If not, how might we recuperate its historical importance?

\textsuperscript{142} I think it may be helpful to consider films like *L’Armée des ombres* and *Une affaire de femmes* as healthy correctives to this gender-blindness. If women as either resisters or at least resourceful people in general are missing, Melville’s and Chabrol’s films provide us with excellent and appropriately complex models of these historical categories.
The Illusion of Objective History

The critiques of Baudry and Hoffman assume the natural superiority of a traditional nineteenth-century model of historiography: that it must be as objective and totalizing as possible in order to be valid. Here, it is important to remember that *Le Chagrin et la pitié* was made in the six months just after the events of May, 1968.\(^\text{143}\) If there is anything that May ’68 taught the filmmakers, it is that this objectivity is impossible and that the “all-encompassing” nature of conventional history is hegemonic, dealing more with exclusion than with a will towards plurality and diversity.\(^\text{144}\)

Instead, *Le Chagrin* openly displays its artificiality and disparate elements, puzzle pieces that call upon the spectator to actively participate in the film’s meaning-making. Early moments, most notably the opening credits, are characterized by a peculiar use of freeze-frame. The audience is presented by an unnaturally still image, often with an identifying title, as the soundtrack continues. Only at the moment when the soundtrack and image come into sync does the latter animate. It is as if what is being said has to “catch up” with what is being seen. What we have here is not a cause-and-effect process, wherein the spoken word magically brings the photographic image to life, but rather a subtle underlining of the ironic distance that permeates *Le Chagrin’s* semantics: what you see and what you hear can be two very different things, just like what you (say you) remember and what actually happened. Moreover, this is a *construct*: *Le Chagrin* immediately dispenses with the naturalizing form of conventional historic

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\(^\text{143}\) Indeed, Margaret Atack argues that *Le Chagrin* “can be seen to be of and about the politics of 1968, rather than being a discourse on the Occupation liberated into existence by 1968” ("L’Armée"164).

\(^\text{144}\) “In its multiple interviews and use of montage, *Le Chagrin* bears the marks of 68’s *prise de parole*. Apart from the statistics at the beginning, there is no commentary explaining what we should thinking, it is the choice of the material and the editing that has to do this work” (Atack, “May” 119). It is also the *spectator* that has to do part of this work.
documentaries and with a few understated editing-room tricks reminds us that there is a human will behind the present discourse.

Creative editing is present in more than just a handful of freeze-frames. Newsreel footage shows Pétain delivering his first appeal, in which he “makes to France the gift of his person.” As the audio of the speech continues, Le Chagrin cuts away from the footage to various archival shots of people listening in cafés, on the street, at home. Then the film leaps in time: Pétain’s speech continues as we see the Grave brothers, Verdier, Tausend and Mendès-France. All of the witnesses are in moments of pause, of reflection. Louis Grave looks away; Verdier turns his gaze to the floor. By syntagmatic association with the people of 1940 listening to the broadcast and by paradigmatic association with the soundtrack, Le Chagrin intimates the witnesses’ 1968 responses to the discourse. The filmmakers didn’t play the speech for every person they interviewed, but through this creative editing, we get an idea of their attitudes: the Grave brothers are disgusted, Verdier and Mendès-France are ashamed and uncomfortable, Tausend oblivious. Documentaries commonly animate a series of archival images with a present-day commentary by some faceless voice of authority. Here, Le Chagrin performs the opposite function, using the visual to comment upon the archival audio, turning convention on its head and using the “commentary” in a critical rather than explanatory manner.

Polycentricism is a primary characteristic of Le Chagrin, and a manifestation of Ophüls’s ideology about creative works in general, which he considers “une tentative de communication, l’expression d’une suite de points de vues personnels, face à d’autres points de vue, face à d’autres personnes” (“Regardez” 9). Virtual conversations like this are created in the cutting-
room for *Le Chagrin*, resulting in a point/counter-point structure, such as the five-point “exchange” that attempts to characterize the Resistance. De la Vigerie, the black sheep of a grand bourgeois family, proclaims the exceptional nature of the Resistance as “une société sans classes” (*Le Chagrin* 54). His remarks, that “on ne pouvait être résistant que quand on était inadapté” (54), are intercalated with the supportive testimony of *Combat* director Degliame-Fouché and of CNR president Bidault. The former underlines how the Resistance functioned “en dehors de la société organisée,” while the latter stipulates that “il y a des gens qui sont résistants par nature” (54). This monolithic portrait of Resistance members as “great men,” psychological and social aberrations, initially plays into popular (mis)conception.

However, *Le Chagrin* does not stop there, adding more dissonant voices to the conversation: those of Duclos (head of the clandestine Communist Party) and du Jonchay (a self-professed Monarchist and “résistant de tendance nationaliste”). Via this second set of intercalated testimonies, we are led to understand just how fractured the Resistance was. While Communist cells deliberately disregarded orders to refrain from overt activities of assassination and sabotage, du Jonchay, the Limoges regional chief, ignores orders to contact these cells. For Duclos, “l’insurrection nationale est inséparable de la libération” (*Le Chagrin* 55), an inversion of De Gaulle’s phrase. Du Jonchay is anti-Communist “parce que je suis catholique” (54), and he holds the Communists in contempt, since they recruit amongst convicted prisoners and supposedly owe more loyalty to Russia than to France. Personal ideologies plagued the Resistance from the beginning, their divergences thrown into stark relief by newsreel footage of de Gaulle that ends this sequence: “Les Français libres n’acceptent pas cette défaite. Les Français libres ne consentent pas à ce que, sous prétexte d’ordre européen, leur pays serve à l’ennemi de base de départ pour attaquer d’autres peuple qui luttent pour le même idéal” (55). *Le Chagrin* has
clearly drawn a parallel between “free” Frenchmen and the Resistance, but de Gaulle’s semantics are not lost on the spectator: “les Français libres” are supposedly one force, with one ideal.

Against this monolithic myth, *Le Chagrin* deploys a polycentric discourse, making judgments of its own and inducing the spectator to likewise judge. “Ophüls and his colleagues do not so much exploit their subject as ennoble it. How? Certainly not by any fancy cinematics, but merely by allowing the witness to shape the course of the trial” (Sarris 81). Cinematics, though they may not be fancy, do play an important role. While witness testimony is the primary material, the recipe is the key. Differing voices are not placed on a panel and filmed cinéma-vérité-style in debate and real-time conversation. Such an exchange would definitely have a certain value, but the cinematic medium would be incidental to it.146 Ophüls and company play up the special power (and weakness) of film, using editing to create virtual conversations while never hiding that they are cutting-room fabrications. This not only resists but also breaks down the naturalizing effect of conventional historiography and its cousin, documentary filmmaking. Authority is still derived from authenticity, but authenticity is in turn derived from a diverse set of facts and points of view. Moreover, the combination of these “artifacts” is accomplished in an overtly artificial manner. This is part of what qualifies *Le Chagrin et la pitié* as a Barthesian artificial myth.

**As Historiophotic Model**

Acknowledging the arbitrariness of a discourse, its status as a construct whose creation is guided by human will, is the first necessity of an artificial myth for Barthes, but it is not sufficient. An artificial myth must also recognize the willed nature of its own ideology. As in *L’Armée des

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146 Indeed, Ophüls “always thought cinéma-verité was bull,” (Ciment 42). To demonstrate, when he does have several voices before the camera, such as the meeting of Gaspar and his cell, or when the Grave brothers gather with family and friends about the dinner table, these events are broken up by the editing, displaced throughout the text to create new meaning via juxtaposition and association.
ombres, the filmmakers of *Le Chagrin et la pitié* do not come right out and declare their intentions, and I think this is to their credit. Rather, it is up to the audience to decipher and interpret the ideological aims of the film and its creators. Like Melville, Ophüls and his associates place stock in the intelligence of the spectator. Unlike more naturalizing discourse, they provide the clues and tools for the spectator to decipher the ideas behind the film.

This is the key to recuperating *Le Chagrin* in light of the critiques made by Pollard and Reynolds. These two scholars, and a few others, are right to point out that *Le Chagrin* does not abandon narrative completely. There is a clear development of ideas and a rough chronology of events across the four and a half hours of the film, one that more or less follows the historical course of events, but one that also diverges, regresses and calls into question popular attitudes about those events. It is a narrative nonetheless, and as in less demystifying discourse, the story of *Le Chagrin* hides its own presumptions about gender. It sidelines women, holding them at bay for the threat that they pose to a masculine way of historical thinking; and this elision is at odds with the anti-establishment rhetoric to be found throughout the film.

Fortunately, the mode of this rhetoric provides the cure for the film’s poison. Although it may contain an unreflective misogynistic ideology, its attitude towards received ideas in general is critical, calling them constantly into question. The film portrays in a negative light those who were/are unreflective about their motivations during the Occupation and is much more sympathetic to those who thought/think critically about them, regardless of which side of the conflict they may have been on.

People who operate in bad faith are portrayed negatively – man or woman, young or old, French or German. Both Pollard and Reynolds single out the hair-dresser, Mme Solange, as a

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147 Ophüls has always been aware of this fact. “*Le Chagrin et la Pitié* prête à des polémiques moins par son contenu que par sa construction. Il ne s’agit pas d’un simple collage de documents et d’interviews, mais d’un récit dramatique, réalisé en salle de montage, à partir de ces documents et d’interviews” (Godard).
key moment of *Le Chagrin*’s misogyny. They focus upon her portrayal: fidgety, inarticulate and unsure. Yet, it is not so much her near-hysterics that *Le Chagrin* wants to criticize, but her lack of judgment, her abstention and *attentisme*. Mme Solange cannot explain why she was *pétainiste*; she was just “pour le maréchal” (*Le Chagrin* 64). But it doesn’t matter if you were for Pétain or for de Gaulle. The same critique of Mme Solange could be applied to Mademoiselle X. Present in an English newsreel, recently escaped from occupied France, her is face aglow because she is “very happy” about the prospect of doing work given to her by de Gaulle for the Free French government. It is not a matter of doing what is right or making a stand for one’s belief; Mademoiselle’s smile is relief to have a place, to be of use.

Women in *Le Chagrin* don’t think much, but that does not keep men from making the same error. Helmut Tausend, commanding Nazi officer in the Clermont region during the Occupation, is present throughout the film, and his statements are constantly undermined. His sincere admission that Alsace is part of Germany, his naïve belief that the guerilla tactics by the *maquis* were not proper warfare, his derisory attitude towards his post in Clermont coupled with nostalgia for his service in the name of Nazism: all of this seems quite alien through Ophüls’s lens. Tausend suffers from such tunnel vision as to be absurd. In this way, he is similar to the Wermacht Adjutant, Walter Warlimont, whose bureaucratic double-speak is painfully threadbare. However, Warlimont is more careful of his speech than Tausend; the camera needs only give the latter enough rope to hang himself. In contrast, the camera is uncharacteristically interrogative of the adjutant: it pans and shifts while he speaks, unsettled and unsettling.

These Germans are not alone, and in fact their attitudes are perhaps more understandable than those of several Frenchmen. The famous cyclist Géminiani never saw any Germans in the village of Clermont-Ferrand (while Verdier saw too many). Schoolteachers Dionnet and Danet
are not even aware that the plaque in the school courtyard commemorates fallen Resistance members who were their students. René de Chambrun, son-in-law of Pierre Laval, goes even further. He constructs sanitizing myths and cultivates similar attitudes in those about him through economic influence and, one can even surmise, fear. He trots out a worker of his Chateldon factory for the camera, a man whose release from a Nazi prisoner of war camp Laval had arranged. The moment looks terribly staged as de Chambrun hijacks the interviewer role; if it was not staged, it proves further the sway he holds over his employees. “We were privileged!” the worker says, laughing naively as de Chambrun looks smugly at the camera. A small handful of workers from Laval’s hometown are freed: this is de Chambrun’s idea of “anti-repression” policies.

These are negative examples, and if Le Chagrin focused uniquely on them the charge of gender hypocrisy would be all the more problematic. However, not only does the film criticize, but it also offers examples of a positive resolution. The film sympathetically portrays those who think critically about their actions during the Occupation. They have more screen time; they are engaged in conversation rather than antagonistic interviews; also, the inter-cut archival footage reinforces their views.

LOUIS GRAVE: Il faudrait penser à faire une paix durable parce qu’il n’y a rien de plus bête que de se battre.

[INTERVIEWER:] Cela dépend pourquoi on se bat !

LOUIS: Croyez-vous que ceux qui se battent connaissent le pourquoi ?… (un temps) Ah !… je ne crois pas. Quelques fanatiques,… quelques-uns, oui, le savaient.

Mais vous, vous le saviez ?

148 That particular instance plays out like the best Saturday Night Live sketch – with far more chilling implications.
Louis: Ah oui, je le savais oui…

Vous n’étiez pas un fanatique ?

Louis: Non, mais quand je suis parti à la guerre de 40… (un temps, il rectifie.) Je suis parti en 39, le 2 septembre et j’ai été effectué à Modane. Eh bien, qu’est-ce que j’allais y faire ? Je n’en savais rien. […] J’allais tuer les gens que jamais je n’avais vus, il faudrait comprendre ça,… et qui ne m’avaient peut-être pas fait de mal. Après, ils nous en ont fait du mal quand ils sont venus en France, qui nous ont esquintés,… mais à l’époque… (Le Chagrin 14-15)

Far from espousing simple retaliation, Louis articulates the difference between fighting out of blind duty (his deployment to Modane) and fighting for a cause (his later Resistance activities). The archival footage that follows is a French newsreel report from the Maginot Line, where Le Chagrin is in full ironic mode. To push irony to absurdity, Mendès-France then recounts how French soldiers had so many hours of calm that Parisians established funds to plant rose bushes along the Maginot Line in order to beautify the landscape.

The ability to learn from past mistakes is not unique to Resistance fighters and peasants. Louis Grave’s social and ideological polar opposite, Christian de la Mazière, demonstrates similar thinking. Unlike Géminiani, Mme Solange or the Clermont shopkeeper Marius Klein, Mazière is frank about his activities: he was amongst the 7,000 French volunteers who fought for the Nazis in the Russian campaign, as a member of the Charlemagne Division of the Wafer SS. Moreover, he has clearly reflected upon the various forces in his life that led him to makes such a drastic decision: the “atmosphère d’antisémitisme violent” that impregnated his grand bourgeois

149 Indeed, in a later interview Louis, who was denounced by a neighbor, is well aware of the futility of revenge. “C’est grave ça… Mais qu’est-ce que vous voulez faire? Rien.” (Le Chagrin 66)

150 “Les soldats jouissent des heures de calme sans cesser d’être prêts au combat. Face à l’ennemi, ils montrent toutes les vertus qui font les vainqueurs : patience, courage, vigilance, résolution, confiance” (Le Chagrin 15).
upbringing, the attractive religious spectacles of Nazi culture ("chaque fois j’emploie le mot messie, parce que c’est vrai"), his reactionary motivations guided to Fascism because Communism was antithetical to his social milieu. Mazière is given a long time to speak, largely uninterrupted by editing. Inter-cut footage of Jacques Doriot, “Chef des Fascistes Français,” and French archival newsreels, support his statements. Interviewer André Harris engages him in a civil conversation; when the camera moves, it does so not to interrogate but gracefully, to follow the walking speakers or like an interlocutor would tip his head or nod. The setting is the sumptuous Sigmaringen Castle, one that seems natural to Mazière, even emblematic: upper-class, traditional, aristocratic and Germanic.

The film’s esthetic approves of Mazière openness, but the most important moment comes at the end of the interview, when Harris asks if Mazière has revised his judgment about his choices during the war:

MAZIERE: Oh, bien sûr,… je pense qu’il n’y a que les imbéciles qui ne modifient pas leur opinion ou qui n’en changent pas. Là, je n’engage que ma propre responsabilité bien sûr. J’ai changé, mais ça c’est un autre problème. Des jeunes m’ont demandé ce que je pensais de l’engagement, de leur engagement. C’est à chaque fois sympathique, fascinant, parce que ça fait bouger, l’engagement, mais parfois aussi cela a des conséquences dramatiques. Alors, je dois dire que je conseille la prudence…

Vous êtes devenu un libéral ? Vous avez peur des idéologies ?

MAZIERE: Un peu… (il hésite) et même beaucoup. (Le Chagrin 62)

Mazière’s newfound prudence is doubly beneficial. Not only does he profess the need to critically revisit and revise one’s opinions, but he encourages the same attitudes in others. He is,
in a way, still engaged, but now his ideology matches that of the film: honest, reflective and aware of the forces that surround and drive us.

Denis Rake, the British spy, demonstrates that these forces are diverse and always personal. Though Anthony Eden depicts him as a courageous patriot driven by a profound sense of duty, Rake is lucid about his personal motivations. “C’était vraiment, je crois, dans le fond que je voulais faire preuve du même courage que mes amis, qui étaient devenus aviateurs, etc. Etant homosexuel à ce moment-là, dans ma vie, c’était une de mes grandes craintes que je n’aurais pas le courage de faire certaines choses” (Le Chagrin 42). As in the case of Mazière, the editing and mise-en-scène portray Rake in a positive light: at home, with his cats, at ease with himself and his surroundings and confident of his statements.151 His tender recollections of his German lover during the Occupation are bittersweet and make him even further sympathetic. Rake is an exceptional model of sensitivity and lucidity – and importantly, perhaps unfortunately, neither French nor German.

*Le Chagrin et la pitié* has an ideology, and in both form and content provides the attentive spectator with the means to decipher it. It criticizes historical blindness, regardless of gender or nationality. (Though, neither the working class nor the peasantry seems to suffer this fault.) Through ironic montage and mise-en-scène, it denounces those who do not reflect upon their motivations and the well-being of their fellow human beings. On the other hand, it praises those who are honest about their actions, who reflect upon the ill or good that they have done in the name of an ideology. However, all of these positive models are men. Given the absence of positive female models coupled with a systematic exclusion or marginalizing of the female voice, *Le Chagrin* seems to demonstrate that the construction of history is a uniquely male

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151 This confidence, in conjunction with other testimonies, also lends weight to his previous observations that the working-class and Communists were much more engaged and sympathetic to his missions, while the bourgeoisie tended to be “très neutre” (*Le Chagrin* 42).
domain. Nonetheless, its attitudes towards this construction encourage the spectators, male or female, to ask their own questions, to seek their own truth. The critiques of Pollard and Reynolds prove that they have.

“Sweeping the Clouds Away”

We can categorize *Le Chagrin et la pitié* as a Barthesian artificial myth because it recognizes its own subjectivity and provides us with tools to decipher its ideology. As open and playful as it is probing and acerbic, Ophüls’s film seeks to integrate two supposedly opposing poles of representation, to mediate an irreconcilable conflict between “l’exigence d’objectivité et une réalité qui ne peut se donner que comme récit intime, subjectif, personnel” (Fraisse 80). By exemplifying and validating a polycentric discourse and critical thought expressed through creative montage, *Le Chagrin* leads to a radically new way of representing and understanding history. It embodies “l'expression d’un discours historique qui s’appuierait simultanément sur une méthode scientifique et une sensibilité à l’image” (Guigeno 53). The film constructs an argument (that not all of France was as résistante as many would like to believe) in a multifaceted manner that is proper to the cinematic medium. It recognizes cinema’s inherent strengths (accessibility, ontological effect, plasticity) and weaknesses (hyper-specificity, subjectivity).

Furthermore, it combines these sets in order to carry out perhaps the most important function of historical investigation: pedagogy. Ironically, Ophüls has consistently denigrated the

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152 The result is that *Le Chagrin* and similar projects are “not, strictly speaking, historical documentaries; they are works of art dealing with historical events” (Furman 182).

153 “The way the director juxtaposes segments, his camera angles and setting of the interviews, and especially the supplementary scenes [...] permit a fictionalization that redirects the spectator toward a different interpretation of history. Cinema exploits generic duplicity and interpretive force of allegory best through its own kinds of figularity” (James 87).
use of film in this way.\textsuperscript{154} The risk of which he is so much aware is that of indoctrination, that effect of the hegemony that his generation resisted so virulently. Nonetheless, if in \textit{Le Chagrin} Ophüls does not seek to teach us \textit{what} he thinks, he still demonstrates \textit{how} to do so. The film’s pedagogy is not the Atlas-complex lecturing of the Sorbonne, but rather, “a way of learning without indoctrination” (Hoffman xiii). \textit{Le Chagrin} seeks to lead by example – and its example is as innovative as it is rigorous.

Creativity is a key characteristic of \textit{Le Chagrin et la pitié} as an artificial myth. Maurice Chevalier ends the movie with a sequence that we can understand as a metaphor for the film itself. The famous singer relates a series of false reports about his death “in a railroad accident, then, they said I had been shot by the Gestapo, then they said that I had been shot by the patriots, then they said I had been shot by the militants. Well you see, for a man who has been shot so many times, I don’t feel so bad” (\textit{The Sorrow} 173). Like \textit{Le Chagrin}, he lays out all the possible stories and skewers them with a joke. Then he goes on to more serious matters. Chevalier sets the record straight about his visit to a prisoner of war camp in Germany where he performed, once, for French prisoners – he never toured Germany during the Occupation. However, it is insufficient to simply set the record straight. Chevalier replies \textit{in song}: creatively but topically, performing the corrective measure of a counter-myth and then pushing beyond that. This is exactly the same function and process of \textit{Le Chagrin}. Whereas \textit{The Battle of Algiers} is a counter-myth, its faux naturalism falling prey to the same tyranny of the hegemony it seeks to assail, Ophüls’s film does not merely lay bare the popular misconceptions of Resistancialism. It also responds to and breaks down the naturalizing mode of discourse that made that myth of Resistance possible in the first place.

\textsuperscript{154} “Une chose que je trouve complètement vaine, c’est de croire que le cinéma est un outil pédagogique” (Chauvin 53). Teaching the audience “n’est pas mon but, qui est de leur faire sentir, de les faire rire ou pleurer. Je suis un cinéaste de fiction frustré, je ne m’en cache pas” (54).
Chapter 5 Conclusion

When drawing broad conclusions about *L’Armée des ombres* and *Le Chagrin et la pitié*, we may benefit from the fact that both films come from a nearly identical moment in time and treat similar subjects. They provide insight into French social attitudes towards historical filmmaking in the days just after the events of May 1968 and the critical spirit inspired at least in part by those events helps to make both movies legitimate investigations of the Occupation. Moreover, their blend of scientific analysis and cinematic creativity contribute elements to a redefinition of the French war film.

In a somewhat curious manner, *Armée* is almost void of identifiable, direct marks of May ’68. Far from indicating that May ‘68 had less of an impact than many believe, *Armée* actually embodies one of its heighest ideals: critical self-expression. In crafting a *Melvillian* myth of Resistance, the movie attacks the hegemony of Resistancialism, whether Gaullist or Communist. The director seems to be saying: this film best approximates my own experience but your mileage may vary. Just the production of such a rich, complex and personal take on what was for decades a sacred cow of popular myth is a meaningful accomplishment.

On the other hand, as Margaret Atack has demonstrated, *Le Chagrin* is awash in the critical, analytical and counter-hegemonic program of ’68. As the French colonial empire has disintegrated, baring the chinks in the armor of its founding principles of logic, capitalism and causality along with the “natural” supremacy of Western civilization, a younger generation revolts in the streets and on celluloid against a combination of hypocrisy, silence and willfully distorted stories concerning the Occupation. Yet *Le Chagrin* is more than an angry indictment; it provides a model of critical thinking about the past. Perhaps in a way, the filmmakers have learned the lessons of Renoir’s utopian vision, of Carné and Pévert’s uncertainty, and especially
that of Clément’s earnest untruths. The older ways of thinking about history are insufficient. Reactionary politics once led France down a dark path and they continue to keep her from completely acknowledging that obscurity. In the face of these observations, *Le Chagrin* proposes a synergy of creativity and scientific method that continues to influence historical filmmaking today.  

One of the greatest accomplishments of both *Armée* and *Le Chagrin* is that they shed light on their historical subject as well as their society of production. Though it is deliberately temporally unspecific, Melville’s work may be the most authentic movie about the Resistance. More than any other before or even since, it relates how it felt to be a Resistance member; it approximates the dark uncertainty, the powerful paranoia and the all-consuming passion of those in the army of shadows. It demonstrates that the Resistance was not a band of misfit superheroes or patriotic ideologs, but rather a tenuous confederacy of many different kinds of people, often exceedingly normal people, each with his – or her – personal motivations. Their heroism is not in feats of derring-do and close calls but in the courage and mental acuity they mustered in order to take extraordinary measures during unprecedented times – and most importantly in the moral and often mortal price they paid.

*Le Chagrin* is still today a valuable source of information about the French experience of World War II. Its disparate voices illustrate, like *Armée*, that reasons for resistance and collaboration were as varied as the individuals who made either choice. It further shows how those choices were often ill- or uniformed, especially the third option: *attentisme*. Unquestioning

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155 Pollard and Reynolds’s criticism should not be passed over while examining this work as a document of social history. Through *Le Chagrin* may indict one kind of hypocrisy, it is not free of its own double standard: it espouses an open and critical attitude towards historiography but denies one half the planet any positive contribution to the act of creating history. The movie may make important strides, but it also demonstrates that sexism remains an integral part of the French psyche in 1969.
obedience to a class or party ideology led people to carry out unthinkable acts, such as a Frenchman fighting on the Russian front in a German uniform, or the willful blindness and bigotry of everyday French citizens. In effect, *Le Chagrin* defines these three categories with a combination of thought and action. Resistance is a varied and personal choice, both critical and active. Collaboration is also an active option, but is tainted by an uncritical spirit. In a way, we can surmise that *attentisme* is the worse of two evils: it demonstrates the fault of blind ideology and is also completely passive. With this rubric, Ophüls guides the spectator to understand what people did during the Occupation while at the same time creating a useful frame of reference for future engagement, at war or elsewhere.

On the simple level of content, *Armée* and *Le Chagrin* demonstrate a fundamental difference between French and Anglophone war films – especially those about World War II. Whereas Hollywood derives some of its most powerful heroic myths from the American experience of the Second World War, the stories the French tell themselves of this era eschew tanks and battle plans. This is logical but it has implications that reach beyond the level of star actors and typical diegetical content. French war films have become complex and almost always personal affairs, concerned as much with psychology as history, with psychic trauma more than righteous violence.

The dual nature of these works also contributes to our on-going redefinition of the French war film. Cinema now begins to come into its own as filmmakers learn to acknowledge the paradoxical strengths and weaknesses of the medium. It can have an unparalleled emotional and ontological effect; it is incredibly plastic and immediate. These characteristics are also historiophotic weaknesses: hyper-specificity, emotional over critical capacity and a wide range
of representational possibilities – the powerful way movies can create an impression of truth out of nothing but falsities.

To avoid the mythic trap of *La Bataille du rail* and *The Battle of Algiers, Armée* and *Le Chagrin* bring into the foreground the creative part of their production instead of subtly hiding their human-willed nature behind a will to realism and authenticity. Many French historical films since 1971 have come to terms with the necessity to lie on celluloid in order to achieve a certain truth. As I will next examine, the most laudable of these works unabashedly acknowledge prevarication not as a necessary evil but rather as an integral part of historiophoty.

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156 Many mainstream historical films, and most American war films specifically, remain in the you-are-there mode of realism (*Saving Private Ryan*, 1998), a mode that found its apotheosis in 1966’s *Algiers*. 
Chapter 6: Experiments in History

“I see nobody on the road,” said Alice.

“I only wish I had such eyes,” the King remarked in a fretful tone. “To be able to see Nobody! And at that distance too! Why, it’s as much as I can do see real people by this light!”

- Through the Looking Glass, Lewis Caroll

Marcel Ophüls’s Le Chagrin et la pitié is a historiophotic watershed, that convergence of innovation and popular success that fundamentally changes received ideas not only about its subject, but also about the investigation of history on film in general. Its blend of critical thinking and creativity has become a benchmark of historical filmmaking. In this light, how do more recent works use the cinematic medium to illustrate new ways of representing history?

This penultimate chapter suggests that they have begun to do so through experimentation, combining meticulous, authenticating research with innovation and even invention. They defy historiographic conventions to advance the idea that history is not an exception to other modes of discourse: that despite a will towards objectivity, despite a skeptical and scientific approach, its construction is ultimately just as artificial as a novel or a poem. Indeed, they often seek ways to circumvent the tendency of the nineteenth-century model of historical narrative to elide its own subjectivity.

Thus, new approaches to narrative are a common point of the two films examined in this chapter. Laissez-passer figures not one but two protagonists on separate if complementary trajectories. Jeunet’s Un long dimanche de fiançailles complicates its two main stories with an interfering subplot and a plethora of digressions and mini-narratives. Despite these innovations, mise-en-scène remains a marker of authenticity. Both Tavernier and Jeunet carefully researched their films’ respective eras, seeking to recreate their physical universes with as much realistic detail as possible. However, these elements are almost never the focus in an antiquarian manner,
as Nietzsche forwards the idea. They remain ever in the background instead of being memorialized or even worshipped as artifacts of a bygone “Golden Age.”

Nonetheless, film form is the real site of experimentation and new manners of historical thinking. For neither *Laissez-passer* nor *Dimanche* shrinks from highlighting its own artificiality. Tavernier uses his setting, the Parisian film industry of the Occupation, to meditate upon cinema and its capacity to represent the present and past of its society of production. Jeunet’s bravura camera movements and unapologetic use of special effects not only underline themselves, but function to illustrate a conception of space-time which approaches a Bergsonian Whole.

**Experimentalism**

These aspects ally both films with a recent trend in historiography: experimentalism. A key aim in this innovative endeavor is to match “the sensibilities of the contemporary age” (Rosenstone, “Practice and Theory” 5). It engages the public in order to both rekindle an interest in the past and to embody new ways of thinking about and knowing it. It focuses innovation upon the form of historical writing, including such devices as self-reflexivity, present-tense narration and direct address/second-person narration, tropes that highlight the various sources and problems faced by historians.¹⁵⁷

If experimentalism sees itself as heeding the call of a larger cultural imperative, there is more at work than mere formal play. Indeed, “experiments in history are not the refuge of poor historians” (Munslow 10). Experimentalist history does not reject the possibility of knowing the past but rather challenges the modernist conflation of form and content, of history and the past. Recognizing that the former is a narration of the latter, it seeks to highlight history as a construct,

¹⁵⁷ According to Rosenstone, this results in “a certain kind of honesty in the text, a way of giving a sense that behind the smooth flow of historical narrative is a person who has made a lot of choices – aesthetic, political and moral – in order to create this world of historical representation” (4).
embedding post-modern epistemological skepticism in its very form. Thus, it is often self-
reflexive and tends to favor multiplicity, implicitly challenging the conventional, hegemonic idea
of history as a (singular) factual past. It results, moreover, in a very particular relationship
between historiographic form and the past: acknowledging the performative nature of any
discourse, experimentalist historians create overtly artificial bridges between themselves and the
reader/spectator.

Overview

The following analyses demonstrate how both Laissez-passer and Un long dimanche de
fiançailles have historiophotic programs that seek, through form as well as content, to
defamiliarize the spectator’s attitudes not only about the Occupation and World War I,
respectively, but also about history in general.

By following the precepts of New History, Tavernier’s film illustrates historiophoty at its
best, using cinematography and mise-en-scène to engage its spectators and to parachute them
into the past while still keeping a critical distance from conventional historical filmmaking.
Through content, it also complicates received notions about the Occupation and the nature of
resistance in that period. However, some experiments fail, and in the end, Laissez-passer’s
characterization reveals that the movie retreads attitudes of Resistancialism, conflating the entire
French film industry with the Resistance and suggesting that resistance is uniquely a natural,
reflexive act while collaboration is always carefully thought out.

158 “The vertigo of experimentalism lies in its intention to defamiliarize the reader, to disrupt the routine perception
of the past as history with only one road and on destination – to travel hopefully rather than to arrive at the story”
(Munslow 11).

159 “Experimental history thus exists in the fissures between what once was and what it can mean now […] History
is as much about the ‘historians performance’ – the way he or she constructs or stages his or her narrative and invites
a responsive understanding from the audience – as its about the past itself” (Munslow 11).
Jean-Pierre Jeunet’s marriage of blockbuster and art film is more successful. *Un long dimanche de fiançailles* focuses on the often-forgotten experience of women during the war, crafts a complex narrative and uses montage to breach both space and time. In this way, it noth embodies Ophüls’s blend of critical thinking and creativity while simultaneously answering the call of experimentalism. Artful use of cinematic form – that is, open artificiality – creates a fragmented bridge between the spectator and the past.
Novelty and nostalgia collide behind the scenes in Bertrand Tavernier’s *Laissez-passer*. In several ways, it is a daring departure from conventional historical filmmaking; its form illustrates a pluralistic mode of historical thought; it also tells new stories that make us revisit our assumptions about the German Occupation of 1940-44. However, does *Laissez-passer* really teach us anything new about resistance and collaboration? Despite its unconventional approach to historiophoty, through characterization the film espouses a kind of Resistancialism, equating the entire French film industry with the Resistance. Moreover, in its quest to understand its subjects without judging, Tavernier’s film nonetheless makes unstated assessments. It casts resistance as a reflexive activity, whereas collaboration is more thought out. When its motivations are revealed, the latter most often springs from economic necessity rather than overt ideology; resistance, though it begins with personal motivations, becomes an almost gratuitous act.160

The following section begins with a brief discussion of Tavernier’s approach to historical filmmaking, one that can be identified with the movement of New History. We then proceed to a three part analysis: form, content and characterization. Film form, especially narrative, montage and mise-en-scène, illustrate historiophoty at its best; through content as well *Laissez-passer* brings important nuances to the table to deepen our appreciation of the complexities and

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160 This runs contrary to conventional wisdom: *attentisme*, passive collaboration, is reflexive while active participation in the Resistance is a conscious decision. Even such figures as Mazière from *Le Chagrin et la pitié* collaborated more out of conditioning than conscious effort; conversely, the Resistance of such films as *L’Armée des ombres* is a highly-intellectualized activity. Ophüls’s film clearly demonstrates how the Grave brothers’ resistance was a result of their critical thinking, as opposed to simply following orders.
uncertainties of the Occupation. Form and content, however, also lend themselves to nostalgia, to what Lindeperg calls a “museographic” tendency, and this conservatism is most apparent in the film’s characterization.\textsuperscript{161} Though there exists a certain grey area, mostly reserved for foreigners and supporting roles, \textit{Laissez-passer} makes clear judgments of its subjects and their actions.

\textbf{New History on the Silver Screen}

The asymmetrical structure of \textit{Laissez-passer} alternates between its protagonists, and the plot is both simple and difficult to summarize, for it consists of various anecdotes strung together with little narrative causality. Most important may be the way in which the audience understands that \textit{Laissez-passer} is a historical reconstruction in the first place. The film resists the conventional manner of exposition, eschewing superimposed dates for subtle lines of dialogue (“les Allemands… Ils ne vont pas bombarder Paris, ils sont là-dedans”) and grandiose establishing shots for a meticulous mise-en-scène full of historically accurate details that remain constrained to the background.

A rejection of conventional narrative characterizes Tavernier’s filmmaking in general—an aspect that, along with his devotion to social justice and political awareness, was impelled by the events of May ‘68. His historical films illustrate a related phenomenon: New History. This approach to historiography focuses on understanding, even experiencing, the past via a meticulous recreation of the mentalities of a given \textit{époque}. The subjects of New History are not the “Great Men” or even great events of traditional history writing but the “foot-soldiers” of history, the common men and women and their everyday realities. Thus mise-en-scène becomes

\textsuperscript{161} Lindeperg equates \textit{Laissez-passer} with the mode of the “heritage film”: “ces spectacles jouaient leur crédibilité et leur pouvoir de séductions sur la ‘perfection’ de la figuration historique, le sens du ‘détail authentique’ pourvoyeur de réel, le souci d’exactitude et la méticulosité portée à la réalisation des décors et des costumes [...] Tavernier succombe à cette tendance muséographique dans \textit{Laissez-paser}, innervé par un réseau de nostalgies croisées” (“L’évaporation” 50).
centrally important: Tavernier is not interested in conventional psychology; instead, he uses the objects of the past, the contextualization of his characters, as a point of entry.

**Historiophoty at its Best**

Through unconventional narrative, unstable montage and a meticulous but understated mise-en-scène, *Laissez-passé* illustrates some of the best ways that cinema can further our understanding of the past. Tavernier’s choice of an anecdotal structure to the film’s narrative is not merely inspired by his subject, but constitutes a deliberate defiance of the “tyranny of the plot.” Though the movie may progress in a chronological manner, there exists little causality from one episode to the next, especially the shifts between protagonists. This is, in its way, more objective than conventional narration. The mode of narrative espoused by most historians and even historical films assumes the direct knowability of human motivations and, in extremis, the logical, causative progression of time. Tavernier, in *Laissez-passé* as elsewhere, makes no such assumptions: we never see things fully from any one character’s point of view, nor do events happen in the past as if lined up like historical dominos, leading inevitably from one to the other.

Devaivre’s impromptu trip to London is an excellent example. Though the film represents the events in a clear manner, their causality is never singular or readily apparent. Indeed, the entire episode seems so unlikely that the spectator is tempted to share the incredulity of the British intelligence officers who interrogate Devaivre. That the assistant director would be summoned to the office on a weekend, that he would receive the key to the SD office by mistake,

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162 In seeking to recreate the past, Tavernier “accomplished his goal by carefully studying long-neglected documents [...] and by paying enormous attention to the details of everyday life in the past. To make us experience, and thus understand, former eras in the most concrete way(s) imaginable, he re-thinks, re-creates, the way(s) people moved, spoke, ate, made love: in short, the myriad minute ways in which they related to the material world” (Greene, “Dominer et punir” 990).

163 “Si je n'ai pas de contexte très fort, je perds la moitié du film. [...] Montrer les mesquineries, les pressions, les petites bassesses d'un comédien pour démarcher un rôle, par exemple, installe tout l'univers de personnages principaux et permet des les comprendre sans faire de psychologie” (Marvier 108).
that he would just happen to know a high-level résistant (a Vichy functionary of all people), that he would be dragged from Paris to Melun to Moulins then make a round-trip to London and parachute back onto French soil, all while quite ill – it seems the perfect machinations of a spy novel. Yet not only is this a true story represented with remarkable fidelity to past events, but the film’s narrative mode leads us to understand all of these events as the happenstance that they were, the wild intersections of chance, inattention and a plethora of human wills.

This is not to say that Tavernier assumes the total passivity of narrative. Individual episodes have a remarkable tonal instability that reflects the volatility of the historical setting. The dinner around Paul Maillebuau’s table passes from frivolity (Suzanne: “Oh, c’est très chinois,” Aurenche: “C’est oriental...”) to violence (the brutal assault of the elderly cat-trapper) to slapstick humor (to prevent him from fighting with Paul, Olga clocks Aurenche with a wine bottle, and after he collapses declares: “Ça lui arrive… il travaille trop, alors dès qu’il a un peu bu… il s’écroule”). These swift and unpredictable shifts are marked by interludes of seriousness (Olga recounts her lunch with Giradoux) and details that illustrate the deprivation of the era (a pound of coffee is a marvelous gift; Reine and Suzanne wonder if they’ve been served cat instead of pheasant.) In this way, tone follows the basic precepts of New History: the past is represented in bits that lead us to understand the mentalities of the era, the ways people lived and interacted with their physical environment and each other. Through the experience of tonal instability, the spectator may understand the uncertainty people experienced during the Occupation.

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164 Tavernier explains that “je voulais qu’il y ait très souvent plusieurs actions simultanées dans le même plan, qu’on passe d’une action à l’autre. Que rien n’ait jamais l’air d’être arrêté, que tout cela ait l’air instable, qu’on ne puisse savoir comment ça va se terminer, si on va déboucher sur du comique ou du dramatique. Pour traduire l’incertitude de ces gens sur leurs destins” (Thirard & Tobin 87; my emphasis).
This uncertainty is also reflected in montage, both camera work and cutting-room editing. Tavernier and director of photography Alain Choquart dominate the film with the *plan-séquence* and medium shots. More than a long take, the *plan-séquence* is a form that inserts the camera into the action and is highly mobile, moving from one framing to the next, stepping about and around characters.\(^\text{165}\) Because long shots are avoided in favor of medium and three-quarter shots, there can be a general sense of disorientation – without an establishing shot, the spectator is often uncertain of where the camera will take him next.

Constantly on the move, the camera prowls the set – much in the manner of Renoir’s preferred form of montage.\(^\text{166}\) Like Renoir’s cinema, this form creates important but understated connections between individual characters as well as between those characters and their environment. Aurencé’s chamber in the Hôtel du Square is introduced with a long take that begins with a three-quarters shot of a wall full of papers, drawings and a painting; the camera pulls away gently and pans left to reveal the rest of the room in a similar state of disorder; we then pan right to find Aurencé as he begins to put some kind of order to the chaotic mess. Just like Lange’s room, festooned with Wild West memorabilia and represented in a continuous medium shot the first time we enter, the creative chaos of Aurencé’s mind is symbolized by the decoration of his living space. That we see all of this in a single take lends it coherence and ontological weight, tying objects visually with what they represent.

An additional effect of the *plan-séquence*/medium shot combination is that the camera (and the spectator) becomes an active participant in the diegesis.\(^\text{167}\) This is an important

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\(^{165}\) “Dans ce film, la caméra est toujours instable. On ne doit pas être installé dans la dramaturgie. […] Le terrain n’est pas solide […] La caméra recadre sans cesse quelqu’un qui surgit, qui réagit” (Marvier 108).

\(^{166}\) Lalanne notes that Renoir’s cinematic style “plane sur le film” (85).

\(^{167}\) “Le principe du film est d’être au milieu des gens, tous le temps. Je ne ne mets jamais à l’extérieur de l’action. La caméra est presque un personnage” (Marvier 107).
difference from the effect of Renoir’s cinematography. Whereas Renoir’s camera mobilized to connect objects and characters, it did so most often from the point of view of the director and remained apart from the characters’ actions. Even when placed in the middle of the action, such as the *Marseillaise* scene of *La Grande Illusion*, the spectator senses the distance between himself and the action on-screen. Tavernier’s camera mimics human sight via movement, framing and its placement in the action, and thus *Laissez-passer* parachutes us into the past.

As if relieved of the task of being adventurous by the camera work, most of Tavernier’s editing in this film is conventional. Yet, there are two remarkable exceptions; *Laissez-passer* demonstrates a hypertextual sensitivity where period films are not just shown as rushes, but interrupt the on-screen image. Though these moments are motivated by diegetic events, they serve two different narrative purposes. The first illustrates Aurenche’s screenwriting technique, his collecting of overheard bits of conversation and the careful manner in which he crafts his dialogue, using *insouciance* instead of *heureux* or *content*. As he reads a draft to Olga, the concomitant scene from *Douce* takes over on-screen. The second such event gives a dire closure to one of the subplots, the deportation of Jacques Dubuis, Simone’s brother. As Devaivre catches up with his own brother, Louis, recently escaped from a German prisoner of war camp, the former reveals Jacques’s disappearance. Louis reassures Devaivre that Jacques could reappear at any time, like himself. In voice-over, Simone covers their conversation: “Jacques Dubuis, mon frère, n’a jamais reparu…” A scene from *Huit hommes dans un château* appears as Simone continues: “… et je ne l’ai jamais revu sauf une fois. Cinquante-sept ans après son arrestation […]”. The image slows as the camera finds a tall, gaunt figure in a suit, taking tickets in a cinema foyer, finally holding him in freeze-frame. “C’est lui, là. Les Allemands l’avaient envoyé mourir comme tant d’autres dans une mine de sel en Haute-Silésie.”
Taken together, these two events are a fascinating meditation on the interrelation of cinema and its society of production. The demarcation lines are porous, as real life feeds into fictional representation and back again. Additionally, the film illustrates in a rather macabre manner one way in which cinema is historically important, as a document of the past, as a memorializing vessel of lives now disappeared. The film-within-a-film structure permits us to push this meditation even further, as *Laissez-passer* momentarily acknowledges its artificial nature, dropping its pretension of hyper-realism and demonstrating even more effectively than the behind-the-scene events of its setting how much cinema is the construction of (many) human will(s).

This hyper-realism, created via Tavernier’s meticulous mise-en-scène, plays a central role in the director’s historical filmmaking. Accurate and authenticating details are how the spectator becomes aware of the past nature of the setting as well as how we enter into a more developed sense of historical understanding. *Laissez-passer* does not succumb to antiquarian history; it does not fixate upon the men’s suits, the women’s hats, the café sign declaring “Journée sans bière,” Simone’s typewriter, or a hundred other period-specific props and costumes. These remain relegated instead to the background, establishing the context for the actions and reactions of the characters, the physical world that surrounds them.

When objects are singled out, they are not revered artifacts but symbols of characterization. Greven hangs his hat and coat on an enormous bust of Hitler, a complicated but illustrative gesture of his attitudes towards the Führer. On his trans-Channel trip, Devaivre clings to his bicycle pump, the one object of familiarity in a surreal escapade. Olga collects handbags, symbolizing both her economic ambition to open a leather-goods store and her esthetic predilections: “très beau, les sacs à main. Même vide, c’est beau” (Senik 26). One crewman at
Continental waxes lyrical about his cigarettes: “Si tu faisais ta toilette comme je m’occupe de mes clopes… Je les passe à la vapeur, je les sèche, je les peigne, je les mélange à de la scarole, et j’y ajoute de la barbe de maïs… Nanan ! Meilleur que le belge, mon ami!” (34). These last two in fact play a dual role, illustrating not just the characters, but the state of deprivation in Occupied France, along with the small things to which people attached their fragile hopes and wounded pride.

Attention to detail goes beyond props. The creation of a silent Paris required the building of sets for Tavernier’s film to eradicate the sound of automobile noises that would have been highly irregular in a city where petrol was strictly rationed. (Tavernier records almost all of his sound direct.) In conjunction with a particular lighting scheme, the recreated capitol is one of dour tones and an oppressive atmosphere. The director explains that in “Paris, je voulais qu’il n’y ait aucun lyrisme. En revanche le lyrisme éclate dans les quelques échappées dans lesquelles on sort de Paris, en vélo sur les routes de France” (Marvier 108). Thus via contrast with the open air of the provinces, Laissez-passer represents the claustrophobic and shadow-filled streets of Occupied Paris. Again mise-en-scène leads us to a deeper understanding of the past and the environment of the film’s characters.

Lessons Learned

The form of Laissez-passer illustrates some of the important innovations that Tavernier’s cinema brings to historiophoty, avoiding a monolithic and conservative vision of the past while using the

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168 Lighting plays an important part in this differentiation of visual tone. Choquart recounts that he used “deux types de lumière. D’une part, des lumières douces, naturalistes; d’une part, des lumières très contrastées, plus oppressives qu’agressives” (Eisenreich 92). Interestingly, the primary purpose of this lighting scheme was not a directly realistic effect, but rather to “se rapprocher de la mémoire visuelle de cette époque” (92).

169 “Il y a eu une sorte de concept global, au début, pour éviter tout ‘reconstitution’: trouver un principe de récit de mise en scène, à savoir être au milieu des choses, des gens, des sentiments. Être à l’intérieur, éviter les plans de situations” (Thirard and Tobin 86)
strengths of cinema to recreate past events as no other medium can do. Yet the film offers further lessons about the Occupation in specific. While conventional forms of resistance are present in Devaivre, they find an indirect counterpart in Aurenche’s own brand of “résistance de plume.” The Resistance is shown to be a misnomer as a singular noun; its components are various, fragmented and even at odds with each other. Pluralism and multiplicity seem to be the name of the game, constantly complicating things.170

The two main characters, Devaivre and Aurenche, illustrate complementary forms of resistance. The former takes the more active path, bombing trains, stealing documents, and disseminating illegal tracts that denounce the Occupation. The complicating fact here is that Devaivre could easily be labeled a very active collaborator, working “entre les dents du loup” at Continental Films. Already in Devaivre, Laissez-passer uses historical fact to contradict conventional Manichean divisions of collaboration and resistance. However, Aurenche should be considered just as daring, for he incarnates “une autre forme de résistance. Celle qui, avec le papier, essaie de ne pas plier à l’air du temps, de ne pas accepter les diktats moraux et sociaux de Vichy” (Marvier 105), moral and social dictates that, as several historians have shown, were even more oppressive than those of the Germans and whose opposition could just as easily result in arrest and deportation.

Aurenche’s main resistance activity, ironically, is a virulent form of abstention, finding every way possible to avoid working for Dr. Greven and Continental. This refusal is not nearly as viscerally translatable to the screen as Devaivre’s more traditionally heroic gestures. However,

170 “If Safe Conduct seems to overflow with intricate, overlapping sub-plots, it can be ascribed to Tavernier’s belief that only a sprawling, multi-character film can accurately convey the rampant horror - and small triumphs - of this much misunderstood era. Words like 'contradiction' and 'complexity' frequently occur in historical accounts of this period and Safe Conduct's refusal to issue Manichean judgments reflects an awareness of the difficulty in ferreting out the contradictions of the Occupation from the vastly different perspectives of the early twenty-first century” (Porton 4).
as is fitting, Aurenche is provided with several moments to illustrate his philosophy with words. At Paul Maillebuau’s table again, he forwards an idea more recently developed by such film historians as Bertin-Maghit, Ehrlich, Garçon and Jeancolas:

AURENCHÉ: Et puis les films d’époque, excusez-moi, c’est encore une excellente manière de faire passer les idées. Aujourd’hui, si vous faites une allusion un tant soit peu disons… critique ou simplement lucide… sur le sabre, le goupillon, la famille…

PAUL: …la police…

AURENCHÉ: …la police, censuré ! En complet veston, vous êtes des ennemis de l’ordre national. La même chose dans un costume d’un autre siècle…

PAUL: …autres temps, autres mœurs. (Senik 38)

The idea of allegorical cinema as Resistance is thus present relatively early in the film and forms the core of Aurenche’s subsequent actions as a screenwriter.171 It is particularly interesting to see how Paul the collaborator compliments Aurenche’s discourse. He is the first one to mention the police (hence, domestic order, the SS, deportation and the omnipresent fear thereof), with starkly plain language compared to Aurenche’s careful metaphors. Paul’s summation is relative: “other times, other ways,” a perfect glimpse into his own sense of moral relativity.

As for Aurenche, one must admire the courage it takes to state: “Monsieur Greven… même si j’en connaissais [Jewish screenwriters], croyez-vous vraiment que je vous le dirais ?” (Senik 46). Greven certainly doesn’t take it well, threatening almost reflexively to have Aurenche deported. But the heart of the screenwriter’s philosophy is in his letter to Olga, explaining his departure from the Panier Fleuri brothel:

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171 Though not totally opposed to its possibility, Lindeperg is unsatisfied with the treatment of this idea: “La thèse d’une résistance de plume - qui ferait des films à costumes le fer de lance de la subversion sous le masque de l’allégorie historique - aurait nécessité d’être envisagée avec plus de nuances” (“L’évaporation” 51).
Tu me connais, tu sais au fond que je suis un voltigeur désespérément fidèle… aux femmes plutôt qu’à une seule, aux amis à mes idéaux aussi… et c’est ce qui est le plus risqué en ce moment, car si j’ai le courage des mots, je ne tiens pas devant la douleur physique. Et pourtant, je veux affronter cette époque de honte sans avoir à rougir de moi… en me battant avec mes armes et sans avoir écrit une seule scène, fusse dans des films alimentaires, une seule réplique qui ait l’air de cautionner toutes les saloperies que j’abhorre et dont ce Paul Maillebuau est le plus parfait représentant… (Senik 57)

Devaivre’s resistance may be about hand-grenades cached behind a bathroom panel, secret flights to London and stolen German documents, but Aurenche’s is no less courageous according to the film. It is, in the least, honest. Aware of his proper strengths and weaknesses, the screenwriter knows that although he has no place in the maquis, his facility with words could help to counteract the nefarious and fascistic tendencies of the French State.172

These tendencies are almost uniquely represented in Maillebuau, perhaps to the film’s detriment and certainly against its aim for breadth and pluralism. Yet the Resistance does not escape a fragmented and contradictory portrait. In London, despite a bottomless cup of tea and their stiff good manners, Devaivre is virtually assaulted by English intelligence officers, forced to tell, retell and retell again his incredible story. Far from being praised (Nord: “Étonnant. Vous êtes étonnant, monsieur”), Devaivre is subject to distrust and threats to his life while no one really pays him the least heed. Allies, indeed. Le Chanois has a similar experience, though his interrogators are fellow members of the clandestine Communist Party. He is practically accused of collaboration because of his desire to remain at Continental and for his work on such films as

172 Tavernier: “je pense qu'Aurenche est tout aussi formidable lorsqu'il écrit avec Bost 'je vous souhaite l'impatience et la révolte' que Devaivre lorsqu'il fait sauter un train” (Gravel 11).
Le Corbeau (a film that was historically assailed on all sides). Like Devaivre, Le Chanois is also threatened: “Ou bien tu suis les ordres… ou bien tu nous quittes.” His erstwhile “comrades” (“le plus beau mot que je connaisse”) prove themselves to be slavish followers of the party line rather than patriots or even critically thinking friends.

In Laissez-passer, there are as many forms of resistance as individual resisters, working sometimes futilely or at cross-purposes, and always with just as many agendas, personal, political or economic. This pluralism at the heart of the portrait the Resistance is reflected in the film’s more than 115 speaking parts that paint a vast human canvas of the historical period under investigation. In this diversified content, Tavernier makes important strides to aid the spectator’s knowledge and understanding of the past: that it was not arranged as a series of causative events, that the Occupation made for strange, even counterintuitive bedfellows and that the choices made were done so in an era of unprecedented uncertainty and oppression.

The Persistence of Myth

The preceding two sections investigate the innovations that Laissez-passer brings to the table as a historical film about the German Occupation of France during World War II. As historiophoty, Tavernier’s film is a laudable achievement, using nearly every aspect of the cinematic medium to engage the audience and bring us into the past – all while abstaining from taking the easy roads of glorious heroism, antiquarian mise-en-scène and traditional narrative modes that hide just as much as they order and reveal.

Nonetheless, though not overtly Manichean, Laissez-passer’s characterization makes clear divisions and judgments. It places its subjects into three categories: résistants (of which there is an amazing profusion), unknown (a grey area reserved largely for Germans) and collaborators (who are uniformly negatively portrayed and their motivations ill- or un-
explained). Through these categories and the implicit judgments made of each, Tavernier’s film ultimately recycles a form of Resistancialism.

Especially around Devaivre, we are practically tripping over résistants, or at the very least sympathizers: Le Chanois heads the cell inside Continental; Simone types Resistance tracts that Jacques Dubuis disseminates; Fléchard gives Devaivre a ride in the country and intimates that he can connect the assistant director with the maquis. Like Fléchard, Pierre Nord arrives from nowhere at just the right moment and like Devaivre works “behind enemy lines” as a Vichy functionary. It may be logical that an active resister would tend to accumulate like-minded people about him, but Laissez-passer pushes this logic to a Resistancialist extreme in its portrayal of the crew at Continental. It would seem that nearly everyone working on these films is a résistant in his own little way: transporting illegal leaflets, cursing the Germans under his breath, pranking the Austrian director, Pottier. The atmosphere is familial and energetic; in the oppressive lighting and closed spaces of the sets, the “true” French proletariat colludes to fight the good fight. Yet overt resistance is rare. Only Michel Simon, in a moment of frustration as Greven and Bauermeister watch the filming, has the daring (like Aurenche) to cry “Je ne peux pas continuer de jouer surveillé par la chiourme.” Greven takes the unsubtle hint and leaves.

All of this resistance activity is almost uniformly portrayed in a positive manner. The crew about him approves of Simon’s snarky comment, a crew with whom we have become familiar and allied. Practically everything Devaivre touches turns out well, and what doesn’t (Jacques’s disappearance, Spaak’s incarceration), we come to understand is out of the assistant director’s control. Though challenging and often physically dangerous, resistance is good and relatively unproblematic.
Perhaps this is because the enemy is not all that threatening. Bauermeister may be
difficult, even menacing; the sound of spoken German may make the French characters jump;
Nazi inspections are to be feared and avoided; but the film’s principal German character, Greven,
is a complex figure, at turns charming and threatening. The way in which he casually flings his
hat and coat over the bust of Hitler in his office, his admittance that the best screenwriters were
Jewish, his protection of Le Chanois – all of this would seem to indicate that he has more than a
disregard for the Fuehrer’s fascism, that his actions (and thus motivations) are just as good and
meaningful as those of the résistants in his employ. Yet, moments of menace and threats of
deportation complicate this idea. Unlike Devaivre or Le Chanois, we never understand this man,
much like the SD officer who agrees to help Devaivre find his brother-in-law. What motivates
this act of benefice? The idea that the assistant director is “appreciated” at Continental seems
quite insufficient. Both Greven and the SD officer inhabit a peculiar middle-ground in Laissez-
passer, especially since they might be contrasted with such supposedly anti-Nazi figures as the
British intelligence officers or Le Chanois’s comrades.

The middle ground between resistance and collaboration is historically the attitude of
attentisme, something by and large absent from the film. One could infer that many of those with
whom Aurenche associates are in this historical category, but the idea is never obliquely raised.
Moreover, it seems that many of these characters have important mitigating factors. Actresses
and prostitutes, they must – like the crew at Continental – continue to ply their trades to survive,
and the Germans are the ones in control of these economies. Laissez-passer either conveniently
elides this majority portion of the French population or subtly justifies it.
Contrary to Lalanne’s interpretation, collaboration is not absent from *Laissez-passer* – it is just negatively portrayed and/or ill-explained.\(^{173}\) Paul Maillebuau is the film’s iconic *collabo*: a crook, a letch, a murderer and a sadist. He is a dark and mysterious figure, not only less sympathetic than Greven, but more the French equivalent of Bauermeister, utilizing his position of power to further his own violent ends. One of the Continental crew was a member of the *Légion des volontaires français*, and the rest of the happily *résistant* crew gives him constant grief about the toes he lost on the Russian front. His story is one of dozens that form the movie’s rich historical context. Yet since it remains ever in the background Tavernier passes up a chance to further deepen, complicate – and therefore elucidate – the choices made during this era of contradictions and complexity. Even less of an investigated presence is that of the French police, who during Jacques Dubuis’s arrest are effectively equated with the occupying Nazi forces. There were collaborators, the film declares, and regardless of their motivations, their actions were a traitorous scourge upon their fellow countrymen.

When asked about the film’s dedication, “à tous ceux qui ont vécu cette histoire,” Tavernier admits “qu’il faut comprendre que cette dédicace s’adresse essentiellement aux résistants” (Gravel 6). This unstated understanding of a sweeping generalization characterizes the master narrative of *Laissez-passer* that we see in the treatment of its characters. The category of *résistant* or collaborator is somehow implied, and the entire category of *attentiste* evacuated from the film. Moreover, the Resistance is the only thing worthy of real attention, of a portrait of complexities and contradictions that nonetheless is a positive one; meanwhile, collaboration remains an observed evil.

\(^{173}\) “[L]a collaboration est quasiment absente de *Laissez-passer*” (Lalanne 84).
Conclusion

For Tavernier, “ce qui compte, dans un film historique, c’est de se poser les bonnes questions: si on y arrive, ce ne sera pas difficile de trouver les réponses” (Thirard and Tobin 88). And herein lies the problem: Laissez-passer doesn’t ask questions. Instead, it revels in cinematic nostalgia and the anecdotal rememberings of its subjects and ends up unequivocally siding with the Resistance without really illustrating why people made the choices they did. Indeed, Devaivre and Aurenche’s decisions to resist are depicted as not conscious elections at all, but rather instinctive reactions. Conversely, collaboration is more often difficult and carefully articulated.

Chock full of references to period films, their writing, shooting and reception, Laissez-passer also dabbles in formal nostalgia through its lighting (much of which mimics that of Occupation-era films, to the point of using some of the same machinery), camera placement (nearly always at eye level) and mise-en-scène via “contemporain vague” (Audé 80). What was a politically savvy move on the part of the films made during this time, carefully avoiding direct contact with the society of production, becomes a mode of verisimilitude for Tavernier, muting and fragmenting period-specific details in order to recreate the era more as it was – or at least as it was remembered by Jean Devaivre. Laissez-passer manages to avoid the narcissistic mirrors-within-mirror trap of many movies about filmmaking, but does so at the cost of critical distance.

This lack of critical approach is reflected in what may be a hidden message that we can glean from the film’s characterization: that resistance is natural and collaboration an articulated choice. One scene in particular allows us to read Tavernier’s film figuratively. During the

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174 “Devaivre me disait: ‘Il n’y a que dans les films qu je vois des gens avec des brassard SS dans les rues de Paris. Moi, en quatre ans, je n’en ai jamais vu! […] Les gens étaient très bien habillés, le mieux qu’ils pourraient. Un type mal habillé, c’est qu’il n’avait pas de boulot, et il risquait d’être envoyé en Allemagne. Tout le monde brossait ses habits, c’était un geste de survie’” (Thirard and Tobin 86). Though historically illuminating, this phrase has a striking and dire similarity to that of Géminani’s famous denial in Le Chagrin et la pitié.
Renault bombings, Simone and Devaivre race to the hospital to find their infant son in the nursery. The director himself points out that, just as in France during the Débâcle, all of the authorities have abandoned their posts, having fled to the air raid shelters. Devaivre comes for personal reasons, but as soon as he realizes that several babies are in just as much danger as his own, his actions become altruistic. Not only does this establish the mode of (nearly) all of Devaivre’s resistance activities for the rest of the film, but it also sets him as model of active resistance: personal motivations that become acts for the greater good. Resistance is thus cast as a reflexive activity from principled individuals. Why photograph documents on the sly? Why dare enter the SD office? Why fly to London and parachute back? The film offers no answers, but still congratulates Devaivre for his reflexive (that is, subconsciously motivated) actions.

Neither does Aurenche break the mold of Resistance as reflexive activity. Tavernier characterizes both Devaivre and Aurenche as men who hurtle themselves headlong through this period of their lives, centers of interpersonal power that send destabilizing ripples through the people around them.175 Aurenche’s diatribe at Paul’s table comes only once he is staggering drunk. Bost’s lyrical explanation of the worth of filmmakers makes Resistance a simple extension of one’s work, of one’s way of life.176

On the other hand, collaboration, even its appearance, is a carefully articulated decision on the part of the protagonists. Devaivre works at Continental out of loyalty to his friend and fellow résistant Le Chanois, as well for as the economic security to provide for his wife and newborn son. His explanation that he works chez not pour the Germans seems more like justification than a predetermined mode of action and thought. In a similar manner, Aurenche

175 “Des gens qui foncent, qui pensent plus vite que leur ombre en ce qui concerne Devaivre” (Marvier 108).

176 “Il y a des faiseurs de drap, il y a des faiseurs de pain, il y a des faiseurs… d’histoires… Nous sommes ni plus ni moins que des faiseurs d’histoires. […] On sert à éclairer la vie des faiseurs de drap… des faiseurs de pain…” (Senik 100).
seeks to evade Greven’s offer of work by groping about in conversation, making his resistance not only that of words, but of word play, of an impromptu game that is a response to a rather unarticulated feeling that he doesn’t want to “avoir à rougir de moi.” Like Devaivre, his reasons to work ultimately for Greven are also those of amity and economics – to help René Wheeler – and a carefully thought-out scheme.

*Laissez-passers* demonstrates every good historiophotic intention. It uses film form to challenge conventions of historical filmmaking as a way to recreate the past in a manner unique to the cinematic medium. Much of its content likewise serves to fragment and complicate received notions about the Occupation. However, perhaps because the approach of New History seeks not to judge but to witness, perhaps out of the director’s friendship with the real-life Devaivre and Aurenche, or perhaps merely out of wishful thinking, the film continues to circulate the most pernicious of conservative, and even fascistic, myths: the *übermensch* – heroism as innate and individual rather than conscious and collective.
Un long dimanche de fiançailles: The Poet’s Point of View

A man condemned to death by court martial, flung into the no man’s land between enemy trenches, huddles through a winter night behind the sparse cover of the detritus-ridden landscape. In the morning, Six-Sous has an ultimate moment of rage. His last request: “Pisser debout – comme un homme!” He stands, and his urine is a pathetic stream, but his grating, vociferous song of protest and mourning for the butchery of the Great War resounds across the battlefield. As does the German sniper shot that kills him.

When he falls, face down in the grey mud, we see him from above, as if we were floating in the air: this proud man reduced to a dim mote upon a devastated landscape. Strictly speaking, this point of view is humanly impossible; it violates the maxim that the camera be placed to mimic human sight – preferably at eye-level. Responding to this possible criticism, director Jean-Pierre Jeunet states: “c’est le point de vue du poète” (DVD commentary). For non-filmmaker spectators, this departure from convention may not register as abnormal, but its lyricism, its devastating emotional impact certainly can be felt. This bending of traditional filmmaking practices, innovation for the sake of storytelling and emotional effect, is a hallmark of Jeunet’s style.177 It is also a key aspect in understanding the historiophotic program of his 2004 film, Un long dimanche de fiançailles.

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177 Jeunet feels that “there is necessarily a basic grammar where directing is concerned. If you try to cheat with certain rules, the film no longer works. However, I think that the goal every director is aiming for is to break these rules, to use them or twist them to make something new, to discover something that has never been done before” (Tirard 115).
It may be a daring idea to posit that Jeunet’s blockbuster could actually teach us something new about history. Yet, labeling Dimanche uniquely as a blockbuster may be something of a misnomer, despite its funding from Warner Brothers and its enormous budget and scope. For it is a very French take on the Hollywood super-production. Including personal bits and flights of fancy from its director, it also investigates a wide series of French concerns in what I believe is not only a French way, but a manner that fulfills many of Munslow’s aims of Experimentalism.

So, how does Dimanche marry the blockbuster and the art film to investigate the past? The following analysis answers this question in three ways: like Mathilde, like her quest, and like a poet. Dimanche gives us horrific glimpses of life in the trenches, but its real focus is on the home-front, the women’s war. This is also a fractal film, one whose narrative emphasizes seeming chaos to divine a deeper, more complex order; it further requires the spectator’s attention and even participation in its construction of meaning(s). Jeunet’s montage is marked by constant camera movement, which lends the entire film poetic grace. Moreover, the camera moves just as much through time as it does space, filling the film with temporal digressions and breaching physical barriers to demonstrate a conception of the (filmic) universe that is more akin to Mallarmé’s Un coup de dès and the Bergsonian Whole than to Zola’s Germinal or Hugo’s Notre-Dame de Paris.

**Background**

Produced by Warner Brothers – through 2003 Productions, a new company formed especially for this project – Un long dimanche de fiançailles found itself in a contentious battle for French
identity even before its release. Since the bulk of the production funds came from an American parent company, Jeunet’s project was denied government assistance through the policy of *exception culturelle*. Several prominent publications (*Le Monde, Cahiers du cinéma*) railed against it as further evidence of rampant globalization (read: Americanization). Of uncertain national origins, it was denied the right to compete at the 2004 Cannes Film Festival, and after advanced screenings, Corsicans vociferously protested their unfair portrayal in the film. “Serious” critics the world over panned it as too long, too complex, too frivolous, unfaithful to Japrisot’s novel – and mostly just too “Jeunet.”

Nevertheless, *Dimanche* was an unprecedented success. It enjoyed more than four weeks as the top grosser at the French box office, propelled by Warner Brothers’ deep-pocketed advertising campaign and benefiting from the popularity of Japrisot’s novel as well as the recognizability of both its director and leading lady. Jeunet’s blend of careful historical reconstruction, quirky character treatment and elegant, sweeping cinematography – along with Audrey Tautou’s trademark charisma and Angelo Badalamenti’s expressive score – obviously struck a powerful chord with contemporary French audiences.

**The Women’s War**

One reason for this immense public reaction was a blend of familiarity and innovation in *Dimanche*’s treatment of women and their experiences of the Great War. The focus on women in what is, at least partly, a war film, is an important step in expanding public knowledge and understanding of this conflict. While this unconventional approach is tempered by the fact that

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178 Vincendeau remarks that the entire brouhaha is “absurd” (12) and another critic notes the film is “wallowing in cultural specificity – from the unspeakably miserable trenches of WWI to the bustle of post-war Paris” (Nesselson 27).
its female characters initially conform to very conventional female stereotypes, this is usually a starting point rather than a destination.

Élodie Gordes is the quintessential mother figure who becomes the iconic war widow, a sympathetic embodiment of hope, sacrifice and tragedy. Yet, against these easily digested labels, there is much about Élodie that is unconventional. The mother of five children from a previous marriage, she is a Polish immigrant and also a working woman. The exceptional circumstances of both her sacrifice and her tragedy are telling. She gives up the happiness of her marriage in order to save her husband, Benjamin, from the horrors of the front by vainly trying to become pregnant by sleeping with his best friend, Bastoche – at Benjamin’s request. However, she is genuinely happy in those few days with Bastoche, perhaps understandably so, after long months of deprivation and the absence of Monsieur Gordes.

Élodie’s story is one of the most coherent mini-narratives that comprise Dimanche’s winding tale of loss and recovery. We may ask if the story behind this story might not be a punishment for her marital infidelity, a “cosmic” retribution for the intrusion of sexuality into the purity of the maternal figure that should exclude such carnal instincts. Indeed, though she acts at the request of her husband and gains a few days of happiness, she loses both Benjamin and Bastoche – to the war. If anything, the real tragedy of Élodie Gordes is that despite all of her efforts, the Great War did nothing but pile further hardship upon her. Though an identifiably iconic mother figure in some ways, she is also an illustration of an often-forgotten component of war – the homefront, and the particular tragedies and travails that World War I visited upon those not in the trenches but left behind to fend for themselves.
Female protagonists often risk becoming the empty vessels of a film’s narrative: the simulacra of a woman present merely to keep things “different” and moving along. Mathilde, though on one hand easily labeled as the virgin ingénue, escapes such a fate through a complex characterization. *Dimanche* casts her not merely as a submissive woman wearing a mask of stubbornness, but with equal parts critical thought and inexplicable, even superstitious, faith. Though Mathilde may engage in trademark Jeunet games like proving Manech is alive by counting to ten, these are outward signs of the deep-seated faith that drives her on a seemingly hopeless task. If she doesn’t turn a critical eye to her belief in Manech’s survival, she is quite capable of thinking critically. Mathilde demonstrates that she is intelligent as well as manipulative, daring and cunning; she steals official papers from the military archives, plays upon Rouvière’s sympathies by pretending to be wheelchair-bound and constantly arranges and rearranges the puzzle of Manech’s “execution” at Bingo Crepuscule.

Many such gadflies are irritating and distant characters, since their basic approach to things is doubtful and caustic. These traits would be further complicated by Mathilde’s quirky form of faith, leading perhaps to charges of hypocrisy. Yet, Mathilde the semi-orphan is fully sympathetic, in part as such, implicitly inviting the spectator to play the role of parent. Her mixture of anti-authoritarianism and sensitivity also leads us to ally ourselves with her because she combines the best of our love both of the underdog and of a more fully-realized female character. She believably incorporates what may be contradictory in others, especially

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180 In the face of growing female sexual aggression in films like *Baise-moi* and the increasing presence of women in the contemporary workplace, Tautou owes part of her popularity to the fact that she “represents a reassuring fantasy figure whose basic submissiveness is masked by stubborn determination” (Vincendeau, “Miss France” 14).

181 “Tautou’s roles play to traditional family values and many of her characters embody the idea of the ideal daughter since, as semi-orphans, they invite the spectator to fill the shoes of the absent parent” (Vincendeau, “Miss France” 15).
stereotypical men: a questioning manner (her interactions with Rouvière) and a resolute faith (her simple tests), emotional sensibility (her interactions with Pire’s daughter and Élodie Gordes) and stone-faced courage (her visits to Manech’s “grave” and to the field that was Bingo Crepuscule.)

Tina Lombardi, Dimanche’s iconic whore, is in some ways Mathilde’s nemesis. It is not that the two have an antagonistic relationship, since they hardly have any relationship at all. Rather, though they both share a lost love and the desire and intelligent capacity to uncover the truth of hidden past events, their narrative trajectories are opposite. Tina is out for revenge; Mathilde seeks to recover a life. The extravagant extension of the film noir moll, Tina is a murderous avenger, a castrating figure who sets her intelligence to destruction, easily aligning it with her free, aggressive sexuality. And upon this point, Dimanche is mercilessly conservative: Tina is an aberrant figure who cannot be permitted to live. Her quest is moreover a futile one, a tragedy revealed in her last moments before the guillotine.

Despite this narrative hostility and general distance, there remains something sympathetic about Tina. She embodies, like Mathilde in Japrisot’s novel, a bitterness and rage against the injustices of the Great War. While Mathilde may dare to steal documents and doubt the official version of events, Tina dares real action. Her final moments are a cementing event. Actress Marion Cotillard gives a superb performance, a mixture of resignation, outrage and delicate sensibility, what Jeunet calls her unique ability to play a “fracture” in Tina’s psychological and emotional armor. In this development of sympathy, Tina also moves beyond the traditional punished and contained femme fatale to illustrate the psychic and social damage caused by World War I, the aftershocks that rippled through a devastated society long after the trenches were filled in.
Though *Dimanche* superficially stereotypes its female characters, it uses each of these icons as a point of departure rather than merely recycling conventional attitudes. Élodie Gordes may be a quintessential mother figure but her tale of absurd loss illustrates the greater tragedies that played out in thousands of households in the War of 1914-18; the same might be said of Tina Lombardi, whose dire fate was at least of her own making. Tautou’s Mathilde, though she may play to reassure contemporary male insecurity, is also a deeply complex character that constitutes a blend of opposites and whose quest embodies an admirable manner of historical investigation. Departing from the smallest of objects and merest of intuitions, she manages to uncover not only a truth, but the multiplicity of truths that make up the past.

**Fractal Narrative**

Multiplicity and fractures are how *Dimanche* conceives of the past, for it is what Wendy Everett would call a “fractal film.” A relatively new trend in movie-making, fractal films reflect a shifting popular conception of the universe, one more akin to recent scientific developments such as chaos theory than the ordered, nineteenth-century model of conventional film narrative. Fractal films focus on multiple characters and narrative strands, placing an emphasis not on linear causative events, but rather the seemingly random interaction and development of these various components. The resultant meta-narrative abstains from stasis or closure and instead offers only ongoing change and process.

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182 Fractal films are “structured by various interwoven narratives that trace the fragmented experiences of an undefined number of characters. In most cases the relationships between these characters develop apparently randomly, in unpredictable and dynamic ways that demand a creative reading on the part of the spectator. Because of the multiple ‘realities’ implied by their parallel or intersecting stories, the films offer neither stasis nor closure, but merely ongoing change and process. Typically, their starting point is an occurrence whose randomness is clearly stressed and which is presented as setting in motion the multiple narrative strands that develop” (Everett 163).

183 The word “seemingly” is of particular importance. Fractal films, like chaos theory, do not merely throw their components to the wind. An investigation of chaos actually seeks to find a deeper, more complex and often fragile order beneath the apparent randomness of its subject.
It may seem surprising that such abstract, complex and unconventional processes would be taking place in a mainstream film, but let us examine how this idea applies to Un long dimanche de fiançailles. Firstly, the starting point of the narrative, the meeting of the five executed men, is stressed as a random event. Though each of their reasons for coming to this point is shown, theirs are disparate experiences: trauma, bad luck, ennui and misanthropy. The only things that ally these five men are their wounded hands and the happenstance of time. Furthermore, the film makes no attempt to converge any of these narrative strands that stretch backward and forward through time. Mathilde must navigate each story separately, sometimes discovering and sometimes creating connections between them on her search for Manech. In addition, there are at least two main stories: the quest and the execution. In the style of Rashomon (Kurosawa, 1950), as the former advances, the latter is told and re-told from myriad points of view. To further complicate things, the Tina Lombardi subplot runs constant interference, more for the spectator than Mathilde. History, then, must be actively reconstructed because its components are diverse and its development almost random. On one level, Dimanche’s narrative comes to a kind of closure: Mathilde finally recovers her lost love – but does she? Though the film hints that Manech remains much the same person as before the war, his memory is gone; the erstwhile blissful couple must start their life all over again.

Fractal films may place an emphasis on multiplicity and seeming chaos, but there is an order to be divined: their narratives often develop along a pattern similar to networking. Much

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184 Multiple stories from multiple characters seem a constant of Jeunet’s cinema. “Un seul directeur, une seule histoire, ça me paraît pauvre. J’ai toujours l’angoisse que le spectateur n’en ait pas assez, qu’il ne soit pas satisfait en sortant du cinéma” (Rouyer 11). Though with this admission it may seem that Jeunet is driven more by fear than a desire to innovate, it also reveals a healthy respect not just for the appetite of the audience, but for our intelligence as well – a trait that he shares with such directors as Melville and Ophüls.

185 In the narrative of fractal films “echoing the random growth of the network, there is little or no linear movement, and stories and events instead form complex web-like structures. The patterns underlying the chaos are only
as hyperlinks connect web pages across the globe in a plethora of often unpredictable ways, the narratives of fractal films offer little to no linear movement. They shift instead from side to side, back and forth in time and space, demanding active spectator participation. Background information is often sparse and clues, if present, can be misleading or outright untrue.

*Dimanche’s* relationship to this aspect of fractal films is more equivocal. The plot does offer linear movement on both major narrative strands. However, this progression comes very slowly, in fits and spurts, sparked by random encounters and often the story of Bingo Crepuscule is retread since the same events are told from different points of view. The randomness of the progressions is partially because the film is riddled with digressions; unlike most fractal films, there is a profusion of background information. Far from rendering *Dimanche* a more conventional narrative, these digressions add to the anecdotal, and thus pluralistic, nature of the film. They add to its historical breadth, offering so many more glimpses of the era, so many more voices.

Most importantly, the spectator is called upon to be attentive, even to participate in the film’s meaning-making. This is a mystery, after all, a puzzle to be solved. The cast is huge, the events are numerous, there is a constant flood of information to sort and contextualize – all atop (or beneath) Jeunet’s stunning visual esthetic that demands attention itself. A mystery implies clues, and there are plenty. Indeed, one of the most poetic of devices in the film is the box that Mathilde receives. This tin of memorabilia is emblematic of the film as a whole: pictures, knick-knacks, coded letters and postcards. Everything is present already in this box to understand the execution at Bingo Crepuscule – or at least to lead the inquisitive (and determined) to knowledge of the past. However, these are not transparent clues; they can be misleading or misinterpreted gradually and partially recognized by the spectator, who must play an active role in the construction of meaning. Background information is minimal and clues – if they exist at all – are misleading and confusing” (Everett 167)
and the film reflects the possibilities of these pitfalls with the Tina Lombardi subplot, granting knowledge of events without their proper contextualization. *Dimanche* leads us down dead ends as easily as the right path, and there is no way of knowing ahead of time which will take us where.  

**Breaching Space-Time**

If the narrative of *Dimanche* is characterized by multiplicity and develops in unpredictable ways, with long takes and camera movement, its cinematography both embodies its inherent non-linear movement and suggests that its various component can and should be connected by the spectator. Jeunet’s characteristic visual flair creates a poetic world in and of motion, one where time and space are equally explorable.

Jeunet’s camera is constantly moving: helicopter shots create sweeping expositional images; crane shots soar over the trenches and the battlefield; the camera tracks through Mathilde’s world like a drifting phantom; a Steadicam lopes alongside running characters. Yet none of this is jerky or jarring, rather it remains ever smooth, elegant and powerful.  

This aspect in itself lends the film a sense of flight, which relates to the albatross leitmotiv, and a sense of controlled (constructed) grace. Like the forceful austerity of Melville’s *L’Armée des ombres*, *Dimanche* forwards its artificial nature while still creating an engrossing emotional effect. A predilection to move the camera also lends itself to long takes; the camera reframes the image rather than cutting, and thus the filmic universe is granted a greater sense of wholeness

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186 Film critic Dave Kehr laments that “the details become the discourse – a constant flow of visual (and aural) stimulation in place of the traditional development of plot, characters and theme” (74). The key word here is *traditional*. While Jeunet remains ever aware of the conventions that govern mainstream filmmaking, he constantly seeks to bend or even break them in the service of something new and interesting. If form takes over for traditional cinematic elements, this is not necessarily a flaw but should be examined specifically – especially in light of *Dimanche*’s popular success.

187 Jeunet explains that he is “very strict about camera movements: I feel they must be regular and steady. [...] I insist on total rigor because I believe that it lends elegance and power to the camera movement” (Tirard 118-19).
and ontological weight. The opening sequence is an excellent example. It begins with a long shot of a rain-soaked trench, immediately setting the scene emotionally and visually, then descends past the rotting corpse of a horse thrown into a tree, an iconic figure of World War I imagery, and finally moves forward past the tree to follow the band of condemned men as they trudge along the trench. All of these things are to be taken together, in the same place, parts of the same world, a world that is dreary, grotesque and absurd. Camera movement also raises the notion of *hors champs*, for while the camera may move through the filmic universe to refocus and reframe, it consequently acknowledges its own limitations. It cannot show us everything, and in combination with the treacherous path of the film’s narrative, it may not even show us everything that is important. This is one point of view, it implies; there must be others.

Jeunet also uses montage – specifically editing, superimposition and camera movement – to breach both space and time. The many digressions of *Dimanche*, especially as they range farther from the two main narratives, are commonly cast as period film, and these effects-laden sequences perform several functions. The different film speed and simulated period film stock mark these sequences as just that: apart from the main story. Furthermore, they relate film to memory, or even to dreams. Yet this abnormality cannot be easily contained, for with superimposition these same kinds of effects spill over into the rest of the work. Although the function of superimposition is somewhat conventional (representing phone calls, the passage of time, the writing of letters and even memories of previous diegetic images), it demonstrates the porous nature of space-time within *Dimanche*. Even within the frame, that is to say without cutting to a wholly new shot and thus exhibiting the same ontological value of a long take, the movie connects disparate times and places. And is that not a fundamental goal of a historical film?
Perhaps more powerful than these effects-rich visuals, Jeunet’s use of compositing allows him to recreate the past and to breach space and time in physically impossible ways. The introduction of detective Germain Pire begins with a long shot of the Place de l’Opéra – but the Place as it probably was in 1920. This image alone is a combination of four different takes: the Opéra today with no modern vehicles or people in view, and three takes of extras in period costumes and automobiles, each take filling a different portion of the screen. While maintaining motion and perspective in the background, the camera moves downward to discover the sign outside Pire’s office in the foreground. The camera then tracks right through a wall to enter the building itself, past an office where Pire’s daughter is working and finally into the office proper to capture the Mathilde/Pire interview *in media res*. Like the long take that opens the film, this sequence places all of these elements together. More than establishing itself as authentic through mise-en-scène, and more than demonstrating technical wizardry for its own sake, it connects the disparate elements of a recreated past in a graceful manner, breaching both time and space while employing nearly every element unique to the power of the cinematic medium.

**Cinephilia, Cinemania, Jeunet**

How those elements are combined, to what effect and to what end, is something that sets *Un long dimanche de fiançailles* apart from Jeunet’s previous films and renders it an important work of experimentalist historiophoty. While his earlier work is marked by an inward-focused love of cinema, *Dimanche* finally harnesses his mastery of the medium to look outward and make unsuspected connections. To understand this shift better, I find it useful to apply the concepts of cinephilia and cinemania developed by David Sterritt.

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188 This touch is a favorite of Jeunet’s: “my mania is the entrance into the frame from below [...] to make the character’s arrival incredibly dynamic” (Tirard 119).
Sterritt employs these terms as categories of movie watchers. “The average cinephile is content to see, ponder and adore great films” (Sterritt 19). We can thus describe him as the “adoring thinker,” who approaches a movie as a puzzle to ponder, appreciating the unique forms invented by the filmmakers to address a certain issue – and therefore constantly aware of each film as part of a greater social fabric. By extension, the cinephile feels the obligation to reach out, to encourage others to broaden their cinematic (and social) horizons. As for the other category, one could describe a cinemaniac as a “screen addict,” for he is “driven to see, see and keep seeing everything in sight, with pondering often kept at a safe, tidy distance” (19). However, there is more at work here than an obsessive-compulsive attitude: for the cinemaniac, “film is a substitute for life. Film is a form of living” (26). The best life is just as carefully constructed, just as perfectly framed as a great movie; and this leads to constant disappointment and frustration, for real life is messy, disparate and fractured.

While Sterritt applies these categories strictly to movie watchers as a meditation on the profession of a film critic, they can also be applied to filmmaking. Considering that so many (French) filmmakers self-identify as cinephiles, their attitudes towards watching movies could easily port over to their ideas about cinematic creation. As for Jeunet, I would identify his works before Dimanche under the rubric of cinemania. Delicatessen is a closed world of somber colors, self-involved mise-en-scène and dark humor that deliberately insulates itself from the real world, denying allegorical possibilities and reveling in its artificiality without touching upon greater social issues. La cité des enfants perdus is similar on many points: a fairy tale coated with industrial soot that does little more than regurgitate bits and pieces of modern mythology with the distinct visual flair that characterizes Jeunet’s collaboration with Marc Caro. Le Fabuleux
destin d’Amélie Poulain works very hard to erase its connections with the real Paris in which it was shot but not set.

In contrast, though Un long dimanche de fiançailles may share stylistic markers with Jeunet’s other works, here we finally have a cinephilic film. Unlike the delight of the dominos set up and knocked down in perfect order that characterizes Amélie, Mathilde must discover and erect each bit of the story of Bingo Crepuscule; sometimes she sets up the wrong one and sometimes they get knocked down early. For the attentive spectator, the movie is pocked with small errors and cheats; there were no payphones in the Gare d’Orsay in 1920; the German “Albatross” is actually an American Stearman biplane; the “real” albatross is nothing of the kind – it’s a gannet. Instead of detracting from the film’s historical program, these small errors lead critical viewers to ask questions and to expand their horizons. Finally, Jeunet’s latest work also recognizes its status as a component of a larger social fabric, addressing such issues as feminism, the trauma of trench warfare and the frictions of regional identities.

In this way, Un long dimanche de fiançailles fulfills many of the aims of experiments in history. Experimentalism does not abandon the knowability of the past – and in Dimanche, the learning about past events is our central concern. However, the representation of these events acknowledges its own artificiality, its status as a human construct. Jeunet’s soaring crane-work and breaching of space-time with montage perform meld form with meaning to simultaneously underline both. Finally, experimentalism is a hopeful journey into the future. In Dimanche, the final scene may have a simple if incredible emotional impact, but it is really the getting there that counts most, and our joy is tempered with the knowledge that this is just one step among thousands, one verse in an endless poem.
Chapter 6 Conclusion

Experiments in history are amongst the latest evolutions of histriopgraphic and historiophotic practices, offering innovative ways to learn about history. However, I approach analyzing films so recent as *Laissez-passé* and *Un long dimanche de fiançailles* as documents of social history with a little trepidation. Even though as an American I may benefit from a slight cultural remove, this is not entirely comparable to the distance provided by the passage of time and the accrued analysis of scholars. We are still quite close to the subject, especially in a world of ever expanding globalization (and thus an ever shrinking globe), and we have no way of knowing how these works may affect future productions and modes of thought. Nonetheless, both of these movies contribute a great deal to a redefinition of the French war film via their heterogeneous inclusion of previous strategies and/or the way we can surmise they react to older works.

*Laissez-passé* models a historiophotic approach that grew from the critical and creative spirit of May ’68. Tavernier acknowledges that looking too closely at an object can make it effectively disappear, either rendering it entirely banal or imbuing it with new meaning via forces both onscreen and off. More often than not, a fixation on representing authentic objects of the past leads only to antiquarian history, to a quasi-religious reverence for those creations of a “Golden Age” of past achievement. Instead, Tavernier leaves these objects to the side and in the background, crucial to an authentic representation but never emphasized.

The box-office success of *Laissez-passé* reveals more than a public acceptance of Tavernier’s subtle but critical approach to historiophoty. It also indicates a popular metacinematic predilection. Like the “great works” of the Seventeenth and Nineteenth centuries, the French are pround of their cinematic achievements and enjoy celebrations both small and large of this cultural capital. One may be tempted to think that examining the success of the
French film industry during *les années noires* would be little more than a soothing balm or a cheap attempt to appeal to cultural pride in order to sell tickets. There are certainly economic concerns with a production of this size and Tavernier frequently goes out of his way to demonstrate his encyclopedic knowledge of the era’s cinema but the presence of other films in *Laissez-passer* goes far beyond erudite winks at the audience. Metacinematic concerns and forms shape this movie on a fundamental level, leading the spectator to mediations on esthetics, history and the nature of visual representation. This kind of hypertextuality goes back to *A bout de souffle* (Godard, 1959) at the very least, but the popularity of *Laissez-passer* demonstrates that French audiences have become quite sophisticated in their tastes.

Sophisticated, and even narcissistic, but not necessarily pedantic. The small touches in a Jeunet film are more than just style: they are constant, miniature invitations to join in the fun of cinema. There are grand worlds both outside and within the human psyche that the camera may explore, and the particular will to push towards the exterior is key to the value of *Un long dimanche de fiançailles* as a document of social history. Jeunet is no longer sharing just a personal darkroom creation. He now reaches beyond the frame, punctures time and space to include the spectator in both the joy of storytelling and in the critical, analytical process of historiophoty. *Dimanche* is an intensely rich and complex film – and a nearly unprecedented box-office success in France. Whether they came to the theater out of a cult-like loyalty to Jeunet, star-power attraction or historical curiosity, French audiences responded strongly and positively to this work. Creativity and criticism have clearly found a legitimate synergy in popular attitudes towards history.

What do we learn of the past from these movies? *Laissez-passer* is a treasure-trove of historically authentic objects, characters and anecdotes. Though it may fail to confront the
choices of collaboration, resistance and *attentisme* with sufficient critical remove, it is still an excellent snapshot of the Occupation: the scramble for decent clothing, the lines at the butchershop and the silence of Paris. As in pointillism, these minutae form a terrific impression of a greater whole without a single element dominating the composition. But *Laissez-passer* goes beyond props and set-pieces for the purposes of historical recreation. Like *Armée*, it employs form to approximate the experiences of its subjects. Narrative instability eschews realism to give us an idea of the turbulence of the times while subdued lighting helps to recreate the era’s quiet oppression. With the constant use of a steadi-cam, medium shots and *plan-séquences*, the predominant forms place the spectator right in the middle of this complex environment.

*Dimanche* may be just as meticulously researched and recreated as *Laissez-passer*; Jeunet and his collaborators went to significant lengths to assure the historical accuracy of the sets, props and costumes. But the film makes no pretense of realism: where historical fact may impede good storytelling, fiction will out. One does not watch a Jeunet film for its documentary-like authenticity. Nonetheless, *Dimanche* does contribute to our appreciation of the Great War and French society of the early 1920s. Cinematic treatments of women’s war experiences are few and far between, especially such eventually positive treatments as those found in *Dimanche*. Though there are several excellent historical films about the horrors of the trenches, Jeunet does an unprecedented job of representing the muck, horror and madness that permeated the life of *les poilus*.

The more significant aspect of Jeunet’s work is a historiophotic approach that values creativity as much as criticism. Mathilde’s constant quest indicates that persistently asking difficult questions is part of the creative process, and the movie’s forms demonstrate how creativity is not that far removed from the writing of history. While in a mode of realism this
mélange may tend to lead to mythmaking, in Jeunet’s hands it becomes a positive contribution toward popular conceptions about history and historical filmmaking.

These notions have become increasingly mature. *Laissez-passer* and *Un long dimanche de fiançailles* seem to have moved beyond Daniel’s categories of *film de guerre* and *film sur la guerre*. They include important moments of armed conflict but focus just as much on other matters, especially the complexities of their respective subjects. Even more, they find creative ways to highlight the difficult process of historical representation. Experiments in history, these movies have carefully learned the lessons of their predecessors and are unafraid to combine strategies that have been examined separately in previous chapters. Each movie is a hypertextual feast: *Dimanche* based on the Japrisot novel and *Laissez-passer* inspired by an array of memoirs, interviews and the personal experiences of the filmmakers. Hybrid creations, they are also unafraid of ambiguity and polycentricity. Tavernier’s film understands that objects and events of the past are best examined peripherally; Jeunet’s works on many levels and especially as a metaphor for the historiophotic process. Furthermore, these movies share important characteristics with artificial myth: an open acknowledgement that history is a story crafted through human interpretation, that in form and function it often has as much in common with the myth of Sisyphus as with lived experience. They have learned to doubt themselves and share that doubt with the audience without necessarily creating an effect of total alienation. Complex, creative and critical, they are the end product of more than 100 years of historical investigation on film.
Chapter 7: Hiroshima’s Atomic Silhouette

Where has the French war film been and where is it headed? Can we understand the development of the strategies that it has employed during the past century as an evolution – both of film form and of social attitudes towards cinema and French national identity? (For the two are often closely intertwined). And, does this evolution port over to still larger issues, demonstrating a changing popular conception of history and the possibilities of its representation?

To answer these questions, it may be appropriate to address first where we have not been. The desire to perform close analysis has constrained me to examine a relatively small number of films. While I consider that the rubric of “strategies” is beneficial to understanding the various forces at work in the French war film, it has also necessarily led me to exclude important works from this project, including Les Croix du bois (Bernard, 1932), Verdun: visions de l’histoire (Poirier, 1928), Les Jeux interdits (Clément, 1952), Paris, brûle-t-il? (Clément, 1966), Le Crabe tambour (Schoendoerffer, 1977) and Fort Saganne (Corneau, 1984) amongst others. I have omitted many of these movies because those examined in this project perform a representative function. One Clément film on the Resistance is sufficient; Le Petit soldat (Godard, 1963) and L’Année dernière à Marienbad (Resnais, 1961) are allegories. Other exclusions are relatively unremarkable on a level of form and/or content: Bouchareb’s 2006 Indigènes, for all its impact, brings nothing new to the genre; Bon voyage (Rappeneau, 2003) is an insipid rehash of heroic wartime clichés. Other films have already been sufficiently treated by other academics, such as Malle’s Lacombe, Lucien (1974) or Au revoir, les enfants (1987), along with the dozens of
“Obsessive” films about World War II produced in the 80s and early 90s. Along with *Hôtel terminus* (Ophüls, 1988), *Nuit et brouillard* (Resnais, 1955) and *Shoah* (Lanzmann, 1985) constitute an entire field of study unto themselves.

From the point of view of film history, there are two significant absences. The first is the New Wave, specifically that of the *Cahiers* group, and there are a few reasons for this. First, for all their esthetic innovation, their strategies fall rather neatly into those investigated in this project. *Le Petit soldat* and *Jules et Jim* (Truffaut, 1962) are allegories, the first of the Algerian War, the second of changing feminine roles in the 1960s; *Le Dernier métro* (Truffaut, 1980) is a rather anachronistic retread of the myth of Resistance. In addition, while one cannot deny the importance of the New Wave in regard to contemporary French history and that of cinema, it has somehow become a monolith, the yardstick against which all subsequent French movies have been measured. This has led to true absurdity: *Cahiers du cinéma* reads *Laissez-passer* as either an anti-New Wave film – or about rampant globalism; it was also one of the leading critics of *Un long dimanche de fiançailles* as “un-French.” Where, and how, then has the New Wave ideal become the ultimate incarnation of French film?

Substantive challenges to this cultural and esthetic hegemony have only begun to appear, notably Sellier’s *La Nouvelle vague: un cinéma au masculin singulier*. Filmmakers such as Jeunet, Ozon and Haeneke have begun to make serious inroads with meaningful films that buck

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189 Cf. “Amélie, or le fabuleux destin du cinéma français,” wherein Andrew deconstructs Jeunet’s film as a faux-New Wave work and highlights the continuing project of *Cahiers du cinéma* to perform the same function, jealously safeguarding the New Wave legacy as not only good filmmaking, but the epitome of French filmmaking – and by extension French cultural expression of the twentieth century.

190 It is appropriate to acknowledge something of personal esthetic bias as well. Through this project, I have found myself more and more to be “positifiste” – I like films with rich visuals, tightly-crafted scripts and fanciful, elegant camerawork. Indeed, I prefer them to the rough-cut spontaneity of the New Wave esthetic. The unspoken conservatism of the New Wave irks me (especially Truffaut’s). I always found more problems than solutions with the *auteur* theory; great films are always made as a group, especially by those who play together well. *La caméra-stylo* is a fabulous idea, but it presupposes a modernist, and hence out-dated, form of artistic creation. Even a novel or a book of poetry is never produced alone. Following the “linguistic turn” of the 1970s (as Munslow coins the phrase), the idea of an “author” has been greatly problematized.
the old trend.\textsuperscript{191} In this light, one should understand my exclusion of New Wave films as a desire to tread new ground, to explore some areas of French cinema that have in the past received significantly less critical and academic attention than their New Wave counterparts, especially within the genre of the war film.

There is a second, more crucial, absence: the atomic silhouette of \textit{Hiroshima mon amour} (Resnais, 1959) has been cast upon this project from its inception. It is the exception that confirms the rule of the rubric that I have imposed on this project. Indeed, it does not fit neatly into any of the “strategies” we have examined because it incorporates nearly all of them. This conclusion will use it as both a summation of each strategy and a counterpoint that allows us to make connections.

\textbf{Literary Appropriation}

Abel Gance’s \textit{J’Accuse} and Chabrol’s \textit{Une affaire de femmes} together demonstrate the lasting, complex relationship of cinema and literature. This overall strategy divides into two categories: adaptation and \textit{bricolage}. To the former, we may add from this study \textit{L’Armée des ombres} and \textit{Un long dimanche de fiançailles}. The “translation” of a written work to the silver screen has long been a favorite practice of the cinema industry, but as we have seen, the most successful adaptations are not matters of direct copying, or “transformation.” Rather, they seek to extract the essence of the source text, the hypotext, establish a matrix of imitation and in this way best adapt the hypertext to its new medium. In this “essentializing,” adaptation may be somewhat akin to \textit{bricolage}, the irreverent borrowing of signs and modes that characterizes \textit{J’Accuse}. For it

\textsuperscript{191} “Acting with what seems perfect unconsciousness, Jeunet rejects the venerable Bazinian model of filmmaking [...] Jeunet does not use the camera to capture an existing reality [...] but to create a composition all its own” (Kehr 73). Kehr ultimately intends this observation as a harsh critique of Jeunet’s style, but it also cuts straight to the heart of the matter, and could be an important starting point of an entirely new and different study of the tradition of ontology in French cinema.
is not a matter of using the same signs in the same old way but of renewing them. Yet, *bricolage* goes much further, pushing beyond mimesis to turn its borrowed signs against themselves, opening up new ways of thinking and representation.

It is to this second category that *Hiroshima mon amour* unequivocally belongs. Indeed, one is tempted to consider it the ur-film of *bricolage* – if not the first then the most prominent work to demonstrate a synthesis of literary and cinematic concerns. The primary source of its literary stylizing is novelist and scriptwriter Marguerite Duras, who infuses *Hiroshima* with a mélange of classicism (a five-act structure and an operatic tone in the dialogue) and post-modern textual meta-awareness. The very underpinnings of conventional historical representation, the ability to denote the past in a realistic manner, are given as paradoxical in the film’s dual psychological necessity to remember and to forget past trauma.

*Hiroshima* does more than embody Duras’s literary concerns within the script; it marries her written epistemological skepticism with film form. The dialogue and the image exist in a synergistic relationship, sometimes as harmonious blend, sometimes as counterpoint. What Elle may accomplish by recounting her past to Lui and/or in voice-over, Resnais’s editing performs via irrational intervals: Lui’s hand is suddenly replaced by that of Elle’s dead German lover; the slow traveling shots of Hiroshima’s neon streets blend into the dour stone avenues of Nevers. However, while Resnais’s cinematography suggests that the past may be recalled and even represented on-screen, it can only ever do so as artifice. If Elle’s voice insists upon all the things she has “seen” in Hiroshima, the opening shows all the things she could never have experienced: the death and devastation of a million suns on the Place of Peace. The grotesque poetry of this sequence extends to Lui’s relationship with Elle’s past – it is a story recounted to him, and
represented to the spectator, always at a remove, always the construct of a human will, always a fragment, a partially invented sliver of past memories.

Memory is thus a central concern of *Hiroshima mon amour*, especially traumatic memory and its problematic relationship to one’s present identity. After shattering devastation, how can we integrate ourselves back into ourselves, as individuals and as a society? In relating literature to cinema, *J’Accuse* and *Une affaire de femmes* touch upon something of the same: the relationship of the individual to society beneath the unprecedented, brutal shadow of twentieth-century warfare. Far from retreating into sanitary estheticism, all three films use it to flank the problem of psychological recovery, both individual and collective.

**Allegory**

Another flanking strategy employed by the French war film is allegory, though in *La Grande Illusion* and *Les Visiteurs du soir*, we are attacking present problems instead of past trauma. Renoir’s film deploys World War I, specifically German prison camps for French officers, as a distilled representation of French society of the mid-1930s. All of the necessary elements are present, the aristocracy, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, but the film engages in more than mirroring and commenting on its society of production. Renoir attempts to articulate a radical social program, the rearranging of society from one of vertical boundaries (nation-states and ethnicities) to that of horizontal ones (primarily socio-economic classes). And herein lies a certain paradox, for while Renoir’s utopian vision, embodied by his long takes and prowling camera-work, seeks an egalitarian ideal that erases difference, *La Grande Illusion* remains trapped in a universe of differentiation, where the rich are rich (or, at best, sacrificed), men are men and women are women.
To buck the masculinist status quo, we may turn to *Les Visiteurs du soir*. While *La Grande Illusion* uses war to allegorize its society of production, *Les Visiteurs* performs the opposite function, using a fabled, glorious French past to allegorize the fascistic forces present during World War II. The genius of Carné and Prévert’s film is turning the dire constraints of filmmaking and moral impositions of the French State to their advantage. Avoiding the present and transparent social commentary allows them to create luscious, romantic vistas whose feudalistic setting allows for subtle and biting investigations of power and its misuse. The Vichy mandate – overt or tacit – to cultivate strong, moral, intelligent representations of women likewise permits Carné and Prévert to place an ideological résistante right on the screen in 1942. Anne embodies more than the Vichy ideal, she pushes intelligence and moral integrity to the point of anarchy – and pays a heavy price for the strength of her convictions.

Both of these films place their “real” concerns at a remove from their actual settings while maintaining an identifiable correspondence for an attentive and imaginative spectator. *Hiroshima mon amour* takes this method to an extreme by allegorizing itself. Recognizing that a direct representation of the past, either that of Hiroshima or Nevers, is impossible, Resnais’s film uses two disparate tragedies to mirror each other in order find the “truth” of historical thought entirely within the infinite reflections between them. Connected by impenetrable trauma, if not madness, these events are otherwise wholly different in matters of scale, space and time. Yet the film infuses one event into the other; since the recounting of the Nevers story is impossible outside of Hiroshima, Elle’s outsider perspective always contaminates the investigation of the atomic bombing. These two events are leveraged one against the other: the intimacy of Nevers provides the spectator with emotional accessibility, the scale of Hiroshima a concrete sense of past events. More than an investigation of the “cracks” of history, which is only a small by-
product of *Hiroshima* and never its true aim, Resnais and Duras constantly highlight the fractures of modernist historical thought and work to destroy the conflation of history and the past by placing both in doubt and puncturing them with one another. Beyond allegorizing itself, *Hiroshima mon amour* becomes a historiographic metaphor, an abstract and even poetic model that illustrates the performative nature of writing – or filming – history.

**Barthesian Myth & Artificial Myth**

As for Barthesian myths, *Hiroshima* again defies easy categorization and embodies the radical possibilities of artificial myth. Its defiance is the source of its strength, for it revolves around the impossibility of representing the past *just as it was*, that is, realistically. Unlike the unquestioned but unstable ideologies of *La Bataille du rail* or the faux-naturalism of *The Battle of Algiers*, *Hiroshima* constantly questions its own truth-value. It works hard to obfuscate the easy answers and bears its ideology overtly: history is not as it was, but as we think of it. The forces that lead us to the past, or that drive us there, necessarily shape our representations and interpretations of it.

*Hiroshima*’s readily apparent artificiality and multiple possibilities of meaning ally it with artificial myth. Like *L’Armée des ombres*, it calls attention to itself and simultaneously plays with space-time: a smash cut to fling the spectator from the clean halls of a museum to the detritus moments after the bomb, an irrational interval to bridge suddenly and inexplicably the distance between a Japanese train station in 1959 and a shack in the French countryside in 1944. Like *Le Chagrin et la pitié*, it demonstrates the fragmented nature of past events, the fact that memory can be faulty, even willfully so – and that we deny it at our own peril.

At first blush, historical experimentalism may be such a direct descendent of artificial myth as to render them indistinct, particularly in light of the analyses performed in Chapters 5
and 6. Indeed, one point clearly relates them: artifice is all. Realizing that film’s ontological force is a paradoxical weakness and strength, Melville, Ophüls, Tavernier and Jeunet opt for abstraction and fictions over concrete, documentary-like realism. Yet it is inappropriate to apply the rubric of artificial myth to either *Laissez-passer* or *Un long dimanche de fiançailles*. The form of Tavernier’s film questions many of the basic precepts of conventional historiography, but it ultimately falls prey to a myth itself. Moreover, its form does not forward itself as artificial but rather as hyper-realistic. Tavernier attempts to approach his subject as if devoid of historical presumptions instead of posing critical questions. What *Dimanche* lacks to qualify it as an artificial myth is a specific source myth to deconstruct. Though it may touch meaningfully upon a number of historical issues, even larger ideas of space-time, this contact is too varied and too incidental for us to discern a specific target.

The same does not hold true for *Hiroshima mon amour*, for this film has a clear subject myth: “la connaissance de Hiroshima” (Duras 10) and, by extension, the knowledge and knowability of the past in general. For the quandary is this: to know is to assign meaning, to relegate, to categorize, supposedly to understand and thereby to come to terms with and to erase something by putting it comfortably aside. Lui and Elle come to the ultimate terms of their respective traumas, naming each other after the cities of Hiroshima and Nevers, obliterating their pain by immersing themselves in it. *Hiroshima* recognizes that meaning is not inherent to the regarded subject, indeed, that existence is perhaps not even inherent to it. “Perhaps” is the key word to this film: while it does not deny the knowability of past events completely, it deeply problematizes that process, filling it with contingency in the mirror play between Hiroshima and Nevers.
Experimentalism

In its equally fragmentary, contingent and interconnected conception of space-time, *Hiroshima mon amour* is Deleuze’s standard-bearer of the time-image and its narrative counterpart, the crystalline regime; it uses cinema to explode the modernist conflation of form and content, to question the implied (thus often unexamined) ideas inherent to realism, to put in doubt even the very possibility of realism. It thus represents historical experimentalism *avant la lettre*.

Though *Laissez-passer* may not as aggressively espouse such radical ideas about space, time and memory, it nonetheless illustrates an admirable and experimentalist historiophotic model. In Tavernier’s film, meticulously researched but never highlighted mise-en-scène combines with unconventional narrative in order to avoid traditional psychology and to parachute the spectator into the past. Subtle but expressive use of cinematography, lighting and narrative tone creates realism with artifice, suggesting in a manner unique to cinema the way it probably was in Paris during the Occupation. Nonetheless, this formal and historiographic experimentation does not prevent *Laissez-passer* from falling back into the trap of Resistancialism.

In matters of overt artifice, *Un long dimanche de fiançailles* is closer to the experimental spirit of *Hiroshima*. Jeunet’s cinema has never been concerned with Bazinian realism, and just as Resnais’s graceful tracking shots and irrational intervals puncture linear time, so too do Jeunet’s elegant crane shots and almost magical superimpositions. Both films adopt a narrative style that is somewhat hybrid, part classical or at least conventional structure and development, part wildly fragmented and interconnected in seemingly random ways.

Thus what further links these two films is a doubtful and inquisitive nature, reflected in characters and film form. Elle wants to “know” about the bombing, Lui wants to “know” the
story of her German lover – just as Mathilde wants to “know” what happened to Manech. To obtain this information, one must ask questions, difficult questions that many do not want answered; and the responses can be treacherous, often, if not always, invoking even more questions. Nonetheless, *Hiroshima mon amour* places more emphasis on inquiries than answers. Resnais and Duras bathe their film in epistemological skepticism: “Tu n’as rien vu à Hiroshima,” Lui intones. In contrast, the story of Manech’s survival is knowable in a direct manner. Though the future of the once blissful couple remains in doubt, there is a satisfying finality to Mathilde’s quest, especially compared to *Hiroshima*’s torturously ambiguous ending.

**Hiroshima & Nevers**

Avant-garde in 1959 but still very well received, the radical ideas in *Hiroshima mon amour* have since trickled into the mainstream. Anticipating the globalism so staunchly opposed in France today, *Hiroshima* was a proudly international production; the stipulation that half of the film must take place in Japan was a challenge that forced Duras and Resnais to a greater level of creativity and to a fundamental complication, leading them to fruitfully relate seemingly disparate events. *Hiroshima*’s literary underpinnings take part in a trend already at work in French cinema but certainly set a new benchmark for the integration of these mediums, surpassing adaptation to arrive at *bricolage*, creating a popularly successful work that challenges conventional thinking and establishes a level of complexity and sophistication that other films would take as a model. *Hiroshima* clearly illustrates how film form can investigate time and space in ways that challenge received notions, not just about past events but about their contemporary representations. In these ways, its atomic silhouette has haunted the past sixty years of historical filmmaking in France.
It may also help categorize *Hiroshima mon amour* as a French war film. Throughout the present study, I have sought to demonstrate that though it differs significantly from its Anglophone counterpart, the French war film as such definitely exists. It is a kind of cinematic creation that treats through form or content real armed conflicts between two or more factions, conflicts that have significance in French history and thus in the development of a national identity. This kind of film is often hybrid in nature and frequently uses metaphor to approximate the past experiences of its subjects. These subjects are most often characterized collectively and in order to understand the past, psychology is emphasized over physical violence.\(^{192}\) Its plot structure is frequently non-linear and other forms over time have developed to place modernist thinking in doubt. This sub-genre of the historical film has witnessed an increasing sophistication and complexity; it has attained a point where historiophotic meditations are often seamlessly but visibly integrated into both form and content.

Indeed, I believe this study has used the French war film to demonstrate how cinema spent the past century growing up. The story sketched here, if I may be so bold, is one of increasing maturity, both of how filmmakers have learned to wield the camera and of the development of popular attitudes and sensibilities. In its early years, cinema suckled upon the teat of nineteenth-century literary forms but eventually sought to mirror and to criticize the deeply troubled world of its adolescence. It spent its young adulthood crafting illusions to deal with past traumas and then courageously deflated those fabulations. More recently, it has learned how to tackle issues, past and present, with its proper tools and forms, more aware than ever of its own strengths and weaknesses. This evolution did not take place in a vacuum, but in tandem

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\(^{192}\) Despite eschewing action and spectacle for drama and psychology, French war films – and perhaps historical films in general – still meditate upon the relationship of the individual to society as a whole. However, the terms have changed: instead of the one (drama) relating to the many (spectacle), most often the many are related to many, or as is clearly the case in *Le Chagrin et la pitié*, the several are related amongst each other in myriad ways.
with French audiences, their conceptions of themselves, their ideas about the past and the issues that are important to them.

And there remains no dearth of matters to address. A great, even definitive, French film about the Algerian War is yet to be made.\textsuperscript{193} Events such as Dien Bien Phu also continue to be cinematic lacunae. Within the Hexagon, Resistancialism apparently will not die, though it is slowly being complicated. It seems that Gance’s risen soldiers keep haunting filmmakers who constantly return to the Great War. A vast field extends beyond the conflicts of the twentieth century, into both the past and the future. Yet, for all its doubt, \textit{Hiroshima mon amour} and its progeny demonstrate that the French cinema is ready for the challenge, for it has learned to travel hopefully through the past toward the future.

\textsuperscript{193} Movies like \textit{Caché} (Haeneke, 2005) and \textit{L’Ennemi intime} (Siri, 2007) are beginning to pick at this complex knot of racial tensions, trauma and shame.
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**Appendix: Synopses**

*J’Accuse*

The analysis of *J’Accuse* integrates a plot synopsis; see page 21.

*Une affaire de femmes*

Marie Latour (Isabelle Huppert) lives a hard life during the German Occupation of France. Her husband a prisoner of war, she lives in a tiny, squalid apartment and scrounges for food in the countryside. One day, she helps abort a neighbor’s pregnancy with an injection of hot soapy water into the uterus. The operation is a success and to thank Marie, the neighbor gives her a phonograph.

In the meantime, Marie’s husband, Paul, returns. The reunion is cold, but Marie still goes to get her hair done, and at the salon meets Lulu, a prostitute whom she quickly befriends. Spurred by freedom of her new friend, Marie manages to move her family into new, slightly more spacious accommodations, where she meets her second “client.” Marie’s cottage enterprise grows, despite Paul’s suspicions and misgivings. The family moves to a third, even larger house and things begin a downward moral spiral. Marie rents open rooms in the new house to Lulu and the prostitute’s associates. Rather than attending school, her children play idly in the courtyard. She takes a lover, Lucien (a collaborator), hires a maid and offers Paul to her. One of Marie’s clients dies of complications, yet Marie has never been happier. She finally begins to fulfill her dream and takes singing lessons.

Blatantly cuckolded, Paul writes a letter denouncing Marie to the police. She is arrested, and sent to Paris to be tried before a special court. To her shock and incomprehension, she is found guilty of crimes against the state and sentenced to the guillotine. Her final days are spent
in solitary confinement, where she wavers between blaspheming anger and sorrowful resignation. One fine April morning, her hair is cut and she is led in a pitiful, unspectacular ceremony to be executed.

*La Grande Illusion*

The working class Maréchal and the aristocratic Bœldieu are French aerial reconnaissance officers during World War I. Their plane is shot down by Rauffenstein, who orders that his fellow officers be taken to the German barracks to share a meal instead of being immediately imprisoned. But war, as it often does throughout the film, spoils the international bonding. Maréchal and Bœldieu are removed by German military police and taken to a prison camp. Helping the French officers to make the most of it is Rosenthal, the son of a Jewish banker, who shares the bounty of care packages sent by his family. They dig a tunnel to get away, but the project is a pipe dream: on the day of the escape, the prisoners are transferred.

A long series of relocations is represented by a montage of German landscapes and prison signs seen from a train car. Finally, Bœldieu and Maréchal arrive at Wintersborn, a wintry gothic castle isolated on a vertiginous hill. There, they meet two old acquaintances. Rauffenstein is the camp commandant. The aristocrats, career officers on opposite sides of a brutal war, have more commonalities than differences, conversing in English about horses, cocktail bars and mistresses. Bœldieu may enjoy this new-found companionship, but he has no illusions about the social dead-end he inhabits. He is even ready to sacrifice himself to allow Rosenthal and Maréchal to escape.

Traversing the German landscape, Rosenthal and Maréchal find shelter in a barn, and are discovered by Elsa, a German farmer’s wife and war-widow. Instead of denouncing the escapees to passing German troops, Elsa takes them in, nurses Rosenthal’s wounded foot, feeds and shelters the pair. Despite the differences in culture and language, a romance blooms between
Elsa and Maréchal. However, the war continues to loom; the French officers cannot shirk their duties. Followed closely by German border guards they escape into Switzerland, whose snow looks remarkably like that of Germany – or of France, for that matter.

Les Visiteurs du soir

“Or donc, en ce joli mois de mai 1485, Messire le Diable dépêcha sur terre deux de ses créatures afin de désespérer les humains… (Vieille légende du XVe siècle).” These creatures are Gilles (Alain Cuny) and Dominique (Arletty). Disguised as brother minstrels, they come to the château of Baron Hughes (Fernand Ledoux) whose inhabitants are in the midst of a feast to celebrate the impending marriage of Hughes’s daughter Anne (Marie Déa) to the chauvinistic knight Renaud (Marcel Herrand). The first object of their mischief is the seduction of the betrothed couple, followed by Dominique’s wooing of the Baron himself. The next day, during a celebratory hunt, Gilles and Anne consummate their relationship beside a fountain in the woods. At the same time, Renaud surprises Hughes and Dominique. Back at the castle, Gilles declares his true and ardent love for Anne. The romantic sentiment is answered by a clap of thunder. Outside the castle, a bolt of lightning sets a tree ablaze and a dark rider is silhouetted against a stormy sky: the Devil (Jules Berry) arrives.

Up to this point, Les Visiteurs du soir maintains an achingly slow pace; Satan’s presence ignites the film into action. Gilles is discovered in Anne’s chamber and imprisoned. Hughes and Renaud are incited to duel; Renaud is slain, and the Baron quits the castle to chase after Dominique. The sole island of serene resistance is Anne, whose unshakable faith in her love for Gilles defies the Devil at every turn. In return for Gilles’s freedom, she promises herself to the lecherous Mephistopheles. Gilles is freed, but with no memory of his former love or servitude. The pure and righteous Anne turns the defeat into victory with the unexpected: she lies. Meeting
Gilles again at the fountain, her love restores his memory. Though the nonplussed Devil turns the lovers into stone, their hearts continue to beat in unison, untouchable by satanic magic. The Devil is reduced to a childlike temper tantrum, simply fading from view.

*La Bataille du rail*

The plot of *La Bataille du rail* is a relatively simple one in two uneven parts. The first part, which maintains most of the traces of the original documentary, introduces the train station of Chalon-sur-Saône and its workers who steadily escalate their actions of sabotage and resistance against the omnipresent and increasingly violent Germans. After the bombing of ten German trains, hostages are taken and executed in a sequence that critics rarely fail to praise because of its borrowings from Eisensteinian montage. This first section, about 20 minutes long, is obviously set during the Occupation, but has no real temporal specificity. A voice-over provides the viewer with important information about the complex functioning of the railway system, especially the direction of train traffic. Most characters are sketched at best, members of the Resistance are known only by their codenames (“Athos,” “Carmargue”). The emphasis here is on a collective and fraternal resistance against a nearly faceless enemy. The second part has a much clearer historical setting, as it begins with the coded announcement via radio of the June 4th landings in Normandy. From this point, the collective characterization and the narrative schema become more specific and linear. The action centers on a German convoy of reinforcements, called Apfelkern, and the efforts by both railway workers and the *maquis* to prevent it from reaching the Normandy region. The remarkable scene of this section is a derailing of the convoy’s armored train escort.
The Battle of Algiers

Pontecorvo’s 1966 film begins and ends from the point of view of Ali la Pointe (Brahim Haggiag). A criminal radicalized while in prison, he is recruited to the Front de la liberation nationale (FLN) by El-hadi Jafar, a fictional version of Saadi Yacef played by himself. La Pointe is an important figure, but remains a single character amongst a chorus of non-professional actors through whom the film depicts the events of November 1954 to December 1960 in the city of Algiers. In a contrapuntal manner, the narrative consists of escalating attacks and counter-attacks between the members of the nascent FLN and the French colonial authorities (pieds noirs). A triple terrorist bombing of French colonial civilians ultimately leads to the introduction of French paratroopers, led by Colonel Mathieu (Jean Martin).

Algiers’s visceral brutality, and much of its supposed “even-handedness,” reconstructs atrocities being committed by both sides against civilians. Before the bombing of French civilians, the FLN summarily executes native Algerian and others it considers traitors. The pieds noirs form lynch mobs and employ indiscriminate violence. Paratroops use torture, intimidation and murder to “win” the Battle of Algiers, eventually capturing or assassinating the whole FLN leadership. However, the final coda, with its demonstrations and rioting by native Algerians for independence, suggests that though the French may have won the battle, they lose the war.

L’Armée des ombres

Based upon the Joseph Kessel novel of the same name, L’Armée des ombres recounts the exploits of a fictionalized French Resistance cell during the German occupation. We begin on October 20, 1942: Paul Gerbier (Lino Ventura) is transported to a collaborationist internment camp. He befriends a fellow detainee, the Communist Legrain, but Gerbier’s sudden transfer to Paris frustrates their escape plan. From the Majestic hotel, he does escape to Marseille, where a
traitorous Resistance member is abducted and executed. His killers, Gerbier, Félix (Paul Crochet), Le Bison (Christian Barbier) and Claude Lemasque (Claude Mann), try to think past their odious task. Later, Félix recruits an old friend, Jean-François (Jean-Pierre Cassel). From Marseille back to Paris: Jean-François dodges Nazis and collaborationist police to deliver radios to Mathilde (Simone Signoret), and then pays a visit to his brother, “Saint” Luc Jardie (Paul Meurisse). On his next mission, Jean-François helps to rendezvous some cell members with a British submarine that secrets them to London for a meeting with General de Gaulle, who decorates the cell’s leader – Luc!

Back in Lyon, the SS captures Félix and Gerbier parachutes back onto French soil to reform the cell. Mathilde plans Félix’s daring rescue, but the attempt, which sacrifices Jean-François, is in vain. Soon afterwards, the Milice capture Gerbier. The operation to rescue him is a success, but Gerbier must lay low and begins two months of isolation in a run-down country house. The final chapter begins when Luc arrives with bad tidings. Mathilde has been captured and must be liquidated: the Nazis have her daughter. February 23, 1943: Mathilde’s indescribable expression lends the entire film a crushing emotional weight just before her erstwhile friends gun her down. Making their getaway, they pass the Arc du Triomphe, bringing us full circle.

*Le Chagrin et la pitié*

A two-part documentary by Marcel Ophüls, *Le Chagrin et la pitié* was originally produced for French television in 1969, but officials refused to air it. The film eventually premiered in Paris in 1971. It eschews the convention of a faceless, authoritarian narrator who comments upon archival images and instead intercalates archival footage with interviews of German officers, French collaborators, and Resistance fighters from the town of Clermont-Ferrand. The
interviewees offer a plethora of commentaries on the nature and reasons for collaboration, including anti-Semitism, Anglophobia, fear of Bolsheviks and Soviet invasion, and simple caution. Maurice Chevalier's “Sweepin’ the Clouds Away” is a primary musical theme, and its striking incongruity with the dire subject matter marks Ophüls’s historiophotic program: the creation of history through equal parts creativity and critical thought.

Part I, “The Collapse,” focuses on France’s devastatingly swift defeat, the Débâcle and the earlier years of occupation and State collaboration. Later Prime Minister Pierre Mendès-France, Clermont bourgeois Tournier, the peasant Grave brothers and a German officer, Helmuth Tausend are amongst the most important voices, offering a plethora of often contradicting views about the early years of the Occupation. Part II, “The Choice,” investigates the latter years of World War II in France. Resistance, as it increased against the French State and occupying Nazi forces, becomes a central concern, though we learn that it was anything like a unified (or even majority) organization. Indeed, *Le Chagrin* shows the French people’s response to occupation as sometimes heroic but otherwise pitiable, sometimes craven but also monstrous – and sometimes all of these at once. Much of this part revolves around Christian de la Mazière, one of 7,000 French youth to fight on the Eastern Front wearing German uniforms as members of *Legion des volontaires français contre le bolchévisme*. His present-day thoughts on ideology and his reasons for joining the LVF are a cornerstone of the film’s larger cautionary message.

*Laissez-passer*

Set in the Parisian film industry, mostly the German-run Continental, from early 1942 to late 1943, *Laissez-passer* follows the (mostly) real-life adventures of two men: assistant director Jean Devaivre and scenarist Jean Aurenche. One of the important conventional deviances of the narrative is that these protagonists almost never meet; theirs are two very different trajectories
and their individual manners of resistance proper to their temperaments. The quiet, intense Devaivre embodies the more conventional figure of Resistance: he sabotages trains with explosives, steals German documents, and passes out Resistance tracts typed by his wife, Simone. In a twist of fate that proves the maxim truth is stranger than fiction, Devaivre also works chez (not pour) the Germans at Continental films as an assistant director. Aurenche is in almost every way his opposite. A melodramatic womanizer and word-smith, his resistance is much less dramatic: mostly word-play (writing lines like “je vous souhaite de l’impatience et de la révolte”) and doing everything he can to avoid working for Dr. Greven at Continental.

Un long dimanche de fiançailles
Based on the novel by Sébastien Japrisot, Un long dimanche de fiançailles recounts the arduous quest of Mathilde to find her lover Manech after he is reportedly executed for self-mutilation in a World War I trench called Bingo Crepuscule. Mathilde follows myriad clues and leads through the traumatized terrain of the memory of the Great War against all hope, and even reason, never relinquishing the sense that Manech is still alive. The story behind the story is mundane, a mere exchange of dog-tags that allows Manech to escape, but the path to this simple truth is filled with twists and turns, dead-ends and false leads. Performing her own investigation in 1920, more than a year after the signing of the Treaty of Versailles, Mathilde must pick her way through a veritable minefield of others’ war-time experiences. She is guided by a simple tin box filled with the last effects of four prisoners condemned with Manech – a watch that doesn’t work, a coded letter, a postcard of Paris; each is a fragment of their experiences, a piece of the past that means little, if anything, in and of itself, but that can lead Mathilde to the reconstruction of what really happened.
Hiroshima mon amour

Alain Resnais’s 1959 feature film debut begins and ends with marked ambiguity. The opening sequence initially depicts almost the unrecognizable figures of two entwined lovers, covered with dust, then dew, then the sweat of love-making. However, this romantic image is countered with a voice-over dialogue of doubt that summons a quasi-documentary about the atomic bombing of Hiroshima. The protagonists are never humanly named; Elle, a European woman, asserts that “j’ai tout vu à Hiroshima;” Lui, her Japanese lover, denies it flatly: “Tu n’as rien vu à Hiroshima. Rien.” In the mode of stylized ambiguity and doubt that permeates the entire work, both statements are true and false. Elle has visited (we infer) the impressive Hiroshima Museum; she has seen it all. But the act of witnessing the bombing is impossible; the film even suggest its representation is equally so.

Past the documentary, once the heart of the production, but abandoned for what Resnais considered just this impossibility, the film recounts Elle’s and Lui’s final day together in Hiroshima. She finishes making a peace film. He relentlessly tracks her through the streets of the city, slowly pulling from her a traumatic past of her own: the murder of her German lover during the Liberation. The cities of Hiroshima and Nevers, the tragedies of a young woman’s first love and the insanities murder of hundreds of thousands of people, slowly coalesce and intercalate. Finally, back in the hotel room where they began the day, Lui and Elle give each other names: “Hiroshima” and “Nevers” are memorialized and arranged, both remembered and forgotten.
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**CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS**