

The French Cinema

UNDER OCCUPATION

BY JACQUES LAURENT BOST

IN June, 1940, the French motion picture was dead, and in the year following the defeat everything seemed to be against its resurrection. Four of the best French producers—René Clair, Julien Duvivier, Jean Renoir, and Jacques Feyder—were in foreign lands, and a great number of actors and technicians were hit by the interdict. But all that was as nothing compared with another more serious danger: the German determination to conquer the French cinema market. From June, 1940, onwards, the German companies Ace and Tobis sent their executives to Paris with instructions to get control of the leading cinemas of Paris and the provincial circuits. Their first attempt was so well managed that, for a year only, three cinema theaters were reserved for French productions. The cinema industry, attempting to defend itself, succeeded in saving a number of the houses, but the Vichy government, powerless or indifferent, did nothing against this "colonization" until the middle of 1941. Once they owned the theaters, the Germans flooded the market with their productions. Happily for the French cinema, these were exceedingly mediocre as a whole.

Although at the time the cinema was its only distraction, the public held aloof from these films. They were either propaganda films, sugary romantic love stories, or "light"

comedies of an appalling heaviness. Sometimes, too, adventure or detective films were seen, feeble copies of American models. Among the hundreds of films the Germans forced on us, it can be said without prejudice that half a dozen at the most were even worthy of mention. The best from the technical point of view was *Le Jeune Hitlérien Quex* (*Quex of the Hitler Youth*), an admirably made propaganda film, dating, however, from 1933.

And so the first attempt at conquest of the French market was abortive. The public didn't like German films and was content not to like them. Did the Germans foresee this check? The Continental installed itself in Paris to try to conquer the French market from the inside, by making French films in France, with French actors and technicians. This second maneuver was clever and succeeded better than the first. Many, too many, technicians and actors (and by no means the worst) accepted contracts offered them by Continental, which made a good start. Two excellent detective films, *L'Assassinat du Père Noël* (*The Murder of Father Christmas*), of Christian Jacques, and *Le Dernier des six* (*The Last of the Six*), of Lecomte, and a romanticized life of Berlioz, *La Symphonie fantastique* (*Fantastic Symphony*), had an enormous public success.

AT that moment the situation of the French motion picture was critical. The Germans owned the good theaters. Continental had gathered together a talented group of actors and technicians. It was very rich and had the advantage of six months' start over the French studios, which were only authorized to go into production from the month of June, 1941. Moreover, when, at last, authorization to produce was granted to the French companies, they found themselves in a position of glaring inferiority in regard to Continental; through the intermediary of the *Propagande Staffel*, Continental controlled the market in film, and severely restricted the quota. Twenty thousand, then eighteen thousand, then finally sixteen thousand meters of film at most were allotted the French houses. This amount was absolutely insufficient. It is generally recognized that twenty-five thousand to thirty thousand meters are necessary for a carefully made film. It had to be made up by buying in the black market, where a three-hundred-meter reel cost about ten million francs, and it was the same for all the material used in making a film—nails, wood, and paint for scenery, stuff for the costumes, or cosmetics for the actors' make-up. The quantities officially distributed were always laughable, and the cinema, more than any other industry, had to resort constantly to the black market, which considerably overweighted the budgets. Later, even electricity was severely rationed and the number of working hours reduced. Finally, in 1943, only night work was allowed, and that, as everyone knows, gives disastrous results, particularly when it is constantly interrupted by alerts. Mention may be made, too, of the Italian competition, less severe and less well equipped and, above all, less dangerous because of the total and utter mediocrity of the Italian productions.

TO these commercial and material difficulties were added others—different but no less irksome, such as the passive resistance of a double censorship to all interesting experiments. The smug and prudish Vichy censorship systematically refused to authorize any subjects outside of "Work-Family-Country," and reserved its indulgence for the feeblest stories of return-to-the-land. To give two concrete examples, it vetoed Stendhal's *Le Rouge et le noir*. It forbade the use of the words *amant* (lover) and *maitresse* (mistress) in the dialogue. On the other hand, the German censorship forbade films on present-day subjects which could not be made directly or indirectly a vehicle of propaganda.

Thus, French films had formidable German competition. Italian competition was disastrous because of the material conditions of work, difficulties of the censorship, Continental's marketing monopoly, and the fact that French producers were able to exploit their films only on the French market, since the number of sessions was more severely restricted in the French movie houses. It took months before a film costing six or seven million francs covered expenses, which in normal times would have been a matter of weeks. It is easy to understand that the big films costing from ten to thirty millions to produce were not a paying proposition. Finally, it must be said that quality was, for the producers at that time, a pure and simple luxury. The public, deprived of distractions, queued up indifferently for a masterpiece like *Goupi-Mains-Rouges* or for some dud production thrown together in a month.

So it is not surprising that the first French films to appear after June, 1941, were of no great interest. The year 1941 marked the peak period of the all-powerful Continental. What is surprising, however, is that from 1941 onwards, Continental productions regu-

larly fell off in quality until they became (with but few exceptions) entirely mediocre, while the French cinema not only drew level with its competitor, but actually showed a definite advance of its own prewar achievement.

FROM August, 1940, to 1944, about three hundred films were made. Let us say at once that out of these three hundred, only one was definitely a piece of German propaganda. This was *Forces occultes*, a film about Freemasonry, thrown together to order by a handful of technicians and actors without talent who were less squeamish than the public, who spontaneously boycotted the production. Several other films made by Continental have incurred the reproach of having indirectly served the purpose of German propaganda. Of these we shall speak later.

As to Vichy propaganda, its purpose was served only by a few films having as theme the famous "return to the land," such as *Port d'attache*, *Andorra*, and *Patrice*, absolutely colorless and inoffensive films, if sheer silliness can be inoffensive. Three hundred films, then, among which there was naturally an enormous amount of rubbish, leg shows, pieced-together detective stories, flat, insipid, love stories. But at all times and in all countries film production has included this shoddy.

Since a number of subjects were forbidden, scenario writers sought to escape censorship by taking refuge in regions that were free to them—the last, the domain of crime fantasy and legend. For producers who found difficulty in making expenses, costume films had the advantage of not getting old-fashioned. They could be marketed later abroad, once restrictions were removed again.

About twenty French films produced during the war are worth retaining, and that is not so few. They are the work either of pro-

ducers already known before the war, like Marcel Carne and Jean Gremillon, or of less-known producers who have come to the top, like Christian-Jacques, Jean Delannoy, and Claude Autan-Lara, or newcomers since the occupation, such as Jacques Becker and Louis Daquin.

MARCEL CARNE, the creator of *Quai des brumes* (called *Port of Shadows* in the United States), gave us, in 1942, *Les Visiteurs du soir*, (*Night Visitors*). A couple of damned souls are sent by the devil into a castle of the Middle Ages, to stir up trouble. The devil, in the guise of a sarcastic aristocrat, comes down to earth to keep watch on his servants. The theme of the film is that love is stronger than the devil. This sumptuously mounted film, perfectly developed and played, even though a little cold, had an enormous success. It was the first of a series of fantastic films featuring the devil. Maurice Tourneur's *La Main du diable* (*The Devil's Hand*, a Continental production) had an excellent idea, borrowed from Gérard de Nerval, but not much was made of it. The film was vulgar and appeared to be thrown together. Lower still, we have *L'Homme qui vendait son âme au diable* (*The Man Who Sold His Soul to the Devil*), an imitation, pure and simple. I only mention these two last films to illustrate the taste of the French cinema for the fantastic — a taste which showed itself again in two other films. *Le Baron Fantôme* (*The Phantom Baron*), of Jean Cocteau and Serge de Poligny, was not very good, and I doubt if it will have a chance of revival after the war. *La Nuit fantastique* (*Night of Fantasy*), in which real persons and events mingle and get mixed up with dream persons and events, teemed with excellent cinematographic ideas, but the whole was badly constructed, and included vulgar

and unnecessary episodes clumsily patchworked onto the scenario.

AFTER *Visiteurs du soir*, Carne made *Les Enfants de Paradis* (*Children of Paradise*), not yet shown to the public, but said to be exceedingly good in the setting of the famous Boulevard de Crime (Crime Boulevard). It is the story of the rivalry of the mime Devureau with the actor Frederick-Lemaitre and is another costume film to be marketed after the war.

Jean Gremillion's film *Remorques* (*Towropes*), made before the war, was a love story with a maritime atmosphere. Later, Gremillon made *Lumière d'été* (*Summer Sunlight*), in which complex characters, eaten up with passions or vices, tear each other's reputations to pieces, in a "sticky" atmosphere. Gremillon can create an atmosphere as well as Carne. (It is, generally speaking, the greatest quality of good French technicians.) But he has the advantage over Carne and all his other colleagues of being able to get all they have out of his interpreters. *Lumière d'été* has perhaps one fault: the setting in which the story unfolds (a dam under construction in wild and rocky mountains) is not sufficiently an integral part of the story. It does not really play a part, as does the sea in *Memorques*. There are other faults in the scenario, like a certain rather worked-up and conventional cruelty, but Gremillon's production is so perfect that one believes from beginning to end in the characters' story. *Lumière d'été* is by far the best of Gremillon's films. His latest work, *Le Ciel est à vous* (*Heaven is Yours*), produced in 1943, though technically excellent, falls short in its scenario and rather thin dialogue after the Vichy model.

Jean Delannoy, almost unknown before the war, had two popular triumphs in 1941, *Pontcarral colonel d'empire* and *l'Eternel*

retour (*The Eternal Comeback*). *Pontcarral* is a heroic history of a half-pay officer—to me, totally lacking in interest. *L'Eternel retour* was a bolder venture. The subject is the legend of Tristan and Isolde, modernized and adapted for the cinema by Jean Cocteau. Jean Delannoy is a rising producer, but he does not seem to me to be in the same class with a Carne, a Gremillion, a Renoir, or a Becker. For me, he is what is called a good cinematist, a very clever technician, and nothing but a technician. The aim of a venture like *l'Eternel retour* was, or should have been, to succeed in giving a universal character to his personages in sweater or lounge suit; to make one feel around them the aura of the heroes of legend. In this, it must be confessed, Delannoy has not succeeded. The story of Tristan and Isolde is no more than a commonplace love story. The film is cold and slow, with that notorious slowness of the French cinema, which is surprising, for Delannoy is one of the rare French producers, with Jacques Becker, who once succeeded, in *l'Enfer de jeu*, in giving a film that American rhythm which French authors of adventure films or light comedies seek in vain.

I HAVE seen three films by Claude Autan-Lara, *Le Mariage de Chiffon* (*The Marriage of Chiffon*), a very brilliant comedy, *Lettres d'amour* (*Love Letters*), a half success, and *Douce*. The last deals with the double check of a double love story, and is, at the same time, a cruel illustration of the French *grande bourgeoisie* at the end of the last century. These three films are placed between the years 1880 and 1905, and Lara has succeeded in re-creating the atmosphere of that period in an attractive manner. To other merits Autan-Lara adds (unless it is just luck) that of having always worked with a good operator. The quality of the

photography in his films is always admirably adapted to the subject. This is not so general in France.

The newcomers, the young producers who were still assistants before the war, are numerous, and many will certainly succeed in making good films. I shall mention only three, Jacques Becker, Louis Daquin, and Henri Georges Clouzot.

Becker has made three films up to now, *Dernier atout* (*Last Trump*), a detective film as rapid and keyed up as an American film. Though in a different style, *Goupi-Mains-Rouges* also built up round a police intrigue in a peasant family, but full of a macabre and

icy humor which escaped all the critics and a good part of the public, who were determined to see in this film, and wishful thinking was certainly required to see it, a realistic study of peasant life. Becker's great quality is that he has a style quite his own: a succession of pictures flowing, but tensely linked together. The characters are really living (there are about ten of almost equal importance in *Goupi-Mains-Rouges* who are quite familiar to us after the first reel). Becker has a knack of making the decor vitally important, of making it react on his characters and making the surrounding country react on it all; this makes *Goupi* (with the Cocteau previously



mentioned) the best film turned out during the four years. Becker's third film, *Falbalas*, is being awaited with impatience. This is finished but has not yet been shown to the public.

LOUIS DAQUIN's first film, *Nous les gosses* (*We the Young*), was an insignificant but well-developed storiette. His second and, for the moment, his best film, *Le Voyageur de la Toussaint* (*The Man Who Traveled on All Saint's Day*), adapted from Georges Simenon's novel, was a success of a different kind. The characters (and the spectators) bathe from one end of the film to the other in the famous Simenon "atmosphere" which has tempted so many cinematists. The first reel in particular, the landing of stowaway in the port of La Rochelle, and his walk through the foggy streets of the town, was the best cinema *première cordée*. A mountain film was much less good, and failed chiefly by the impossible feebleness of the scenario, the dialogue, and the acting. This fault is common to the type of film which should once and for all be relegated to the category of simply documentaries.

We come now to Henri Georges Clouzot, who owes as much to public morality as to the cinema. Clouzot worked four years with Continental, like a number of other technicians, and made two detective films, being responsible for scenario and dialogue: *Le Dernier des six* (*The Last of the Six*) and *Les Inconnus dans la maison* (*Strangers in the House*). The first was excellent; the second less good. Afterwards, he made two films as producer, *L'Assassin habite au 21* (*The Murderer Lives at No. 21*), a very amusing detective film, and *Le Corbeau* (*The Crow*), the latter having given rise to heated discussion. No one denies its technical and artistic worth, and for me this film is an authentic

masterpiece. On a small town falls a rain of anonymous letters, signed "The Crow." Consequences follow, at first ridiculous, then disquieting, then tragic. The postmistress has lovers, the bank director is a cuckold, the medical superintendent at the hospital is a morphomaniac, etc. The picture presented by this film of the French *petite bourgeoisie* is abject, but the French cinema has never been tender toward the French. The bourgeois of *Lumière d'été*, those of *Voyageur de la Toussaint*, are odious. The semicriminals of *Quai des brumes* lead a sordid existence. The peasants of *Goupi-Mains-Rouges* are hard and avaricious. The picture of France that the hundred best films of recent years would present to the foreigner would be appalling. But what of it? If good literature isn't made with fine sentiments, still less are good films. No, it is just to reproach Clouzot with having made it for Continental, but it seems excessive to see in *Le Corbeau* a work voluntarily serving enemy propaganda. Clouzot would certainly have done better to choose another subject and other producers, but he would perhaps be judged less severely if he had less talent.

TWO films written by Jean Giraudoux must be mentioned, *La Duchesse de Langeais*, and *Les Anges du péché* (*Angels of the Transgression*), the first of which was produced by Jacques de Baroncelli, the second by a promising beginner, Robert Bresson. *La Duchesse de Langeais*, in spite of Giraudoux's dialogue, is merely a conventional film. *Les Anges du péché* is a success, all the more surprising in that at first sight the subject appears to be the reverse of cinematographic. It deals with convent life, a subject as static and little romantic as can be. Giraudoux and Bresson have made it as alive and thrilling as a detective film, as moving

as a beautiful love story. Once again the French cinema has succeeded with an atmospheric film without much action, but whose characters have a roundness and depth which might have been thought difficult to achieve except in a novel.

THAT is the leading quality of good French cinema. Its characters "resist"; they have response and weight. The character of Patrice in *Lumière d'été*, springs to mind, of Couce, of Goupi-Tonkin in *Goupi-Mains-Rouges*, of the ugly, amorous young girl of *Le Corbeau*. They are something more than their words and gestures and function in the story, as the characters of the cinema are only too often. We feel them stirring with thoughts, feelings, and complexes as difficult to know and as unpredictable as any flesh-and-blood man. Perhaps it is that slowness, previously touched upon, which allows the French cinema to give this roundness to its personages, and perhaps in the long run this slowness is a good quality, at least in atmos-

pheric and psychological films. In this, the French cinema succeeds very well. On the other hand, it is an incurable blemish on light films. The least bad productions of this type, like *L'Honorable Catherine* (*The Honorable Catherine*) or *L'Inévitable Monsieur Dubois* (*The Inevitable Monsieur Dubois*), are but moribund copies of the inimitable American comedies. Why seek to force a talent?

We knew that the French cinema had made progress since 1943, but we expectantly awaited the first American films. If we had advanced by a step, our masters should have advanced by leaps and bounds. Up to now, I have seen ten or so American films, and I admit, to my wicked joy, to have been disappointed. It seemed to me indeed that the American cinema had remained as it was, always excellent but the same, and that the distance separating it from ours was considerably reduced, and even in certain directions reduced to nothing. Perhaps I am wrong, but I don't think so.



Another scene from Pontcarral 11