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► **To cite this version:**

Christoph Vatter. Trauma, cultures of memory and childhood in French postwar cinema: The Example of René Clément's Jeux Interdits (1952). (Audio-)Visual Arts and Trauma: From the East to the West, Universaar, pp.97-114, 2018. hal-03016340

HAL Id: hal-03016340

<https://hal.univ-lorraine.fr/hal-03016340>

Submitted on 27 Nov 2020

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CHRISTOPH VATTER

Trauma, Cultures of Memory and Childhood in French
Postwar Cinema: The Example of René Clément's
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The way France deals with its past related to occupation, resistance and collaboration during World War II might be an exemplary case for studying the link between trauma, cultures of memory and the nation on the one hand and its mediation through the audio-visual arts, especially cinema, on the other. After the vain attempt to repel the Nazi invasion army in May and June of 1940, the occupation period was marked by a profound division of France's territory and the population's minds. Whereas the Northern part of France, including the capital Paris, was occupied and completely controlled by the German Reich's military forces, the "free" south of the country was governed by the so-called Régime de Vichy under Philippe Pétain and its Prime Minister, Pierre Laval. Under the slogan "Travail, patrie, famille" ("Work, fatherland, family") Pétain's *Révolution nationale* willingly adopted the Nazi's conservative ideology and pursued official politics of *collaboration* as the French Maréchal announced in his famous radio speech from October 30, 1940 after having met with Hitler in Montoire (October 24, 1940). Opposed to that strategy of accommodation and collaboration with the German occupant, Charles de Gaulle represents the emblematic leader of the *Résistance* since his famous Appeal of 18 June from London. After France's liberation in 1944, the conflicts between *Résistance* and *collaboration* and the ideological struggles that derived from them were quickly silenced and 'forgotten': the powerful myth of "résistancialisme" (Henry Rousso) claiming France as a nation united in resistance and reducing the extent of collaboration to an insignificant exception of a few felons, was established from the very beginning and was most actively promoted under de Gaulle who was the leader of the Provisional Government (1944–1946) and returned to power from 1958 until 1969. The comforting and apparently very appealing idea of a whole nation unanimously united in resistance against Hitler and Nazi Germany brought along the repression of diverging memories and silenced the internal conflicts between resisters and collaborators, but also the indifference and passiveness of the bystanders, probably the largest group of people not having chosen a clear camp and mainly struggling with their own advancements in harsh times. The dominance of the *Résistance* myth was only weakened after the

change of generation following May 1968 and the first socialist government with the election of François Mitterrand in 1981. But it was not before 1995 that a French President officially recognized this difficult past: in his speech during the commemoration ceremony of the Vél' d'Hiv Roundup, *la rafle du Vél' d'Hiv*, the raid and arrest of 13,152 Jews in Paris on July 16, 1942, Jacques Chirac admitted the responsibility of the French and the *Etat français* as Vichy France is officially called, in the prosecution of Jews.

The historian Henry Rousso used psychological terms to analyze the evolution of France's cultures of memory on the Vichy years.¹ The phases he outlines for the complex process of France's coming to terms with its past, are close to the steps in the evolution of a psychological trauma:² after a first period of "unfinished mourning" during the first decade after the end of the war that was characterized by the short and violent *épuration* and broad amnesties for most collaborators, Rousso observes a long period of "repressions" (1954-1971) of deviant memories from the resistance paradigm. Covering the long years of de Gaulle's presidency, in this period the myth of a nation in resistance, embodied by the General himself, was widely consolidated. The following period, "the broken mirror" (1971-1974), is marked by the reopening of the wounds and a profound change in the vision of the past after de Gaulle's death in 1970. Triggered by Marcel Ophuls' documentary film *The Sorrow and the Pity* (*Le chagrin et la pitié*, 1969/1971) and Historians' re-examination of the period,³ the new generation was not willing to accept the national consensus and claimed change in the memory of the *années noires*. This challenge of the established culture of memory led to a long period of 'obsessions' with the so far silenced crimes of the occupation years. From

¹ Henry Rousso: *The Vichy Syndrome. History and Memory in France Since 1944*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1991.

² Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) was only included in the American Psychiatric Association's DSM (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders) in May 1980 and much less present in public discourse than today. That may be an explanation why Rousso's focus is on memory, a concept that was in the processes of becoming a main paradigm of cultural studies during the preparation of his study in the mid-1980s. When his book was published first in France in 1987, Pierre Nora had just finished the publication of the first two volumes of his influential *Lieux de mémoire* (1984-1992).

³ Especially Robert Paxton's *Vichy France. Old guard and new order 1940-1944* (New York, W.W. Norton, 1972) whose French translation came out in France in 1973, but also Eberhard Jäckel's *La France dans l'Europe de Hitler* (Paris, Fayard, 1968) initiated a great number of new studies on the period. Cf. François Bédarida: "L'Histoire de la Résistance. Lectures d'hier, chantiers de demain." In: *Vingtième siècle* 7-9, no. 11, 1986, pp. 75-89; Pierre Azéma and François Bédarida (eds.): *Le Régime de Vichy et les Français*, Paris, Fayard, 1992 (especially Part one: "L'Historiographie de Vichy d'hier à aujourd'hui", pp. 23-74).

1974 on, it opened the way for the ‘Jewish Memory’ making France’s implication in the prosecution and assassination of the European Jews a major topic and fostered political discussions on the way the nation related to its history. Major trials against war criminals such as Klaus Barbie (1987), Paul Touvier (1994) or Maurice Papon (1998) for crimes against humanity illustrate the central role of dealing with the Vichy past in the 1980s and 1990s. Since then, public debates and a large number of books and films, as well as a prolific scientific production, illustrate the constant interest in this part of French History.

Cinema has always played a key role in the evolution of France’s memory of the occupation period as the following examples illustrate. As a privileged media for dealing with the painful past and conflicting versions of history, filmmakers have often proposed narratives in line with the dominant discourse; but they have also tentatively explored different ways of remembering, often by directly addressing the open wounds of memory. France’s very first postwar feature film, *The Battle of the Rail* (*Bataille du Rail*, 1946) by René Clément, already participated actively in the transformation of the (still present) past into memory. Director René Clément, for whom the Occupation period became the central topic of his long career,⁴ portrayed the railroad workers’ valiant fight by sabotage and erected with *Bataille du Rail* a monument for the *Résistance* that is – clearly inspired by the communist perspective – shown as a collective effort for the nation.⁵ As a central “vector of memory” (Henry Rousso), cinema sets – in Clément’s movie – the tone for the dominant vision of the period 1940–1944 as the people united in resistance – and for the repression of alternative perspectives. The cinematographic climax of ‘résistancialisme’ in de Gaulle’s France was marked by two films from 1966: René Clément’s Franco-American epic war film, *Is Paris burning* (*Paris brûle-t-il?*, 1966) on the liberation of Paris in 1944; and Gérard Oury’s popular *La grande vadrouille*⁶ (1966), a burlesque comedy that showed popular comedians Louis de Funès and Bourvil as gawky, accidental

⁴ Many of his films deal with the occupation period and are important milestones in the filmography of Vichy and its memory, e.g. *Bataille du Rail* (1946), *Le père tranquille* (1946), *Les maudits* (1946), *Jeux interdits* (1952), *Le jour et l’heure* (1963), *Paris brûle-t-il?* (1966).

⁵ Christoph Vatter: *Gedächtnismedium Film. Holocaust und Kollaboration in deutschen und französischen Spielfilmen seit 1945*, Würzburg, Königshausen & Neumann, 2009, pp. 82ff.; Susanne Dürr: *Strategien nationaler Vergangenheitsbewältigung. Die Zeit der Occupation im französischen Film*, Tübingen, Stauffenburg, 2001, pp. 22ff.

⁶ *The Great Stroll*, also distributed under the titles *Don’t Look Now... We’re Being Shot At!* and *La grande vadrouille* on the English speaking market.

resistance heroes duping again and again even more incapable Nazis.⁷ Whereas *Paris brûle-t-il?* with its impressive reconstruction of the fights in the streets of Paris celebrated the idea of the *Libération* as a joint effort of *Résistance* and military operations, one of the core elements of the Gaullist *Résistance* myth – the long-lasting immense success of *La grande vadrouille*, established over a long period as France's most watched movie, along with its frequent transmission on television, reflects the deep roots of the myth of resistance in French popular culture.

But it was also a movie that vigorously broke the mirror of the illusion of a nation in resistance: Marcel Ophuls' documentary *Le chagrin et la pitié* (*The Sorrow and the Pity*, 1969/1971) portrayed the city of Clermont-Ferrand during the Vichy years. It shows the period 1940–1944 not as a conflict between two countries, France and Germany, but rather as an ideological struggle within France. Preferring interviews and testimony over archival images, Ophuls disassembles the image of an organized, united resistance movement; instead, he shows indifference, 'wait and see' attitude and anticipatory obedience as well as traces of a deeply rooted antisemitism in rural France. The film that was forbidden for broadcast on TV for more than ten years,⁸ still found a large public despite of its limited distribution in small movie theaters. Ophuls' film expresses the questions of the post-war generation and therefore documents the collision between different visions of the past. Longtime repressed memories were challenged and brought into the light during the following years, not only on screen.

These few examples of emblematic cinematographic contributions to the process of dealing with a controversial past illustrate how movies participate in the discussion of memory. Beyond its capacity of perpetuating and consolidating dominant visions of the past, film has also a subversive potential to explore different ways of remembering. In this article, René Clément's *Jeux interdits* (1952) will serve as an example to analyze the complex relationship between the representation of trauma and cultural memory in France. After some theoretical reflections on cinema, horror and trauma, we will examine how Clément's movie uses the representation of individual loss and trauma to address the collective level. The specificity of his approach will be underlined through a comparison with François Boyer's novel that is at the origin of the

⁷ A similar approach was already used in *La traversée de Paris* (Claude Autant-Lara, 1956), starring Bourvil and de Funès together with Jean Gabin in the leading parts.

⁸ *Le chagrin et la pitié* was only broadcast in October 1981, after the electoral victory of the Socialists under François Mitterrand. It reached an audience of approximately 15 million and was followed by an intense studio-debate.

screenplay developed by the famous screenwriter duo Jean Aurenche and Pierre Bost in collaboration with Boyer and Clément.

Trauma, Horror, and Memory in Film

The functions of filmic representations of trauma and horror are often discussed in the narrow context of the genre of horror movies, but they can also be examined in a broader sense of traumatic experiences or taboo in the cinema such as for example the holocaust, the Vietnam war or the Spanish civil war.⁹ Elm, Kabalek and Köhne (2014) start their reflections on *The Horror of Trauma in Cinema: Violence Void Visualization* recalling Siegfried Kracauer's analogy between the filmic screen and the story of Perseus and Medusa in Greek mythology.¹⁰ The hero uses his polished shield as a screen reflecting the horror induced by Medusa's petrifying gaze to turn her deadly weapon against herself. The mediated horror is not harmful anymore and, thanks to Perseus' smart ruse, he can cut Medusa's head off and turn it into a weapon for his protection by putting it on his shield. As in the tale of Perseus,

[c]inema serves as a shield/screen offering pathways to insight into dreadful scenes of actual horror, cruelty and violence without petrifying our bodies. As such, film is a powerful and liberating media because it allows us to 'incorporate' unsighted horrific scenes in our memory, to 'behead' or distort the horror in mirrors, and to influence the discourse about violent events in real life.¹¹

The cinematographic representation as a way for addressing repressed memories and horror may thus become a means of coping with the past and finding relief through the reflection of traumatic experiences on a screen. Filmic representations of trauma and traumatic experiences may therefore be a 'safe' way to deal with horrors of the past. However, besides this cathartic function, movies bear also the potential to act directly on the viewer's memory. As the

⁹ See e.g. Thomas Elsaesser: *Terror und Trauma: Zur Gewalt des Vergangenen in der BRD*, Berlin, Kadmos, 2006; Adam Lowenstein: *Shocking Representation. Historical Trauma, National Cinema, and the Modern Horror Film*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2005; Mark Heberle (ed.): *Thirty Years After: New Essays on Vietnam War Literature, Film, and Art*, Newcastle upon Tyne, Cambridge Scholars Pub, 2009; Claudia Jünke: *Erinnerung – Mythos – Medialität. Der Spanische Bürgerkrieg im aktuellen Roman und Spielfilm in Spanien*, Berlin, Erich Schmidt, 2012.

¹⁰ Siegfried Kracauer: "Das Haupt der Medusa." In: Siegfried Kracauer: *Theorie des Films. Die Errettung der äußeren Wirklichkeit*, 3rd ed., Frankfurt/M., Suhrkamp, 2005, pp. 467–469.

¹¹ Michael Elm, Kobi Kabalek and Julia B. Köhne: "Introduction." In: Michael Elm, Kobi Kabalek and Julia B. Köhne (eds.): *The Horrors of Trauma in Cinema: Violence Void Visualization*, Newcastle, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014, p. 2.

German sociologist and social psychologist Harald Welzer has shown in his research on the echo of war movies in German family memories,¹² movies can influence the ways we remember and reconstruct our individual and collective past. In addition to that, as a public media, cinema is also part of discourses in a society and has the power to influence them. The examples of the French movies mentioned above illustrate the major impact film can have in cultures of memory.

Angela Kühner has analyzed the concept of collective trauma that can be defined as a traumatic event stored into collective memory.¹³ She underlines that the notion which is based on an analogy transferring individual psychic processes on a collective level,¹⁴ can describe a traumatic event that cannot be processed with the usual procedures of collective remembering and that therefore cannot be integrated in a contingent narrative on the past. It bears, however, the potential to challenge or change the usual practices and routines of collective remembering. Referring to Jan Assmann's well known distinction between communicative and cultural memory,¹⁵ Kühner suggests the term "communicatively mediated trauma"¹⁶ to describe a trauma that is part of the communicative memory, transmitted by witnesses' accounts, as is the case in Clément's film that came out in 1952, at a time when the events it refers to, had taken place only twelve years before. Following Jeffrey C. Alexander's reasoning, Angela Kühner further points out that a cultural trauma can become a "master narrative"¹⁷ for a group, but it can also go beyond because of its explosive and destructive force.

Cinema participates in the construction and deconstruction of traumatic (master) narratives as shown in the case of France discussed above. But, as Thomas Weber points out, the representation of trauma in filmic narrations focuses on the individual trauma to address the collective level: "The memory

¹² Harald Welzer, Sabine Moller and Karoline Tschuggnall: "*Opa war kein Nazi*": *Nationalsozialismus und Holocaust im Familiengedächtnis*, Frankfurt, Fischer, 2002.

¹³ Angela Kühner: *Trauma und kollektives Gedächtnis*, Gießen, Psychosozial-Verlag, 2008, pp. 250ff.

¹⁴ For a critical reflection on the transfer of the trauma concept from the individual psychological level to the sphere of cultural media, especially film, see also Thomas Elsaesser: *German Cinema – Terror and Trauma: Cultural Memory since 1945*, New York/London, Routledge, 2014.

¹⁵ See Jan Assmann: "Kollektives Gedächtnis und kulturelle Identität." In: Jan Assmann and Tonio Hölscher (eds.): *Kultur und Gedächtnis*, Frankfurt a. M., Suhrkamp, 1988, pp. 9–19.

¹⁶ See Kühner: *Trauma und kollektives Gedächtnis*, p. 24.

¹⁷ Jeffrey C. Alexander: "Towards a Theory of Cultural Trauma." In: Jeffrey C. Alexander et al.: *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, Berkeley et al., University of California Press, 2004, here p. 13.

of a historical collective trauma can only be represented as a personalized form of an individual injury and in every historical era new forms of artistic expression have to be developed.”¹⁸

Trauma, Children and Memory in René Clément’s *Jeux interdits* (*Forbidden Games*, 1952)

With *Jeux interdits* René Clément made an outstanding contribution to the evolution of France’s memory on the traumatic past surrounding the country’s defeat in June 1940 and the internal struggles between *Résistance* and *collaboration*. Putting into the focus of his work a young girl traumatized by the loss of her parents, he created a powerful relationship between this individual fate and France’s complex culture of memory marked by the “shared metaphor” of a nation in resistance and the “common silence”¹⁹ on all deviant visions of the *années noires*.

Jeux interdits begins like a fairy tale: a child’s hand turns the pages of a book with some idyllic drawings, the film’s credits are written on the pages. But the story to come is more one of horror and despair than one of elves and fairies...²⁰ The narration stretches only over four days: from June 17 to June 20, 1940,²¹ the crucial time of *la débâcle*, Germany’s quick overrunning and occupation of France. In a documentary-like style, the film’s first scenes show a long trek of people fleeing the Nazi invasion, especially from Paris,

¹⁸ “Gerade die Erinnerung an historische, kollektive traumatische Erfahrungen kann [...] nur als eine dramaturgisch verdichtete, personalisierte Form der Verletzung des Individuums inszeniert werden, für die in jeder Epoche neue künstlerische Ausdrucksformen entwickelt werden.” Thomas Weber: “Kollektive Traumata. Die filmische Inkorporation von traumatischen Erfahrungen im Frühwerk von Alain Resnais.” In: *Augenblicke. Konstanzer Hefte zur Medienwissenschaft* 56/57, 2013, p. 114 [my translation].

¹⁹ Ed Benson: “The Screen of History in Clément’s *Forbidden Games*.” In: *Literature/Film Quarterly* 33, no. 3, 2005, p. 207.

²⁰ There was an alternative beginning and end produced that put forward the fairy tale aspect in a grotesquely exaggerated way: Michel and Paulette, the two young protagonists, sit on a trunk at an idyllic river and Michel tells the following story to his younger protégée. The ending takes the viewer back to this scene – and its tragic last scene is alleviated by Michel telling Paulette an alternative, happy ending for the two of them... (see *ibid.*, p. 212).

²¹ The lapse of time covered by *Jeux interdits* can be deduced from two written documents integrated in the narration: the first day, the Dollé’s newspaper *La Montagne* shows the headline “Le Cabinet Paul Reynaud démissionne. Un Ministère Pétain lui succède”, an event that took place on 16 June 1940 – the newspaper must thus be from June 17. The end can be dated through Paulette’s Red Cross name tag dated 20 June (see Esther Rashkin: “Psychoanalysis, Cinema, History: Personal and National Loss in René Clément’s *Forbidden Games*.” In: *Projections: the journal for movies and mind* 3, no. 1, 2009, p. 17).

through a beautiful rural scenery. In an air attack of the refugee trek, five year-old Paulette loses her parents and, also her puppy is hit by German machine gun fire. All by herself in the continuous line of wagons and pedestrians, the girl runs away following her dead dog's body that has been thrown into a river by a woman. She meets Michel Dollé, a peasant's son running after a lost cow, who takes her home to his family. Paulette and the ten year-old Michel develop a tender friendship in the world of a harsh peasants' village. Observing the village's life, marked by a family quarrel between the Dollé and the Gouard family, the loss and funeral of Michel's brother who dies after an accident with a horse, and the secret love between Michel's sister Berthe and Francis, a Gouard sibling who has just deserted the defeated army, the children still manage to build a world of their own trying to heal the wounds of Paulette's loss. Starting with the dead dog, they create an animal cemetery in the basement of an abandoned mill mimicking the adults' funeral rituals (fig. 1–4). As Paulette does not want her dog to be alone, they bury other animals – a mole, insects, chicks and others more they find dead or that are occasionally killed by Michel to please the girl. On the tombs, they erect crosses, partly stolen from the church and the cemetery. The theft of crosses from the family tombs foments the conflict between the Dollé and the Gouard families, but finally Michel is identified as the culprit. As an orphan, Paulette cannot stay with the Dollé and is handed over to competent authorities. Distressed, Michel furiously destroys their cemetery throwing the crosses into the river. The last scene shows Paulette in a Red Cross refugee center where she adopts the name of Michel's family, Dollé. In deep despair, she cries "Michel" and runs off into the crowd where she has heard the name of (another) Michel.



Fig. 1: Paulette burying her dog (*Jeux interdits*: 0:31:01)



Fig. 2: The dog's grave (*Jeux interdits*: 0:32:39)



Fig. 3: Michel and Paulette preparing the 'tombstones' (*Jeux interdits*: 0:58:16)



Fig. 4: The animal cemetery (*Jeux interdits*: 1:07:42)

Trauma is evidently a major topic in Clément's film. Robert J. Cardullo actually claims polemically that little Paulette who cannot even name the loss of her parents and makes use of the animals as a form of second hand mourning represents "a model trauma victim"²². However, *Jeux interdits* goes beyond the effect of horror and cruelty evoked by the children's morbid games; it rather emphasizes the collective dimension of trauma that is reflected in Paulette's and the villagers' fate. The film therefore has always qualified for analysis from the psychological perspective of individual trauma²³ as well as for readings as a political commentary on France in the early 1950s²⁴.

From the beginning, the esthetics of Clément's cinematography creates a strong link to the contemporary public's memory of the German invasion. Filmed in a raw documentary-like style, the representation of people fleeing the invasion army and the fatal air attack by the *Luftwaffe* allow identification through potentially similar experiences witnessed just twelve years before. Bowles underlines this efficiency of René Clément's documentary approach, one that he has already magnificently shown in *Bataille du rail* (*The Battle of the Rail*, 1946),²⁵ to reconnect with the collective level.²⁶

But far from unconditionally supporting the Resistance myth as in *Bataille du rail* and without overtly contradicting it, Clément adopts in *Jeux interdits* the intermediate position of a subversive strategy offering elements for identification and a universal, allegoric reading of the traumatic horrors of war time on one hand, and a more hidden analysis of France's struggle to cope with the memory of the Vichy years, on the other.

As the story takes place before the establishment of the occupation system and Philippe Pétain's *État français*, Clément can show the village's inhabitants as fairly unconcerned by the war without a trace of collaboration or

²² Robert J. Cardullo: "Death Wish, Child's Whim, Auteurist Will: Boyer and Clément's *Forbidden Games* Replayed." In: *Literature/Film Quarterly* 39, no. 3, 2011, p. 195.

²³ See for example Rashkin: "Psychoanalysis, Cinema, History" or Arlaud who firmly suggested a psychoanalytical reading in 1952 (Rudolphe-Maurice Arlaud: "Tribune libre autour de *Jeux interdits*." In: *Revue internationale du cinéma* 14, 1952, pp. 65–69).

²⁴ See for example Benson: "The Screen of History" whose interpretation of the film as a direct reflection of the profound changes of the French society in the 1950s and 1960s seems sometimes a bit far stretched.

²⁵ Brett Bowles: "Documentary Realism and Collective Memory in Post-War France, 1945–1955." In: *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 27, no. 2, 2007, p. 251.

²⁶ In the opening sequence, René Clément quotes an iconic image of Sergej Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), the close-up shot of a woman crying in horror. Besides the reference to the great classic, the quote may also refer to Eisenstein's use of montage for the opposition between the individual and the mass as a cinematographic means to convey his political message.

opposing political views. But the coarse family struggle between the Dollé and the Gouard culminating in a fight between the fathers during the Dollé son's funeral, can also be read as a mirror of the ideological conflicts in occupied France, the “guerres franco-françaises”²⁷ silenced by the dominant discourse after the war. In *Jeux interdits*, the conflict is symbolically ‘buried’ in the families’ fight at the cemetery: both brawlers fall in the pit of the tomb and, symbolically rising from the grave, they unite to find the real culprit.²⁸ Both camps are pursuing Michel to elucidate the stealing of the crosses. This perspective of reconciliation through a common ‘enemy’ is even reinforced by the perspective of generational change: Berthe Dollé and the deserter Francis Gouard whose first name tellingly echoes France, plead for a far more moderate attitude towards the other family and, after the fight in the graveyard, their marriage seems to be quite probable.



Fig. 5: Paulette at the Red Cross refugee center (*Jeux interdits*: 01:22:02)

The individual dimension of trauma is expressed through Paulette. The girl is neither able to speak about the loss of her parents nor to tell her family name – thus unable to name her identity. The creation of the animal cemetery can be read as an expression of Paulette's need to bury her parents. Mimicking the observed behaviors from the adult world, she invents obsessively repeated rituals of prayers (0:30:44–0:31:45) and constantly demands for new burials and new crosses on the graves: Having overheard one of the Dollé sons claiming that there would not be enough coffins to bury the victims of the *Luftwaffe* attack, “– Tu vois, c'est pas le temps de mourir, tu n'auras même

²⁷ For a critical analysis of the concept see Jean-Pierre Azéma, Jean-Pierre Rioux and Henry Rousso: “Les guerres franco-françaises.” In: *Vingtième Siècle, revue d'histoire*, no. 5, 1985, pp. 3–6.

²⁸ See Rashkin: “Psychoanalysis, Cinema, History”, p. 67.

pas de boîte. – Mais qu'est-ce qu'on en fait des morts? – On creuse un trou, et hop! Comme des chiens.” (0:18:46–0:18:53), Paulette is wondering about her dead parents' destiny and develops the idea of burying her dog instead – just in the way it was suggested for her parents. The other dead animals are thought of as a consoling company.

Paulette's character has often been interpreted as representing an alluded Jewish identity²⁹ – even though there is no direct mention of it in the film. In fact, most cues could also hint to an atheist urban family background as well as to the girl's young age. However, her ignorance of prayers, burial rituals or of the meaning of the cross can be read as hints for her being Jewish. The ending of the film could be interpreted in that sense as well: Being picked up by two gendarmes, she is led to the Red Cross refugee center where she gets a name tag – she claims to be called Dollé and therefore adopts a false “French” identity – and a number indicating the train she will be put on. The scene evokes associations with deportations – at least for today's viewers who might be reminded, by the images of the last scene, of the emblematic girl in the red coat disappearing in the crowd of deported Jews in Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1994). As the deportation and assassination of the European Jews only became a main focus of the cultural memory on the Nazi time in the 1970s, it is less probable that this was a striking interpretation for the contemporary public in the 1950s. It remains, however, that Paulette is depicted as profoundly different from the other villagers and represents a fundamental otherness which is a factor of explanation for Michel's fascination with the girl. On a visual level, this otherness is emphasized by Paulette's perfectly white dress and her angelic appearance with blond hair and an innocent, almost naïve expression. But these traits also support a more empathic identification with her as an innocent victim of traumatization.³⁰

In *Jeux interdits* Clément connects collective memory and the individual dimension of trauma materialized in the Paulette character as a complex interwoven fabric and invites the viewer to reflect on how to deal with the past of the occupation. Clément (fortunately) abstained from the alternative frame narrative mentioned above (see footnote 19) that would have offered an

²⁹ See, for example, Rashkin: “Psychoanalysis, Cinema, History” who indicates the phonetic proximity between “jeux” and “je” and suggests an interpretation of the film's title *Jeux interdits* as “je interdit” referring to Paulettes inability to assume her identity. Rashkin further evokes the association of *Jeux interdits* with “Juifs interdits” (“forbidden for Jews”) – an inscription found on interdiction signs for Jews during the occupation years.

³⁰ With the choice of Brigitte Fossey for the role of Paulette, René Clément deliberately opted for a younger girl than in François Boyer's novel that has been the model for the script, and reinforces even more the impression of the girl's innocent appearance.

unambiguous relief. Instead, the filmmaker opted for the disturbing combination of a fairy tale like opening and the harsh ending: Paulette's piercing, almost unbearable cries for Michel and her mother as well as the uncertainty of her future as she disappears in the crowd shape the "devastating abruptness of the ending as it stands, which annihilates everything in a stroke, leaving an open wound of pure loss."³¹

François Boyer: *Jeux interdits* (1942) – Writing Trauma after "la débâcle" of Summer 1940

René Clément's film is based on the novel of the same name by François Boyer published five years earlier in 1947. The structure of the book and the film are almost identical, but Boyer's writing is far more oriented towards the collective dimension of trauma and memory. By its laconic and undifferentiated style, Boyer creates a distance very different from the emotional intensity of the cinematographic image, especially transported by Clément's preference for close-ups examining in long shots the faces of his young protagonists. Without the cinematographic exploration of Paulette's trauma on a visual and – through Narciso Yepes' ingenious guitar interpretation of the "Romance anonyme" – auditory level, Boyer's novel rather invites for an allegoric reading, especially fostered by the very different ending.

Eager for more and more crosses with a greater ornamentation, Paulette pushes Michel to climb the church's steeple. In the attempt to take the cross on its top, Michel accidentally falls down and dies. Paulette buries his body alongside the animals in their cemetery and disappears without a trace. The village is left behind without an answer to the loss of the boy. Besides the perspective of reconciliation between the rivalling parties through a marriage between Berthe Dollé and Francis Ganard (Gouard in the movie) who have found the lost crosses,³² the village's idyll seems to be profoundly destroyed by the unexplained loss of the child, Michel.

In the novel, Paulette is thus rather depicted as an allegory for war and suffering and not so much as a traumatized innocent child. The girl appears to be an avenging angel whose devastating passage can be interpreted as a symbol for the village's traumatic fate as a closer look on the last scene reveals: After having taken back their crosses from the animal cemetery, the villagers

³¹ Cardullo: "Death Wish", p. 196.

³² "[E]t il fut finalement décidé qu'on irait tous ensemble, après la sieste, Ganards et Dollés, chercher les croix. On invita Francis à déjeuner [chez les Dollé], ça serait bientôt la noce." (François Boyer: *Jeux interdits* [1947], Paris, folio, 2014, p. 148).

leave the site of the children's forbidden games. Only the largest cross taken down from the church's steeple in Michel's fatal fall is left marking the boy's grave. But Paulette is the only one knowing about it. Unaware of the fact that their missing son Michel is buried underneath, the Dollé and Ganard families leave it behind and walk away. And the book ends with the following lines:

Paulette, assise au bord de l'eau, vit passer des cartons épars [avec l'inscription des noms des animaux enterrés], qui s'en allaient à la dérive, et elle eut encore quelques larmes.
Jusqu'au soir tombant, elle resta immobile, puis elle se leva et s'éloigna à travers champs, vers la grande route. Et comme un lièvre passait en zigzaguant, elle s'élança à sa poursuite...³³

Following an unpredictable path and unclear intentions, Paulette may be on her way to spread the false-illusion of unity in the next village traumatized by the disappearance of a child, symbol of hope and future... Michel's death and Paulette's disappearance coincide with the passage of the first two German soldiers through the village³⁴ – another deviation from the film, where two French *gendarmes* come to take Paulette. The newly achieved reconciliation between the rival families is a necessary condition to stand united against the German invaders. In this sense, Boyer's novel could be read as a warning of the open wounds of the Vichy years, the trauma hidden behind the surface of a nation of resisters having too hastily closed the chapter of occupation and war. The unity of the community – and by extension of the French nation –, comes along with a prize: the trauma of a missing child. They are united in the experience of a trauma that bears, in Angela Kühner's words, the potential of an explosive and destructive force going “beyond the master narrative”.

Both, René Clément's film and François Boyer's novel found great international attention. Of course, the contemporary reception of the film did encounter some resistance. The association of childhood with horror was shocking and the film did not enter in any traditional narrative scheme about childhood.³⁵ The representation of rural life as well as its anti-religious tendencies and critique of bigotry may have added to the skepticism of part of the public and to the decision to refuse it in the 1952 Cannes festival's competition. The specific perspective on the French defeat and the occupation

³³ “Paulette, sitting at the creek's bank, saw loose pieces of cardboard passing [that had been used to label the animal's tombs], drifting away, and she had still some tears. Until dusk, she stayed there, immobile, then she got up and departed over the fields, towards the large road. And as a hare passed by, zigzagging, she hurried in its pursuit.” Boyer: *Jeux interdits*, p. 150 [my translation].

³⁴ Ibid., p. 147.

³⁵ Denitza Bantcheva: *René Clément*, Paris, Éditions du Revif, 2008, here p. 72.

may also be part of the reasoning behind this decision that reminds the case of Alain Resnais' *Nuit et brouillard* (*Night and Fog*, 1956) a few years later.³⁶ Besides those critical voices, it was a huge success and awarded with multiple prizes and distinctions: Best Foreign Language Film in the 1953 Academy Awards, the Golden Lion in Venice 1952, The New York Film Critics Circle Award as best foreign movie... The film's emphasis on a young girl's trauma and the masterly use of cinematographic means to evoke empathy for Paulette have certainly facilitated its universal dimension and therefore contributed to this broad international reception and critical appraisal rewarding Boyer's and Clément's work.

As for the novel published in 1947, it was "virtually ignored in France, but [...] enjoyed a major, if freakish, commercial success in America"³⁷. Translated into 17 languages the book was an international success before making its way back to the French readers. The initially reluctant reception of Boyer's work – *Jeux interdits* was originally a screenplay, recycled as a novel after its rejection – may be explained by a public that, just two years after the end of occupation, was not ready yet for its subversive message. On the international level, the historical context that is much more present in the book than in Clément's adaption, may have raised supplementary interest.

But both, film and book, could certainly also benefit from the attraction between fascination and repulsion specific to the horror genre: "At its subversive heart, *Forbidden Games* whispers the less palatable truth that children are a race of deviants and monsters."³⁸

Filmography

Bataille du Rail. Dir.: René Clément. 82 min. France, 1946.

Le chagrin et la pitié. Dir.: Marcel Ophüls. 251 min. France, Germany, Switzerland, 1969/1971.

La grande vadrouille. Dir.: Gérard Oury. 132 min. France, 1966.

Jeux interdits. Dir.: René Clément. 116 min. France, 1952.

³⁶ The film could only be screened at Cannes after the removal of a shot showing a French gendarme in a deportation scene and therefore evoking France's involvement. The German Embassy also intervened and achieved that *Nuit et brouillard* was only screened out-of-competition.

³⁷ Cardullo: "Death Wish", p. 190.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 196. See also the contribution of Isabel Exner and Thomas Schmidgall to this volume.

Nuit et brouillard. Dir.: Alain Resnais. 32 min. France, 1956.

Paris brûle-t-il? Dir.: René Clément. 175 min. France, USA, 1966.

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