
H-France Review Vol. 18 (May 2018), No. 107

Jean-Pierre Bertin-Maghit, *Propaganda documentaries in France 1940-1944*. Translated by Marcelline Block. Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016. xix + 267 pp. Bibliography and index. \$95.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-1-4422-6101-3.

Review by Steve Wharton, The University of Bath.

The troubled period of the German Occupation of France—*les années noires* or the dark years—has long engaged and fascinated scholars and more general audiences, and much has been written on the various aspects of this time of division and turmoil. One of the lenses through which to examine the period has been film in its various forms—documentary, newsreel, and main feature—from the work of Paul Légliise with his *Histoire de la politique du cinéma français: entre deux Républiques 1940-1949* (1977) through Jacques Siclier's *La France de Pétain et son cinéma* (1999), which set the general context later developed by those such as Jean-Pierre Jeancolas and, of course, the subject of the present review. The appearance of this translation of Jean-Pierre Bertin-Maghit's 2007 French-language work is a timely reminder of the importance of the role of documentary film during the Occupation and takes as its focus a specific grouping of documentaries in support of its argument.

We tend traditionally to view documentary as a truthful and didactic medium, reflecting on its chronicling of nature, history, or culture. This book provides an opportunity to engage with a sub-genre of documentary seen in a time of crisis or dictatorship: propaganda documentary, harnessed to the service of the regime or its leadership, disseminating “the line” and its themes to a public more normally used to seeing documentary as a means of objective information—a public therefore arguably more open to its less noble message than through a main feature or newsreel.

Having worked on the role of cinema in France during Vichy for the past thirty or more years, Bertin-Maghit's differing theoretical approach over that time has moved from the structuralism of the 1970s and 1980s to a more nuanced reading of films within, and determining, their context and content. Drawing here on a then recently-restored group of 178 films integrated into the French Film Archives (some of which were already available to the interested researcher from other sources, and indeed investigated), Bertin-Maghit presents them in a contrast between the intended depictions of so-called Free or Vichy France, and the occupied North (with a nod also to those *départements* under Belgian Military Command). This essential binary proposes an idealized Pétainist South, and a North much readier to toe the line of the Nazi occupier. As with the politics of the time, these two merge after November 1942. Such an approach in categorization also permits Bertin-Maghit in his analysis to show how the

constantly shifting political landscape across the entire country was reflected in the multifaceted deployment of documentary film production in terms of themes and tropes; informed knowledge and open manipulation, if you will.

“Film is part of the individual and the collective; it is furthermore a medium in which systems of production, mentalities, spectatorial expectation, and political and economic data interfere” (p. xviii). It is from this premise that we begin our engagement with the works in question, with an initial chapter on propaganda and institutions indicating both the ideological confusion at the political/governmental level, and the range of producers at the more practical end of the spectrum. Moving then to the key personalities in the field of film production and its politics, Bertin-Maghit turns to newsreel production and the creation of a single news source for projection in cinemas across both zones.

This done, attention is focused on the 178 films themselves, divided for analysis as was the country itself. Pétain as *cynosure* is omnipresent in the Vichy portfolio: *fêted* by adoring crowds, providing the physical and ideological bridge between the traditions of France so important to the *Révolution nationale*, and the younger generation who will forge the future. Bertin-Maghit examines and describes the tropes and imagery in his analysis of presentation of the domestic and imperial agenda.

The Occupied Zone’s propaganda “of agitation and exclusion” (p. 107) provides the contrast with this idyll. Here the enemy is the Jew, the Mason, the Bolshevik. The chapter examining “Paris’s Way” looks particularly at the films deployed in the identification and denunciation of this trio of othering, drawing parallels as appropriate with the tropes of Nazi antisemitism and showing how the typographic elements of poster material find themselves transposed into film *cartons*, providing a subtle imbrication of message across media.

A brief epilogue nods to the changes in focus and production integrity during and after Liberation and philosophizes on the changing role of the author’s approach to film over the length of his engagement with and study of film: “When I was writing the analysis for *Propaganda Documentaries in France*, I was haunted by a double preoccupation: that of the historian, who, through his study of the world of cinema under the Occupation, adds his contribution to the knowledge of a troubled and complex period...; and that of the film historian, who inscribes his work within the long trajectory of the history of film forms” (p. 180). This leads neatly to a reminder to readers not only of the role of film as merely one element of the materials such as tracts, newspapers, and posters that contextualize original audiences, but also a nod to the imminent arrival of new world orders and television as their medium of dissemination and interpellation of publics; the latest manifestation of the long trajectory to which he has previously referred. *La boucle est bouclée*.

The volume offers a catalogue of the restored films, which form the corpus examined in this work, detailing producer, director, production company, voiceover, synopsis, and contextualization where appropriate. (The translator’s delicacy bizarrely provides asterisks after the F of the translated title of *La France est foutue*, presumably to save the blushes of a Transatlantic readership). There is also a useful overview of the files in the National Archives referenced in the discussion of the films and their impact at the time.

The French edition of this book, issued some ten to eleven years ago, provided concrete examples of the works discussed through extracts and sometimes complete shorter documentaries on an accompanying DVD; one can only assume that the issue of rights for further reproduction and subtitling prevented a similar approach here. There is however ample illustration through stills from the films discussed, in terms of providing an underscoring of the points the author wishes to make about *mise en scène* and its visual encoding for the reader.

It is regrettable that the bibliography is exclusively francophone, as this does not afford the opportunity of engaging with “Anglo-Saxon” experts in the field such as Brett Bowles on newsreel, and other authors on the propaganda role of documentary during the Occupation, whose work provides an alternative to the sometimes echo chamber-like interrogation and dissection of this difficult period of French history from the country of origin.

This is however an important addition to works available in English providing greater understanding and interpretation of Occupied France and of the mechanisms deployed in the promotion of the palatability of the Vichy regime and its collaborators (in all senses of the word).

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ISSN 1553-9172