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Steve Wharton: Screening Reality. French Documentary Film during the German Occupation

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Steve Wharton: Screening Reality. French Documentary Film during the German Occupation

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Scholarship tracing the ideological motivations of Vichy film over the past sixty years has, not surprisingly, developed concordantly with a cultural willingness to confront French complicity in the morally 'grey areas' of the *année noire*. For example, Roger Régent's groundbreaking study published shortly after the period, *Cinéma de France sous l'occupation* (Paris 1948), proclaimed that unlike in Germany, no government propaganda corrupted cinema between 1940-1944. This unlikely view is clearly affected by the temporal proximity to the films in question, made more acute by the continued productivity of the individuals who made them. Meanwhile more recent film criticism, following historicist trends in France and abroad, has been increasingly open to re-reading and confronting the blind spots of the fascist era and less likely to judge Vichy film-makers so uncritically. As Naomi Greene notes in "Mood and Ideology in the Cinema of Vichy France" (*The French Review* LIX 3 [1986]: p.437-45), "These young critics had no doubt that Vichy cinema was, in the words of Francis Courtade, 'a-temporal, mais non a-politique'" (p.439). Steve Wharton's book is a recent example of such research.

Although the historiography of propaganda and narrative cinema during the German Occupation of France has endured countless revisions, Steve Wharton's book, *Screening Reality. French Documentary Film during the German Occupation*, is the first to assess the role of documentary film within the rubric of government propaganda. According to the author, the French audience's rejection

of any overt political doctrine in both the escapist fiction of narrative cinema and the newsreel footage that accompanied it, necessitated an institutional appropriation of documentary film for relaying government dogma. This move ostensibly depended upon the audience's willingness to accept documentary footage as both 'real' and 'didactic'. Indeed, genre expectations frame the author's main inquiry, which is whether "documentary's perceived role as didactic and truthful medium was capable of subversion or open appropriation to serve the régime" (p.22).

The book is comprised of two parts, in addition to a comprehensive appendix that details the production and screening of many documentary films produced between 1940-1944. Part I contains two chapters that provide a thorough framework which traces the parallels between the birth of the Vichy Regime and the re-birth of French cinema as state-sanctioned industry following the armistice with Germany on 25th June 1940. Government interest in cinema was not accidental, and in many ways the establishment of an infrastructure that both funded and regulated nationalist documentary cinema mirrored the rationalization of cultural production practiced by the occupying forces. Yet, interestingly, the new *Etat français* drew upon France's rich history of cinema in order to bind itself to its own national narrative and differentiate itself from the Germans. One notes in Wharton's descriptions how quickly Vichy apprehended the German method of using cinema as a tool to legitimate the state and its ideologies, yet insisted on doing so in a particularly French fashion (with documentary) that evokes traditions traceable to the Lumière brothers.

The author begins the much broader Part II with a study of what he terms "openly propagandistic documentaries" (p.115). Through reading a series of films about Petain, he focuses on the Marshall's celebrity as both victorious Great War hero and semi-messianic figure, who bears the burden of delivering France from its defeat. The author explicates these films with concise sequence analyses, and is able to convincingly use his diegetic examples to tie the films into a larger comprehensive project of propaganda. He arranges the films chronologically in an attempt to show how this project initiated increasing systematic influence in screening documentaries.

The following three chapters build upon this foundation and Wharton uses them to convincingly delineate how even the most benign documentary film can be framed in a fashion that invests it with the ideology of the state. Through his close analysis of the film series "Art, Science, Voyages", he examines the overlaps of the ASV's diegetic focus on sport, unity, or travel, and the three pillars of the Vichy Government: *le Travail, la Famille and la Patrie* (which he at times successfully conflates to Petain). He then analyzes both the organization and presentation of the films in the *Premier congrès du film documentaire* in order to illuminate how a film festival imbricated propaganda into its constituents merely through the order in which it screened its material. Finally, Wharton's chapter treating French work

programs in Germany offers fascinating insights into how more overt propaganda was used to justify and even motivate participation in a program that was tantamount to forced labor.

The author's thorough analysis of this previously un-researched field should be applauded, but a few critiques of the project remain. For instance, in his conclusion Wharton claims: "We in the new millennium...having evolved new paradigms for the interpretation of film...cannot escape the certainty that documentary film is not and has never been 'true'..." (p.205). One wonders why he assumes the same couldn't be said of the French spectator who had to negotiate manifold texts of dubious truthfulness every day during a war that is still notorious for its omnipresent propaganda. Indeed, the book's conclusion that documentary film *can* be invested with ideology and does not necessarily reflect 'reality' is obvious from the start. This advanced knowledge undermines trust in his rudimentary binaries of 'fiction' and 'non-fiction' or 'reality information' and 'entertainment' and therefore weakens the arguments that they prop up.

Simultaneously, Wharton often assumes a naive stance to film theory that under-emphasizes this inherent ideology of film. This may inadvertently testify to the very 'veracity' of the screened image he hopes to disprove by repeatedly highlighting Vichy 'appropriation' of ostensibly 'a-political' films. The author sometimes over-emphasizes the doctrine that is coming from 'outside' the frame and neglects the inherent biases that are *always* contained 'within' the frame. One does not have to cite Baudry's "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematic Apparatus" (1970) to convey that every director makes an ideological/value judgment anytime he decides to include something within a frame. Whether intentional fallacy is suspect or not, Wharton divorces many documentary films from any intentional complicity with the Vichy Regime by implying that they only became propaganda once the government had access to controlling how and where they were screened. In a way, this regresses back to Régent's post-war claims that French cinema did not exhibit propaganda because Wharton implies, particularly in his conclusion, that documentary films were mere sources of information, which only espoused government doctrine when screened in a certain fashion.

Wharton addresses some of these critiques when he claims: "This is...a 'history book' about film and not a 'film book' about history" (p.21). He therefore rejects a film-theoretical approach in favor of a cultural studies historiography, but does so with an apparent misunderstanding that the two are mutually exclusive, which they aren't. Film theory *can* have a relation to the 'real world', and a closer examination of how the cinematic apparatus works in relation to both propaganda and the documentary would have been beneficial and allowed a more sophisticated approach to reading the material.

Nonetheless, Wharton still impressively deconstructs how documentary footage may be imbricated with propagandistic messages, and therefore fulfills his

objective of interrogating the idea of 'screened reality'. Although his rhetorical strategies prohibit him from making more forceful conclusions, the unique depth of his research and his sincere appreciation of this fascinating genre will be extremely useful to anyone researching and studying cinematic output in France between 1940-1944.

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