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Abstract

If France's ongoing struggle for self-definition in the late twentieth century involved new conceptions of citizenship and nationality, in short what it means to be French, this struggle also entailed the search for an accurate portrayal of a past in which France could recognize itself...

Keywords

French film, cinema, war films, films on war, gendered scenarios, national identity, *Last Metro*, self-definition, identity, female, female characters, feminism, female icon

From War Films to Films on War: Gendered Scenarios
of National Identity—The Case of *The Last Metro*

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If France's ongoing struggle for self-definition in the late twentieth century involved new conceptions of citizenship and nationality, in short what it means to be French, this struggle also entailed the search for an accurate portrayal of a past in which France could recognize itself. The political and artistic battles over the meaning of World War II in France are no doubt approaching a limit with the new millennium and the passing of the last surviving witnesses. And yet the legacy of these battles has not yet gelled, as historians, artists, jurists, and survivors continue to retell these stories to new generations. Films have played a key role in the reworking of what used to be clear-cut ideological clashes (left versus right, communist versus fascist, resister versus collaborator . . .), but have become murky divisions in our postwar era. Concurrently, I have found that the greater visibility of women in films made during World War II is duplicated in key postwar films *about* the war. It would appear that the generation of postwar filmmakers (Truffaut, Malle, Chabrol, Berri . . .) are profoundly marked by the war in ways that affect their esthetic development, as well as their sense of national identity.¹ These *cinéastes*, who made fictional films about the war, are faithful not only to the factual details of the Occupation, but also to the films they saw during their wartime childhoods, not just in thematic terms, but also in unconscious social scenarios. Noël Burch and Geneviève Sellier's account of the French "imaginaire social" as

traced in French films of the Occupation will provide the basis for understanding the psychic repetition in postwar films of certain family scenarios that reflect both women's changing social roles in general *and* the specificity of the war period.² Taking Truffaut's 1980 film *The Last Metro* as my case study, I propose to show that a certain heroic position of wartime women in film and in life (resulting in their obtaining the vote at war's end) is paradoxically combined with our current postwar ideological murkiness (with no position, left or right, being entirely satisfying or pure). The curious result is that a strong female figure becomes the emblem of political ambivalence in late twentieth-century and early twenty-first-century France.

In researching postwar films of the seventies and beyond, following *The Sorrow and the Pity*, I've noted two things: first, that *survival* during the Occupation is more frequently the focal point than military battles and war maneuvers. For many French citizens the Occupation was experienced as a long wait to struggle through. Second, there is a prominence of *female* characters who seem to embody France's attempts to define itself in terms of its wartime past, as resisters, collaborators, victims, *attentistes* (those who waited) and everything in between. . . . Why would women figures become so prominent in these films? For some, like Susan Hayward in her book *French National Cinema*, women's lives become key points of interest in these French films of the eighties and nineties only because our postmodern era fails to take seriously both history and women (287). But I think these films' fascination with both Occupation history and women's lives can be explained in other ways. Louis Malle's *Lacombe Lucien*, François Truffaut's *The Last Metro*, Claude Chabrol's *Story of Women*, and Claude Berri's *Lucie Aubrac* (to name just a few of the most interesting and/or successful films) all pay attention to the accuracy of historical detail, to the exemplarity of their characters, and to everyday survival as a key part of telling the way the Occupation was experienced by the French. With so many French men imprisoned, working at forced labor, exiled or killed, women had to fill their traditional roles as homemakers *and* to become the principal breadwinners for their families. The associations among

historical detail, the portrayal of daily survival, and women's lives, are so strong in this understanding of Occupation history that women's lives come to figure as examples for the French situation in general, what Dominique Veillon has described as "la guerre au quotidien" ('the war on a daily basis').³ For the postwar filmmakers who grew up during the Occupation this preeminence of women in their memory thus makes full sense, as women took on many roles that they hadn't had in prior generations. The postwar films about the war correspondingly present an array of women coping with difficult conditions across economic, political, and ethnic divisions.

Lynn Higgins has pointed out that Truffaut's *The Last Metro* finds its sources in wartime films like Marcel Carné's *Children of Paradise* (1943) and Ernst Lubitsch's *To Be or Not to Be* (1942). Both are concerned with "a theater troupe and theatricality in life and on the stage," as is *The Last Metro* (Higgins 155). But beyond the issue of "interfilmic references" to the periods' works and their theatrical topics (a self-conscious, reflexive move characteristic of the adult New Wave filmmaker), there are other key reasons for portraying Occupation reality via the theater that have to do with the "look" of films made during the Occupation.⁴ To begin with, due to production constraints during the war, French films of the forties often resembled theater with their closed, inside spaces and greatly reduced sets and decors. This look in fact becomes an esthetic that Truffaut's film mimics. Truffaut's reprise of the feel and appearance of wartime French film goes beyond, or at least complements, the thematic, self-conscious film references. The dark look of the nighttime sets with artificial lighting and shadowy corners suggests the anguish of the Occupation as well as the clandestine actions taking place in its oppressive atmosphere. Each character harbors a secret (the lesbian, the resister, the Jew, the blackmarketeer, the traitor, etc.) that makes life all the more dangerous to live. For Truffaut remembering, the dark theaters of his youth bear the mark of a clandestine activity (he sneaks in without paying) and are no doubt associated with the erotic charge of a secret, taboo experience taking place in the dark. Alan Williams has pointed out that the "closed settings," for

the intense social and family dramas of Occupation films, have “served as metaphors for France under the Occupation” (259). In Truffaut’s 1980 film, they continue to do so. For the young Truffaut during the war, play-acting, disguises, posturing, and feigning were characteristic modes of being. These are in turn evoked in the film via the theater.

In order to appreciate certain *unconscious* repetitions from Occupation films that appear in *The Last Metro*, we need to take a closer look at the social configurations in the wartime films that Truffaut watched as a boy. In their exhaustive study of French film production, *La Drôle de Guerre des sexes du cinéma français, 1930-1956* (*The Phony War of the Sexes in French Cinema, 1930-1956*), Burch and Sellier make the claim that women’s socio-political advances became facilitated through a certain reworking of gender roles that the conditions of the Occupation helped to bring about and that the period’s films reflect (as well as shape). The authors explain that after the turbulent twenties, in which sexual identity and gender roles were challenged, the thirties brought about a normalizing repression to fend off the rise of the “modern woman” whose androgyny and increasing financial and moral freedom threatened masculinity, the authority of the father, and the patriarchal regime in general. Burch and Sellier read the national portrait of France through its unconscious Œdipal scenarios in film. The collective script of the thirties embodies a denied phantasm of paternal incest that constitutes “a plea . . . in favor of threatened privileges,” embodied in the “father” (symbolic or actual) who has lost or is losing control over women, especially the younger generation (26).⁵ This danger to the “father” is associated with other patriarchal anxieties: the threat to “l’Ordre patronal,” the authority of industrial bosses, as well as the xenophobic, often racist fear of an “invasion” of immigrant workers pouring into France. These fears of increasingly powerful women, of workers and of foreigners are associated with a threat to national identity.⁶

La Drôle de Guerre des sexes convincingly argues that the period of the Occupation brings about a profound change in the cinematic treatment of the family configuration. With the acces-

sion to power of Marshal Pétain, an old, revered father figure (although never a father himself), the public witnesses the increasing decline and ineptitude of Pétain as leader. In film, a new concurrent figure arises, that of the “castrated father,” “*sympathique*,” ‘a nice guy’ but ineffectual, destined to be discredited, chastised for incestuous desires upon “daughters” or younger women, and overrun by the course of events. In the films of this period, female protagonists are more prevalent than before, and their roles are more active. In the pro-Vichy films of the period, this more important, active role quite often becomes that of the victim—the icon of France’s suffering and valor. In the Vichy framework, the price of women becoming an idealized national icon is that they are deprived of the possibility of being desiring humans, since their desire would be considered too threatening to men’s virility. (Women are often some version of a *mater dolorosa*.) In order to revitalize France’s men, Vichy’s female film icons must renounce their own desire. In those films not advocating the Vichy ideology, however, women are still active and even free to express their own desire. What is compelling about the Burch and Sellier transformative model is that it presents a scenario common to the overwhelming majority of the films during the Occupation, regardless of their political leanings.

Truffaut’s favorite French films from his youth are consistently marked by this prominence of strong women and relatively weak or absent father figures, from Autant-Lara’s *Douce* to Bresson’s *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne* (*The Ladies of the Bois de Boulogne*) or *Les Anges du péché* (*The Angels of Sin*), from Clouzot’s *The Raven* to Carné’s *Children of Paradise*. The forties scenarios correspond to changing attitudes about women who, during the war, proved over and over again their ability to take charge of family responsibilities outside as well as inside the home, to survive economic, physical and emotional hardships, to take part in the struggle against the German Occupation, etc. And with so many French men absent from the scene, filmmakers tended to give scripts featuring women much more of a chance.

Truffaut’s recreations of the family dynamic in *The Four Hundred Blows* and *The Last Metro* replicate the Burch/Sellier model.

In the earlier autobiographical film from 1959 (during France's period of repression of wartime memories),⁷ the Occupation is absent, but the gender scenario is pertinent: the beautiful, sexy mother looms large in the life of Antoine Doinel, with the adoptive father appearing weak and dominated by his wife, who lies to him (she has an affair with another man) and orders him around. We know nothing of the boy's biological father. The strong woman in this instance is a self-centered working mother who knows her own desire and is portrayed as the desired, but wholly unscrupulous, object of the boy's fascination.

The Last Metro brings together political icon and the family scenario of the Burch/Sellier model. Truffaut's emphasis on Marion Steiner (played by Catherine Deneuve) as focal point for representing the Occupation is at once a) an affirmation of active, courageous women; b) an ambivalent, but palatable portrayal of the collective response of France to the war via the beautiful female icon; c) a personal fantasy of the filmmaker who overcomes the Oedipus complex via the fictive happy ending (uniting, as we shall see, figures of the mother, father and son). The first of these three characterizations (that is, of courageous, enterprising women) matches historical data quite well: the research of Serge Added on theaters during the Occupation confirms Truffaut's own findings that a rather large number of women actually did run theaters in that period, so Marion's role as theater director is historically accurate. Truffaut's lead character in *The Last Metro*, the actress Marion Steiner, is illustrative of the new responsibilities women assumed when she becomes a theater director because her Jewish husband, the current director, has to go into hiding. The fact that she protects her Jewish husband reminds one of resister Lucie Aubrac's efforts to rescue *her* Jewish husband during the war (not to mention scores of others who helped Jews to hide or escape). Truffaut's portrayal of women in general in the film makes of them a trope for an exemplary French experience of the war.

The contradictions and tensions in Marion's character make it necessary to question what it might mean to be "strong" during the Occupation in Truffaut's vision. Strength does not conform

here to a simple ideal of disinterested heroism. It is more a matter of playing one's life role well, fulfilling the duty to survive through extraordinary times. It involves dissimulation, manipulation, and resourcefulness, as well as the objectionable willingness to sacrifice one Jew (an actor requesting work) for another (her husband). The scandalous nature of such a choice is diminished by the sequence of the presentation: *first* the viewers think that Marion is an anti-Semite turning away a Jew, *then* viewers learn that she only does so because she is protecting her Jewish husband.⁸ What bothers me in this example (and I think it is typical of much of the film's tenor) is that the sequencing encourages the viewer *not* to ponder whether the trade-off (one Jew for another) is objectionable.

Although she is quite vulnerable, and not terribly self-aware, Marion routinely displays nerves of steel: to allay her husband's fears before their play's opening performance, she pretends to be completely relaxed, and then secretly rushes to the bathroom to throw up when stage jitters besiege her. When necessary, she adroitly lies to the authorities about her husband's whereabouts. Her strength lies in overcoming her own fears, particularly in protecting others. When her husband goes temporarily wild at the thought of having to stay in the cellar indefinitely (the Germans have just invaded the "Free Zone"), Marion does not hesitate to bash him over the head to keep him from rashly trying to leave.

Although Marion is not a mother, she plays the role of mother in *La Disparue* (*The Vanished One*), the play the troupe is rehearsing, and this theatrical maternal role is metaphorically repeated: in many scenes Marion's attitude toward her husband Lucas resembles that of a mother caring for her son. She cuts his hair, consoles him, supplies all his basic needs, and tends to his escape plans. Her caring involves love for Lucas if not passion. This image matches, in some ways, Vichy's portrayals of dutiful women who sacrifice themselves for others, particularly children.⁹ Like her Vichy counterparts, Marion Steiner appears to set aside her own desires in the first part of the film. But as in the anti-Vichy films of the war period, Truffaut's character eventually displays her own desire: toward the end of the film, after the actor Bernard

announces he is leaving the theater to fight in the Resistance, Marion's passion erupts: first she slaps him, then they end up making love on the floor of his dressing room. Truffaut's love scene is indirectly infused with a political flavor that again makes Marion a fundamentally ambiguous character: Bernard's choice of the Resistance coincides with Marion's liberation in love. Her weakness (in political terms) coincides with the ability to express her own desire, to herself and to someone else. While this is certainly a strength of sorts, it hardly fits a political, ethical profile.

Marion's acts, and nearly all those of the people in the Montmartre theater, are dictated by personal exigencies rather than ideology. She is consistently identified as an advocate of practical compromise: avoid the Germans if possible, get along with them when necessary. In a visually stunning scene, Truffaut invites us to measure just how far Marion is willing to go, how far she'll "deal with" the enemy. She shows up in her most elegant attire at Gestapo headquarters to try to persuade (presumably using her "feminine charms") a high ranking German official to keep her theater open and out of the hands of the pro-fascist French critic, Daxiat. The opening part of the scene foreshadows the end result: when she is yanked out of an elevator in order to make room for a high ranking officer, we sense that German military gallantry is more a convenient pretense than a material reality. As Marion ascends one side of an oval staircase, she stares at another woman descending the other side on the arm of a German officer; this woman is Martine, whom she recognizes as a black marketeer (Marion has purchased a ham through Martine), as well as a thief, someone who is now reaping the benefits of her collaboration. The scene is both majestic and scary, as if dramatizing the ceremony of collaboration, with a sweeping staircase that looks like a theatrical set. The camera shifts back and forth between the two women, suggesting that Marion is about to become (or has already become?) the mirror image of this woman by compromising herself. Even the beginning of their names, *Martine* and *Marion*, suggests the resemblance. But when Marion actually meets an official, it is not the contact she sought. In a scene whose music connotes an ever increasing tension to the

point of explosion, the unknown officer takes Marion's hand in his and won't let go until she finally wrenches her hand away and flees in terror. The gesture of an officer's good manners has quickly turned into a sinister clutch. We have barely glimpsed the vicious side of relations with the occupier, but it is clear that Marion has underestimated the consequences of dealing with the enemy. As an image of collaboration, presented here as ritualized ceremony, the scene intimates the difference between the theatrical facades of decency that collaboration displays, in contrast to the real dangers it harbors. The hasty flight of Marion undoes the structured resemblance between her and the collaborating Martine. Truffaut is careful here to distinguish between self-advancing collaboration and a politics of survival.

The third and final way political icon and family drama are united in Truffaut's film resides in its autobiographical scenarios. First of all, Truffaut's biological father, whom he never actually met, was Jewish, a fact that the filmmaker only discovered in middle age. Thus the theme of the Jew-in-the-cellar belongs to the filmmaker's own family script.¹⁰ Second, the spectator is struck by the childlike, "clean" version of the war, as if seen through the eyes of the boy François: no one important is ever harmed. In the Montmartre theater where the Steiner troupe puts on its plays, German soldiers and Jewish girls alike share in the common raptures of artistic pleasure. The Jewish girl has only to hide the yellow star on her coat lapel to avoid any trouble. No one except the evil film critic Daxiat dies in the film, no one is deported or tortured.¹¹

The ending of *The Last Metro* is reminiscent of an adult fairy tale. Life and theater come together in the last "scene," a *trompe-l'œil* where, after thinking the film will end unhappily with the young actor and resister Bernard wounded in a hospital turning away from his lover, Marion, Truffaut's viewers then realize that they are witnessing a play and that the "real" ending is a happy finale in a harmonious postwar love triangle: woman and lover (the play's actors—Marion and Bernard) are joined on stage by the director/husband (Lucas) in a triumphant moment. All three happily hold hands to the applause of the play's spectators, an

ovation that seems to celebrate reconciliation, both personal and political. It is also one in which the film-viewers are invited to participate through their own applause of Truffaut's work.

This film, which approaches issues of political and individual compromise, ends in romantic and esthetic triumph. Ultimately Truffaut's personal fantasy, bolstered by historical accuracy, creates the simplified portrait in which the French public of 1980 wanted to see itself: beauty and strength win out in difficult times. If one considers Truffaut's unabashed political ties to an anti-Semitic Right in the 1950s (in particular with the rebellious *Hussard* group of young Turks including Roger Nimier, Jacques Laurent, Michel Déon, Antoine Blondin, and Marcel Brion), it appears that his 1980 film remains consistent with his earlier position: *The Last Metro* minimizes the horror of the Holocaust, makes of most Frenchmen practical resisters and/or survivors, and exempts them from culpability. Both Truffaut *and* the 1980 public who greeted the film with applause felt at ease with this relatively unsullied version of the past. Curious times indeed: Mitterand the socialist and ex-resistance fighter was just coming to power, with his own hidden ties to collaboration.

Truffaut's film presents the disconcerting co-optation of a feminist affirmation from the Occupation. Who better than Catherine Deneuve to embody this figure: she had, after all, posed for the French government as *Marianne*—that is, as the official symbol of France. This combination of female icon and a troubled national identity is one of the paradoxical markers of France's struggles to define itself at the end of the Millennium.

Notes

1. One must exclude leftists Jean-Luc Godard and Alain Resnais from this group. Both these New Wave filmmakers retain a critical distance from the war, with a less personal investment in the period. It can be argued that even in Resnais's *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959), which does contain intimate stories of characters in the war, it is more Marguerite Duras's script that provides this aspect, while Resnais is more preoccupied with the documentary aspects of remembering events.

2. The term “imaginaire social” is somewhat difficult to translate: it refers to the collective imagination of a period, but does not necessarily entail a conscious awareness of its characteristics by those living in it.
3. See the dust-jacket of Veillon’s *Vivre et survivre en France 1939-1947*.
4. In the case of *To Be or Not to Be*, the issue of the lead character (Jack Benny) being made a cuckold by his wife may have been an extra source of curiosity for François Truffaut; in *The 400 Blows*, Truffaut portrays Madame Doinel as unfaithful to Antoine’s stepfather. This may well be autobiographical. At any rate, the issue of infidelity is picked up in *The Last Metro*.
5. My translation.
6. Numerous films of the pre-war period respond to these threats with more or less covert misogyny and anti-Semitism, often resorting to a schizophrenic splitting of groups: the modern, “good” woman is represented alongside the shrew; the “good,” assimilated Jew resides next to the foreigner with shifty values. Burch and Sellier see a parallelism between the argument (developed by François Garçon) that the thirties films were more anti-Semitic than those of the Occupation, and the fact that the treatment of female characters during the Occupation was more extensive and more positive than in the thirties. See Burch and Sellier, 33-37, and François Garçon, “Ce curieux âge d’or des cinéastes français.”
7. See Henry Rousso’s *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France since 1944*.
8. Presented differently, the necessity of such a move could have been put into question.
9. The quintessential example of selfless female devotion can be found in the popular film of 1942, *Le Voile bleu (The Blue Veil)*.
10. The autobiographical flavor of this film is also confirmed by the fact that Truffaut’s leading lady, Deneuve, had also been his lover in the late 1960s.
11. François Garçon was one of the few critics to complain about this when the film first opened. See “Le Retour d’une inquiétante imposture: *Lili Marleen* et *Le Dernier Métro*.”

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