

Wilful women in French cinema under the German occupation

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One of the most emblematic representations of women in French cinema under the German occupation is the role of Anne in Marcel Carné's 1942 classic, *Les Visiteurs du soir*. In this medieval fantasy, pure young Anne (Marie Déa) defies both her father (Fernand Ledoux) and the wicked old devil himself (Jules Berry) by falling in love with and seducing the devil's emissary Gilles (Alain Cuny). She tricks the devil into releasing Gilles from his bond, and in revenge the devil turns the lovers into stone. Yet deep within the two petrified statues, their hearts beat on. How should Anne's role in such a narrative be interpreted? Is she the conventional self-sacrificing woman who accepts death as the price for the ideal of romantic love? Or does she represent a woman's resistance and revolt, an assertion of female desire which transcends death and refuses to be silenced?

Many French films of the occupation rely on such ambiguity as a way of getting round problems with censorship. According to Evelyn Ehrlich, 'During the occupation, films had to pass five separate reviews before production could even begin. The completed film was then examined again by both German and Vichy censors'.¹ Most scholarly approaches to the cinema of the occupation period set out to explore such ambiguities, and to attribute degrees of collaboration or resistance to the films and film-makers in question. When the issue of gender is addressed, therefore, it is usually in terms of the extent to which representations of women are informed by Vichy's patriarchal ideology in relation to women and the family.

For example, Jean-Pierre Bertin-Maghit, writing in 1989, affirms that: '...à partir de 1941, une nouvelle image de la famille transparait où priment l'amour sincère et la fécondité'. In his view, 'Cette société, qui s'appuie sur

1 Evelyn Ehrlich, *Cinema of Paradox: French Filmmaking under the German Occupation*, New York, 1985, 74.

l'autorité du père et du chef, cantonne la femme dans un rôle bien défini. La vamp existe toujours (...) mais la femme est plus généralement synonyme de "devoir" et de "sacrifice" (...) Elle est mère avant tout'.² However, Jacques Siclier, in his 1957 study of women in French cinema, claims that the cinema of the occupation gave French actresses the opportunity to act out morally, spiritually and emotionally demanding roles of a kind which had been only sparingly doled out to them in the previous history of French cinema; in his view, the occupation allowed women to mark French cinema with their presence.³

Such a disparity of views may be accounted for by a difference in the selection of films studied (220 films went into production during the occupation period), a difference in theoretical approach (Bertin-Maghit using sociological terms of reference in relation to structuralist narrative analyses and Siclier concerned more with the element of performance), or simply by the particular personal attitudes and reading strategies of two male critics of different generations. But one might expect to find contradictory constructions of femininity in the French cinema of the period. After all, the role of women at the time of the National Revolution was an uneasy one. Vichy's privileging of the family unit meant a tightening of the divorce laws, subsidies for large families, discrimination against childless men and the introduction of the death penalty for abortion. Yet traditional notions of family life were challenged by the need to raise the birthrate, and François Garçon's study of the cinema of the period highlights the growing acceptance of the figure of the single mother in film.⁴ Vichy also introduced legislation restricting work for women, particularly married women. However, as Germany made increasingly heavy demands on France's workforce, and the economy therefore required additional women workers, new legislation enacted in May 1942 enabled all women to work, regardless of marital status.⁵

2 Jean-Pierre Bertin-Maghit, *Le cinéma sous l'occupation: le monde du cinéma français de 1940 à 1946*, Paris, 1989, 148.

3 Jacques Siclier, *La femme dans le cinéma français*, Paris, 1957, 114.

4 François Garçon, *De Blum à Pétain: cinéma et société française (1936-1944)*, Paris, 1984.

5 Jean Rabaut, *Histoires des féminismes français*, Paris, 1978, 299-301.

At the end of the 1930s, French women could not be considered to enjoy full citizenship and had still not got the vote. However, in the general upheaval and humiliation of the phoney war, the defeat of the French army and the German occupation of France, there must have been a shifting and questioning of gender roles. The absence of some two million men (dead, imprisoned, in hiding or in exile) left a vacuum in traditional patriarchal structures, and the need for women to provide for their families' survival at a time of such hardship must have generated many contradictions. Women's active participation in the war effort and subsequently in the Resistance were also factors in bringing about changes in women's rights after the Liberation. Rather than merely bearing the imprint of Vichy ideology, therefore, one might expect occupation cinema to show traces of the contradictions informing women's lives.

In fact, a number of factors suggest that the French cinema of the occupation may be more woman-oriented than is generally supposed. In the absence of many men, and particularly after the introduction of the Service du Travail Obligatoire in February 1943, when cinemas were no longer safe for those who might be called up, it is likely that women formed a larger proportion of cinema audiences. Furthermore, the effect of censorship on the range of permissible topics and genres was to produce a predominantly escapist cinema, which relied on history, literature, legend and fantasy for its topics and which favoured comedies, mysteries, musicals and costume dramas as genres. It is arguable that romantic comedies and costume melodramas in particular are genres which tend to privilege female viewing pleasures.

Much of the pleasure offered by such genres lies in their star performances, and in the absence of competition from Hollywood (at least in the Occupied Zone) French film actresses could hope for some starring roles. (One of the paradoxes of the French cinema industry of the occupation is that it enjoyed larger audiences and a larger share of the home market than before or after). The Vichy government's conviction that films like *Quai des brumes* (1938) and *Le Jour se lève* (1939) were partly responsible for the defeat of France, and its determination to clean up the cinema, may have meant that certain types of role were in short supply: typically actresses destined for 'bad girl' roles like Viviane Romance had to find wholesome alternatives, like her self-sacrificing heroine in *La Vénus aveugle* (1940). But there was no shortage of roles

for women, ranging from Suzy Delair's portrayal of Mila Malou, Inspector Wens's spunky mistress and assistant, in *Le Dernier des six* (1941) and *L'Assassin habite au 21* (1942) to Gaby Morlay's heroic substitute mother figure in *Le Voile bleu* (1942), and the assortment of repressed and dangerous women portrayed in Clouzot's controversial film, *Le Corbeau* (1943).

An analysis of the 220 film summaries provided by Jacques Siclier suggests that 40 per cent of occupation films had a woman in the leading role, the ten most frequently appearing being: Gaby Morlay (8); Odette Joyeux, Viviane Romance, Renée Saint-Cyr (6); Arletty, Madeleine Sologne (5); Annie Ducaux, Edwige Feuillère and Elvire Popesco (4).⁶ An analysis of second roles adds Michèle Alfa and Micheline Presle to the list. Overall, then, occupation cinema provided continuity for the stars of the 1930s together with opportunities for a younger generation of actresses. It is striking that so many films starred the virtuous maternal figure of Gaby Morlay, second overall only to Fernandel and on a par with Pierre Fresnay.

These figures suggest a detectable shift towards more women-oriented narratives, compared with the French cinema of the 1930s. According to Michèle Lagny, Marie-Claire Ropars and Pierre Sorlin: 'Le cinéma des années trente, s'il raconte des histoires d'amour, ne met réellement en scène que des acteurs masculins';⁷ and Ginette Vincendeau has found that in the 1930s, 'compared to a striking 200 films that place the father at the centre of family conflicts, only 25 or so highlight the dramas of the mother'.⁸ Female spectators during the occupation may have appreciated not only the multiplicity of fantasy roles incarnated by their favourite actresses on screen, but also the professional role models offered by visibly successful career women. Nevertheless, these role models were not always ones of autonomy or resistance; a much-publicised photograph shows Viviane Romance, Danielle Darrieux, Suzy Delair

6 Jacques Siclier, *La France de Pétain et son cinéma*, Paris, 1981.

7 Michèle Lagny, Marie-Claire Ropars, Pierre Sorlin, *Générique des années 30*, Paris, 1986, 195.

8 Ginette Vincendeau, 'Daddy's Girl: Oedipal Narratives in 1930s French Films', *Iris*, V, no. 1, 1988, 73.

and Jumie Astor, with Albert Préjean, on the train to Berlin for a promotional visit in March 1942.⁹

Of the 220 feature films produced during the occupation, however, not one was directed by a woman. Marie Epstein co-directed her last film *Feu de paille* in 1939, Jacqueline Audry did not direct her first feature *Les Malheurs de Sophie* until 1945 (though she made a documentary, *Les Chevaux du Vercors*, in 1943). Françoise Giroud and Solange Térac were working in the industry as screenwriters. But, characteristically, women's major contribution to French cinema production of the occupation years lay in their supportive roles behind the camera and in their fictional roles on screen.

On the assumption that the occupation cinema may nevertheless have something to offer the female spectator through women-centred stories and female performances, I have selected for close analysis three films, drawn from three different genres, which foreground different types of women's roles and feature different female stars; what they have in common is that the female protagonists are all active wilful women who want their own way. I propose to analyse the films in terms of their narrative strategies, the construction of male/female power relations, and the *mise en scène* of the star performances, with a view to assessing the extent to which they create a space for female desire.

The three films in question are: *L'Honorable Catherine* (1942), a screwball comedy; *Douce* (1943), a costume drama; and *Le Ciel est à vous* (also 1943), a contemporary drama which was not shown until 1944. All three films were condemned at the time by the Catholic League. *L'Honorable Catherine* was one of the 27 most popular films of the occupation, *Douce* was a successful example of what has come to be known as the French quality cinema and was runner-up to *Les Visiteurs du soir* for the Best Film Award of 1943; *Le Ciel est à vous*, however, received critical acclaim but was a commercial failure.

9 Denis Peschanski, Yves Durand, Dominique Veillon, Pascal Ory, Jean-Pierre Azema, Robert Frank, Jacqueline Eichart, Denis Maréchal, *Images de la France de Vichy 1940-1944*, Paris, 1988, 155.

L'Honorable Catherine

Deprived of American imports, at least in the Occupied Zone, French producers and directors attempted to make inoffensive light entertainment films of their own. The German-run production company Continental Films was directly responsible for a number of successful comedies, including *Premier rendez-vous* (1941) starring Danielle Darrieux. *L'Honorable Catherine* was directed by Marcel L'Herbier, who had just made *La Nuit fantastique* (1941) with Micheline Presle, and Jacques Siclier describes it as 'un petit événement', in its defiance of the suffocating moral climate instituted by Vichy.¹⁰ Based on a screenplay by Solange Térac, it starred Edwige Feuillère and Raymond Rouleau, previously partners in another box-office hit, *Mam'zelle Bonaparte* (1941).

The plot of *L'Honorable Catherine* brings together Catherine Roussel, an elegant if unorthodox young businesswoman, played by Edwige Feuillère, and Jacques Taver, a charming wealthy young bachelor, played by Raymond Rouleau. Catherine, who has connections in high society and expensive tastes, runs a business tracking down couples who are about to commit adultery, and then blackmailing them into purchasing extremely expensive and ugly clocks: her 'pendules capitalisatrices'. Aided and abetted by her devoted manservant, Jérôme, who has looked after her since she was a child, she claims to have sold over 400 clocks and saved the virtue of over 200 women! Catherine first encounters Jacques as a potential victim when she overhears him arranging an assignation with Giselle Morland (Claude Génia), who is the wife of his best friend Pierre (André Luguet). On presenting herself at the rendez-vous in her role as 'la Providence', Catherine gets embroiled in a chaotic charade to convince the jealous Pierre that she is in fact Jacques's mistress. The scene suggests a mutual attraction between the two protagonists and ends with the couple locked in a passionate embrace. However, antagonism is quick to set in, based on her hostility to his philandering attitudes and his hostility to her anti-social occupation and her refusal to succumb to his charms. There follows

10 *La France de Pétain et son cinéma*, 173.

a series of misunderstandings and comic gags including: a drunken dinner party in a restaurant, abduction by jewel thieves, a car accident and a night in prison. Finally, the couple sort out their differences and the film culminates in the expected 'happy ending', the promise of marital union.

The patriarchal project of the film is transparent. In the opening scene, a seedy-looking male victim says to his aggressor (not immediately revealed to the spectator as a woman): 'un gangster de votre espèce, il faut le mettre hors d'état de nuire!'. The theme is taken up by Jacques as he interferes with her next job (pursuing an adulterous couple who turn out to be jewel thieves), saying: 'J'ai horreur des femmes qui travaillent', and provides the motivation for his attempt to pass her off as mad in front of his servants and lock her away for a day or two in a room in his country house. When the couple are finally reconciled, Catherine happily promises to give up her clocks, and the camera pans from the couple's embrace to a sundial on the wall behind them. The narrative thus ultimately reasserts the patriarchal ideology of heterosexual love as the 'natural' channelling of female desire, replacing the woman's misplaced and troubled desire for independence.

However, this project is not without its ambiguities. In the first instance, the figure of Catherine is barely containable. Despite attempts by the men to structure her life—Pierre sets up the rendez-vous in the Pavillon Rose, Jacques subsequently tries to keep her under his surveillance—Catherine calmly walks off to resume her independent existence, organising her risky but rewarding business from the security of her luxurious clock-filled office. When she returns to Jacques's country house for the final scene, she does so of her own volition, and first organises her revenge on Jacques by making him appear mad in front of his guests and servants, before accepting a last minute reconciliation. Catherine demands recognition on her own terms; she is not to be likened to other women, those deserving of a 'pendule'. Although she agrees to give up her clocks, it is Catherine whose actions and desires have largely determined the narrative trajectory and brought about the narrative resolution.

If Catherine is able to make her own choices, it is in part because of the absence of strong male characters. She is a free agent, devoid of family connections, without a father figure to keep her in check or give her away. Jérôme is more of a nanny to her ('ma nounou'), while she is the 'honnête

homme' of the partnership. The two young men with whom she becomes entangled, Pierre and Jacques, are both ineffectual individuals given to hysterical behaviour (Pierre in his scene of jealous rage, Jacques in his inability to handle the final dinner-party scene); Catherine is able to run rings round them. However, Jacques does have qualities which make him a worthy sparring-partner for Catherine. Like her, he is witty, spontaneous and imaginative, capable of showing tenderness one moment and pouring forth abuse the next. The film privileges the representation of a crazy, anarchic relationship, rather than celebrating conventional marital bliss. Indeed, Giselle and Pierre, the conventionally married couple, are colourless, hypocritical dupes in comparison.

The film's viewing pleasures derive principally from the power of Feuillère's performance, a 'tour de force' which critics compared with Irene Dunne, Carole Lombard or Katherine Hepburn. From the opening scene, when—shock, horror—we discover that the gangster is none other than the fast-talking sophisticated Catherine, Feuillère struts her stuff: she dispatches her first victim with a casual uppercut to the jaw; she improvises a display of lover's pique by tossing Jacques's possessions out into the street; she shoots at the windscreen of the stolen car to escape from the jewel thieves, causing the car to crash into a clock-shop; clad in Jacques's pyjamas, she dances on his table, hurling his books to the floor; she knocks out a travelling clock-salesman and escapes disguised in his clothes; and she creates mayhem at Jacques's dinner party, until she achieves her end and he submits. Catherine is undoubtedly a transgressive figure of trouble and disorder; the unduly long scenes and the inadequately prepared ending are further testimony of the narrative's failure to contain her successfully.

However, there are attempts to contain the performance through the mediation of male spectators within the film. Indeed, much of Catherine's performance consists of putting on an act for others: the hardhitting business woman for her customers, the jealous mistress for Pierre, the mad jailbird for Jacques's servants, the heartbroken fiancée for Jacques's dinner guests. The final declaration of love is only possible because she and Jacques conjure up invisible imaginary spectators as witnesses. The effect on the cinema spectator, therefore, is one of distancing. By constructing her language and behav-

our as both comic and theatrical, the film denies Catherine any emotional depth. The brief glimpses of her feelings of tenderness for Jacques (as in the first 'magic' kiss, and during their night on the straw in prison together) are quickly eclipsed by comic gags. And in any case identification is discouraged in that Catherine is not an 'ordinary' woman doing 'ordinary' work. She is an adventuress, whose economic independence is based on spying and blackmail, not a particularly appealing way of earning a living, especially in the context of occupied France.

L'Honorable Catherine thus offers spectators the pleasures of a narrative that foregrounds female desire combined with a reassuringly contained ending, and a sparkling transgressive female performance mitigated by the 'distancing' of the male gaze. If, as Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik argue, American screwball comedy offers a way out of addressing and attempting to contain the threat that women's social and economic independence poses to the traditional values of patriarchal order,¹¹ then it may well be significant that French screwball comedy was a popular genre during the occupation. An attempt to repeat the success of *L'Honorable Catherine* in 1946 with *Il suffit d'une fois*, also scripted by Solange Térac and starring Edwige Feuillère, was less successful.

Douce

Douce was directed by Claude Autant-Lara in 1943, and starred Odette Joyeux, Madeleine Robinson, Jean Debucourt, Roger Pigaut and Marguerite Moreno. Adapted by Pierre Bost and Jean Aurenche from a novel written in 1939 by Mme Michel (sic) Davet, it is set in an aristocratic household just before Christmas 1887 (before the completion of the Eiffel Tower), and explores the relationships between the autocratic dowager countess de Bonafé, her widowed son, Engelbert and his daughter Douce (Odette Joyeux), and their employees, Fabien Marani, the steward, and his former mistress Irène, now Douce's governess (Madeleine Robinson). By the end of the film, Douce is

11 Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik, *Popular Film and Television Comedy*, London and New York, 1990.

dead and the lower class intruders have been expelled. The film is generally read as a disturbing critique of France's rigid class structures. Like so many occupation films, however, its sympathies are ambiguously inscribed, for the aristocratic family is both the site of disorder, and hence of social criticism, and the site of loss, inviting emotional identification. The principal motivation for the narrative, however, is female desire.

The film opens with a powerful scene of revolt against traditional patriarchal values. A heavily veiled Douce tells the priest in the confessional that she intends to defy her family, society and the church by running away with the man she loves, a servant. She is certain that her will for happiness can overcome all difficulties. In order to further her project, and take care of her rival for Fabien's affections, she manipulates her grandmother into approval of her father's marriage to Irène, protects Irène from Fabien's anger, prevents Fabien from causing a scandal, and finally persuades him to run away with her. Unfortunately for Douce, she soon discovers that her relationship with Fabien is threatened by the shadow of Irène. But this does not stop her from inviting Fabien to make love to her, regardless of the consequences. The following evening at the Opéra-Comique, she tells him she has decided to leave him. He warns her of what returning to her family will mean, and she realises that her quest for happiness is doomed to failure. Just as she is leaving, a fire breaks out in the theatre and Douce perishes, searching for Fabien: a convenient narrative *coup de théâtre* resolves the problem of the transgressive female. Appropriately enough, the fire is started by the mysterious male figure Douce had dared to look at earlier in the narrative.

The film proposes a critique of the family through the role of the autocratic countess, who blithely abuses her loyal servants, and through the *mise en scène* (with décors by Jacques Krauss) which centres on the count's newly installed lift-cage, a device which both separates servants from masters and adds to the claustrophobic images of imprisonment. Douce herself is repeatedly framed imprisoned against windowpanes (though, as she points out, 'ça se casse').

The household is marked by the absence of a strong figure of male authority. Engelbert is weak and ineffectual, dominated and mocked by his mother: he is a man with a wooden leg acquired not in war but simply in a riding accident. In marked contrast, Fabien is young, strong and dashing;

associated with the outdoor world (he has just returned from the family estate in Normandy with a large Christmas tree) and clad in a fur coat, he leaps in and out of windows, smashing them when necessary, a man of action and style. He is a man of pride, too, imbued with the spirit of insubordination (to such an extent that his lines in the sequence involving the countess's charity visit to the poor were originally censored). It is not surprising that Fabien is an object of desire both for Douce, who hopes to see him eventually take the place of her father, and for the countess, who first describes him to the spectator as resembling the 'handsome' man in one of her paintings, who is similarly not of the right class.

However, the spectator also sees Fabien through the eyes of Irène, who finds his ambitions, his theft and his physical presence repellent. He more than once tries to force himself on her, alienating himself from the spectator's sympathies. Once he has agreed to run away with Douce, he loses the energy and anger which made him attractive, only exploding again when she tells him she is leaving him. In the last instance, he too is ineffectual, and his failure is inscribed into the film's *mise en scène*. Lacking both means and imagination, he takes Douce to the sordid hotel room where he had his previous unsuccessful assignation with Irène. There are no transitional outdoor shots or liberating camera movements. Douce is as imprisoned with Fabien as she had been with her family.

Douce's tragic narrative is paralleled by and interwoven with the story of Irène, her rival, another woman who is seeking to defy the traditional patriarchal order (and whose bedside reading is *Les Liaisons dangereuses*). Irène refuses to accept that her status should be determined by class background or by her liaison with Fabien. She steers the count's interest in her towards a proposition of marriage, and to pursue her aims, she rebuffs Fabien and obliges him to hand back money he was planning to steal from the family. Thus, like Douce, she actively pursues her desires. But she, too, receives her come-uppance. Betrayed by the servant Estelle who has guessed at her relationship with Fabien, she is humiliated by the countess's curse ringing in her ears, as a Christmas carol plays on the sound-track.

The film introduces visual and aural motifs which link the two women, despite the differences of age and class. The motherless Douce deliberately

models herself on her beautiful rival, borrowing her umbrella, her sewing egg, her hankies, the view from her window, the popular lovesong she sings, and eventually her lover. The film's musical accompaniment at first engages audience sympathy with both young women, though this is withdrawn from Irène at the end of the film, as though in the last instance the film does not know where its sympathies lie. The effect is to create ambiguity. Is Irène a heartless adventuress, or simply a woman seeking happiness who is thwarted by the closed French class system?

Sympathy with Douce is similarly mitigated. The film withholds from spectators the possibility of any strong emotional identification with Douce's dilemmas, by avoiding the creation of intimacy. Already distanced by the aristocratic nineteenth-century setting and the complex narrative structure, she is further distanced by the lack of close-ups, the downward-angled camera shots, and the filmmaker's unwillingness to allow the camera to linger on her. A brief close-up and dramatic music accompany Douce's realisation of the extent to which Fabien is involved with Irène. But when next morning she invites Fabien to make love to her, the scene quickly cuts to shots of Irène departing, and the attribution of the accompanying music is ambiguous. Even at the moment of Douce's death, the film cuts to her expectant family rather than dwelling directly on the fate of this wilful but tragic young woman.

Odette Joyeux had already starred in a number of costume dramas, including two other occupation films directed by Autant-Lara, *Le Mariage de Chiffon* (1941) and *Lettres d'amour* (1942). These three films all offer a disconcerting perspective on class and tradition in France, and tend to privilege a female point of view. In Siclier's view, the role of Douce was the one in which Joyeux was most able to show her range as an actress.¹² However, it is also the one in which she meets a tragic death. Robinson and Joyeux effectively express Irène and Douce's desire to escape the confines of class and bourgeois morality, but just as the characters are punished for their transgression, so the actresses are denied the full star treatment in their roles, displaced by the film's concern with the depiction of class differences.

12 *La femme dans le cinéma français*, 111.

In Michel Davet's story (which is told from the point of view of the governess), the governess happily marries the count, while the daughter marries the steward, even though she knows she's making a mistake; but when *he* dies in the fire at the Opéra-Comique, the young widow is able to marry her true love, a young officer drawn from the right class. Curiously, then, the pre-war woman-authored historical romance has a happy ending for both women concerned, while the male-directed film made during the occupation modifies the narrative in such a way that the two wilful women are heavily punished.

Le Ciel est à vous or The Woman Who Dared!

L'Honorable Catherine and *Douce* both focus on young unmarried women who are somewhat removed from the pure, young home-loving women idealised in Vichy ideology. In contrast, *Le Ciel est à vous* (which appeared in the United States as *The Woman Who Dared!*) features an older woman who is both wife and mother. The film was praised by collaborationist and resistance critics alike, each seeking to appropriate its patriotism and its convincing representation of an authentic yet heroic 'ordinary' French family. Albert Valentin's screenplay was based on the true story of a Frenchwoman's exploits a decade earlier. The story is simple. Thérèse and Pierre Gauthier (played by Madeleine Renaud and Charles Vanel) run a small garage and have two children. As a result of their courage, hard work and determination, they are able to make their dreams of making a record-breaking flight come true. However, the film develops in such a way as to subvert the idea of a conventional ordinary family and call into question male/female roles and the meaning of marriage and motherhood.

The emphasis of the film is on the couple working together as a team, whether it is a question of moving house (they have been expropriated to make way for a municipal airfield), dealing with the children and Thérèse's mother, setting up their new garage in town, or eventually flying a plane together, he the mechanic and she the pilot. When they are temporarily separated because she goes to work in a car salesroom in Limoges, and he evades his responsibilities by taking up flying again, things fall apart. When they are together, they are capable of taking on the world, recreating the pattern of Pierre's flying

days during WWI when he worked with the legendary Guynemer. The culmination of their partnership is Thérèse's heroic record-breaking solo long-distance flight, a feat crowned by the celebrations of the entire town on her return. But her return is also the moment of the reconstitution of the couple. When Thérèse is in North Africa, signalled by a *mise en scène* of desert, camels and palm-trees, she uses her moment of glory to talk about what her family means to her; on her return, when she is greeted by Pierre, she cuts short the formal speech he is trying to make as the new President of the Flying Club, and rushes unceremoniously into his arms, a wife and mother rather than a national heroine. Order is restored, the couple and the family are reunited.

However, in terms of narrative structure, it is Thérèse, not the couple, who constitutes the motor of the action. She is the active, determined member of the partnership, the initiator of all the important decisions. It is striking too, that a parallel with another woman aviator runs through the film. At the official inauguration of the aerodrome, the guest of honour is one Mlle Lucienne Ivry, who has been invited to give a demonstration of aerial acrobatics, which she is able to accomplish thanks to Pierre's repair work to her engine. Later, she successfully attempts the women's solo record herself, with all the support of a professional team, a powerful machine, and the national press. However, when Thérèse is in North Africa anxiously awaiting a telegram from home, congratulations from Lucienne arrive first. There is no female rivalry here and the film thus allows *two* women to demonstrate their prowess, defying the sentiments of the pompous councillors who had refused to fund the Gauthiers' project on the basis that 'la place des femmes est au foyer'.

By contrast, the men who enjoy flying are less successful: Pierre damages his arm, and Dr Maulette, the founder of the Club, has a fatal accident. Once again, the men in this film do not provide strong models of male authority. Indeed, Charles Vanel's role has been described as 'feminine', because of its supportive, passive nature. Pierre is not a man of action: without Thérèse's resolve, he would have given up flying when he broke his arm, and he would have given up going for the record. However, the more Thérèse gets involved in flying, the more passionate is his expression of love for her, reaching its apogee at the moment when she first suggests going for the record: 'Je t'aime encore plus que le jour où Claude est né'. In her he has found not just a good

wife and mother, but a partner worthy of the friendship he enjoyed with Guynemer—a soul mate!

However, the picture is not without its dark side. There are strong hints that Thérèse's activities are threatening to the family. The couple reach the point where they are willing to sell their daughter's piano to support their obsession, and to put their home and their lives in danger. Images of orphans frame and punctuate the narrative. The film holds open the possibility of a tragic ending, emphasising the children left alone in the garage, Pierre's long despairing wait for the plane to make contact, and the hostility of his mother-in-law and her friends (with the honourable exception of Jacqueline's piano teacher), before the dramatic news of Thérèse's success is phoned through in the middle of the night.

In terms of spectacle, the film is very understated. Madeleine Renaud's performance depends on conveying the sense of everyday reality; she is not an actress who invites glamour shots. In *Le Ciel est à vous*, she is mostly shot at medium to long distance, with the occasional medium close-up shot to underline her independent decision-making. She is dressed in ordinary clothes, smartening up to work in Limoges, but wearing dungarees in the garage. Her flying gear is filmed at a distance, and there are no shots of her trophy-winning exploits or close-ups of her during her record-breaking flight. Similarly, there is no glamorisation of the figure of Lucienne Ivry. The heroic and spectacular potential of the subject is minimised, Thérèse's most visible energetic activity being behind the wheel of a car. Noticeably, there is no use of music to underline her feelings or achievements.

In a discussion about the film's commercial failure, Grémillon himself suggested that the film's release (February 1944) might have been mistimed (cinema audiences were declining because of the risk of deportation), and that the misleading religious overtones of the title might have been offputting. Furthermore, the combination of Charles Vanel and Madeleine Renaud would not have been a top box-office draw. Geneviève Sellier's analysis of Renaud's roles in Grémillon films suggests that she regularly functions in contrast with more mythic female roles, putting forward a nuanced, realistic representation

of French womanhood.¹³ Lacking such a contrast, perhaps this film was just not sufficiently sexy, an impression confirmed by the downbeat image used for the film poster.

Le Ciel est à vous is still an important film in offering new images of the couple. But it holds back on the pleasures it has to offer the female spectator. The female figures are deliberately not glorified, and the audience is not invited to share emotionally in Thérèse's success. Nor can the spectator assume that her flying activities will continue in the future (though her success may allow her daughter Jacqueline to pursue her own dream of a career as a pianist). Yet by showing that women can combine personal fulfilment outside the family with family life, and that men can be supportive of such a goal, this film may be more progressive than Grémillon's later exploration of women's roles in *L'Amour d'une femme* (1953) which suggests that love and a career are incompatible. And the title invites other women (and men) to take these characters as models.

Conclusion

The patterns of female desire identified in these three films seem to suggest a definitive shift from and challenge to the 'master narrative' of 1930s films which, according to Ginette Vincendeau, 'privileges a strong, often eroticised, relationship between a mature man and a young woman'.¹⁴ It is surely significant that the women figures in question are determined to pursue their desires (even to a tragic conclusion) through partners and pleasures of their own choosing; whilst the father figures are either absent, disabled and impotent (the devil in *Les Visiteurs du soir* is another case in point), or (most extraordinarily) find fulfilment as the partner of an active, mature woman. Bertin-Maghit's summation of gender roles in occupation cinema patently does not apply across the board. A number of occupation films do offer the pleasures of narratives motivated by female desire, challenges to traditional gender roles and strong female performances.

13 Geneviève Sellier, *Jean Grémillon—Le cinéma est à vous*, Paris, 1989, 210–11.

14 'Daddy's Girl', 72.

However, these pleasures tend to be mitigated by the aesthetic qualities of the films concerned. Film production during the occupation was a difficult business, involving a severe shortage of materials, problems of personnel, and strict censorship. The response was a 'quality cinema' that was 'rigorous, restrained and formal', where, according to Ehrlich, 'the warmth of prewar French cinema (...) [was] replaced by the iciness of long shots and perfectly composed images, in which actors seemed to be not human beings but well-trained mechanisms, engineered rather than born'.¹⁵ Even if, as I have argued, the climate of the occupation did allow a limited space for the representation of female desire, the modes of representation available militated against it being fully exploited. Wilful women seem to have existed in occupation cinema, women who make their own choices, and who are more than a match for the men in their lives. But just as Pierre in *Le Ciel est à vous* cannot find the words to address the woman who is both his wife *and* a national heroine, so the filmmakers betray their inability to come to terms with the phenomenon of wilful women through their unsatisfactory visual and narrative film language.¹⁶

15 *Cinema of Paradox*, 93.

16 This essay is based on a paper given at a conference on 'Sound Bites and Silent Dames: Women in French Cinema since the 1930s', Birmingham University, March 1992.