

# **Cinema of the Occupation and Vichy France: Examining and Contextualizing *Le Corbeau* and *Les Inconnus dans la maison***

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2020

Guillemets : revue étudiante d'études francophones

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Original citation:

Paramchuk, M. (2020). Cinema of the Occupation and Vichy France: examining and contextualizing *Le Corbeau* and *Les Inconnus dans la maison*. *Guillemets : revue étudiante d'études francophones*, 1(1), 62-74.

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## Cinema of the Occupation and Vichy France: Examining and contextualizing *Le Corbeau* and *Les Inconnus dans la maison*

MICHAEL PARAMCHUK

The period of Occupation and Vichy France was a trying time for French cinema. The months following the Franco–German armistice of June 22, 1940, saw France become a divided nation. The arts suffered and the film industry was no exception; film production slowed considerably in the months following the French defeat. Destroyed production houses and cinemas, a lack of production resources, such as film reels, and a separation of personnel from their equipment was to blame.<sup>1</sup> By late 1940, the *Comité d'organisation de l'industrie cinématographique* (COIC) was created to regulate and represent the French film industry and production slowly resumed.<sup>2</sup> I intend to examine two of the films produced and released during the years 1940–44 and provide a comparison and an overall critique of the Vichy and Occupation film industries and climates. These films will be Henri-Georges Clouzot's *Le Corbeau* and Henri Decoin's *Les Inconnus dans la maison*, both produced and financed by the Nazi-owned and operated Continental Films. Both films provide a unique take on France's occupied society and lend to our contemporary view of French film during the period.

In order to discuss both *Le Corbeau* and *Les Inconnus dans la maison*, this paper must provide background on the climate of French cinema leading up to the Occupation. This will be to situate the two

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<sup>1</sup> Alan Williams, *Republic of Images: A History of French Filmmaking* (Harvard University Press, 1994), 248.

<sup>2</sup> Evelyn Ehrlich, *Cinema of Paradox: French Filmmaking under the German Occupation* (University of Columbia Press, 1985), 17–19.

films historically and provide a basis for explaining why the two films were met with opposition following the war. Following the Nazi rise to power in Germany in 1933, Franco–German cinematic relations were in a contentious position, referred to as “*Les tendres [ennemis]*” by Karen Fiss.<sup>3</sup> Both countries had acquired an affinity for the other’s film culture. This affinity, especially prevalent in Germany towards French cinema, would see UFA (Universum-Film Aktiengesellschaft<sup>4</sup>) begin to produce films in 1936 strictly *en version française* to better engage with French film stars, and to penetrate the French film industry.<sup>5</sup> Throughout the thirties, UFA representatives Raoul Ploquin and Alfred Greven coordinated tours of Germany for many French film stars. Both men would go on to play pivotal roles in Vichy and Occupation cinema during the 1940s.<sup>6</sup>

Following the period of rapprochement between the French and German film industries of the 1930s, relations cooled considerably. Beginning in 1938 with the Munich Crisis, France began preparing for war with Germany, and on 10 May 1940 Germany invaded France through the Ardennes Forest.<sup>7</sup> The invasion prompted a mass exodus from France of filmmakers, actors and others in the film industry. Despite German advances, Marcel Pagnol would continue to work on

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<sup>3</sup> Karen Fiss, *Grand Illusion: The Third Reich, the Paris Exposition, and the Cultural Seductions of France* (University of Chicago Press, 2009), 131.

<sup>4</sup> UFA was one of Germany’s largest media companies through the Third Reich. It was owned by media mogul and influential right-wing politician Alfred Hugenberg. Although never a member of the NSDAP, Hugenberg played a role in Adolf Hitler’s appointment as Chancellor of Germany in 1933.

<sup>5</sup> Fiss, *Grand Illusion*, 132–3.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 206–7.

<sup>7</sup> Evelyn Ehrlich, *Cinema of Paradox*, 1, 5.

his film, *La fille du puisatier*,<sup>8</sup> releasing it before the end of 1940. Alan Williams notes that the film is “vintage Pagnol,” clarifying that the film was not immune from the culture and environment it was produced in as it is “noticeably more somber and slow paced” than his earlier works.<sup>9</sup>

As demonstrated, the French attempted to maintain their film industry through the German attacks into France in early 1940. Despite their best efforts, the French would be forced to cease production by June of that year.<sup>10</sup> The next months would see a quick revival of the industry and by November, the COIC was created to standardize and oversee film production.<sup>11</sup> Pagnol’s *La fille du puisatier* was not exempt from screening through the new governing body, prompting scholars to refer to it as “both ‘the last film of the Third Republic and the first film of the Vichy regime’.”<sup>12</sup> Scholars have long debated the cinema of Vichy and Occupation. They have formed two distinct camps, the first classifying 1940 as a radical break in film, acting as a buffer between the “golden age” of the 1930s and modern cinema of the post-war. The second camp argues the 1940s were nothing but an extension of the golden age, prompting the article “15 ans d’années 30” by scholar Jean-Pierre Jeancolas. The article makes the argument that French wartime cinema was strictly a continuation of 1930s cinema, not a distinct style itself.<sup>13</sup> While this paper will not explicitly focus on these

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<sup>8</sup> Pagnol’s *La fille du puisatier* stars Raimu (Jules Auguste Muraire), one of the most prominent stars of Occupation cinema. Raimu went on to work with Decoin in *Les Inconnus dans la maison* immediately after this project.

<sup>9</sup> Williams, *Republic of Images*, 248.

<sup>10</sup> Ehrlich, *Cinema of Paradox*, 12.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 16–17.

<sup>12</sup> Ginette Vincendeau, “Marcel Pagnol, Vichy and Classical French Cinema,” *Studies in French Cinema* 9, no. 1 (2009): 5, [https://doi.org/10.1386/sfc.9.1.5\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/sfc.9.1.5_1).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 5–6.

arguments, it will side more with the first camp for the purpose of explaining *Le Corbeau* and *Les inconnus dans la maison*. It will also interrogate why the two films are anomalies in an otherwise relatively status-quo industry in a tumultuous time in French national history.<sup>14</sup>

German reaction to the French film industry upon the armistice with the French was to dictate that the industry be overseen by the Ministry of Propaganda in Berlin, with a smaller *Filmprüfstelle* (Film Control Board) established in late July 1940.<sup>15</sup> This paved the way for a full re-establishment of the industry and the formation of the Continental Film *société à responsabilité limitée*, a German-funded company that would hold a large stake in the French industry through wartime.<sup>16</sup> Many of UFA's previous employees were assigned jobs with Continental. One such man was the aforementioned Greven, who would head Continental until 1944.<sup>17</sup> Both Alan Williams and Evelyn Ehrlich have argued that the Nazi policies were rather jumbled following the armistice; however, German bureaucrats decided that film would be an excellent strategy to keep the French population

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<sup>14</sup> The assertion that the film industry maintained the status-quo is echoed by Evelyn Ehrlich, who contends that the first implementation of a new Vichy Film Office was well underway by August 1940 in an effort to keep the industry "French." Furthermore, the COIC was headed by Ploquin, a Frenchman who had extensive connections in the German film industry. Ehrlich, *Cinema of Paradox*, 17.

<sup>15</sup> Ehrlich, *Cinema of Paradox*, 40.

<sup>16</sup> Colin Nettelbeck argues that the "French cinematographic canon" was strengthened while Continental was in production in France. He argues that it helped indigenous French producers prepare for the expansion of the German and American film industries that would later penetrate the French market. Colin Nettelbeck, "Narrative Mutations: French Cinema and Its Relations with Literature from Vichy towards the New Wave," *Journal of European Studies* 37, no. 2 (June 2007): 162–163, doi:[10.1177/0047244107077824](https://doi.org/10.1177/0047244107077824).

<sup>17</sup> Ehrlich, *Cinema of Paradox*, 43.

content under occupation.<sup>18</sup> For this reason, the industry faced a surprisingly high amount of freedom, especially if they were produced by Continental. The majority of films produced in France in the period do not have explicit fascistic connotation, nor any allusion to Vichy's ideological slogan of "Travail, Famille, Patrie." Gregory Sims notes that, although the films of occupation were not necessarily conservative, they were not readily accepted by the resistance in many cases.<sup>19</sup>

Two such films were *Le Corbeau* and *Les Inconnus dans la maison*. Both films would face immense backlash following liberation in 1945 and their respective directors, Henri-Georges Clouzot and Henri Decoin, would be targeted by Resistance press as collaborators.<sup>20</sup> Theirs were two of the three films that would be banned following liberation.<sup>21</sup> This paper will now examine the two films, providing analyses of each, and will look at contemporary and modern interpretations of the productions. Ultimately, I will attempt to argue

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<sup>18</sup> Williams, *Republic of Images*, 254.

<sup>19</sup> Gregory Sims, "Henri-Georges Clouzot's 'Le Corbeau' (1943): The Work of Art as Will to Power," *MLN* 114, no. 4 (1999): 744, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3251362>.

<sup>20</sup> Resistance publications and forces targeted stars such as Pierre Fresnay (*Le Corbeau*, *Les Inconnus dans la maison*) and their directors, calling for prison sentences or execution on charges of indignité nationale. The accusations were largely due to the fact that many of those involved in Occupation film associated with German high officials or profited from their part in the films. The French were keen to play up any aspect of resistance towards the Germans, especially under the presidency of Charles de Gaulle. Naomi Greene, "Mood and Ideology in the Cinema of Vichy France," *The French Review* 59, no. 3, (1986): 438, <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/stable/392672>; Williams, *Republic of Images*, 273.

<sup>21</sup> From 1940 to 1944, over 200 films were produced in Occupied France, a high number during such a time of crisis. Paris would see 379 films released in that four-year period, with a staggering 57.7% of films released in the nation's capital being produced in France. Of these films, Continental produced 30 and only 3 were banned following liberation in 1944. Ehrlich, *Cinema of Paradox*, 50, 192–204.

that the attacks on these films were not simply the hypersensitive reaction of a rebuilding nation; rather, the films contained themes that warranted their criticism.

*Les Inconnus dans la maison* was produced in 1941 and was directed by Decoin and written by Clouzot. It was one of Continental's first productions. The film is a "powerful example of French film noir."<sup>22</sup> From the beginning of the film, one gets an ominous feeling and a sense of darkness. The film is introduced with a sequence narrated by Pierre Fresnay, a well-known actor from the period. Fresnay's narration, "il pleut dans la ville," fills the opening sequence and credits, replicating Benedictine chants. It evokes memories of church, although the dark atmosphere puts the audience on edge while drawing them into the film. The film itself follows a lawyer, Loursat (Raimu), who lives with his daughter Nicole (Juliette Faber) in a provincial French town. An unknown man is found dead in their house, and it is discovered that Nicole and her lover Manu (André Reybaz) are implicated in the murder of the unknown man. Loursat ends up providing the defense of Manu and eventually assists in finding the true killer.

Themes of distrust, lying, and defense are addressed throughout the film. All of this is against the backdrop of a dark, often haunting town. Fresnay's narration throughout also gives an air of someone always watching. It seems he knows everything that is happening, and this is further reinforced when his narration is not present through the court scene. Distrust and lying are in many different elements of the movie. There are lies between Loursat and Nicole, and deceit is present in Manu and Nicole's interactions

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<sup>22</sup> Judith Mayne, "Les Inconnus dans la maison/Strangers in the House," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 27, no. 5 (2010): 402, doi: 10.1080/10509208.2010.494993.

throughout the film. Loursat also has conflict with members of the community and airs his grievances in his opening address in court. Loursat ultimately comes to Manu's defence in court, and despite thorough questioning from the other councilors, Manu is found innocent.

All these themes present in the film did not sit well with the resistance audience, although the principal reason for its being banned following liberation was its anti-Semitic connotations. Ehrlich contends that it is the only film from the period that can be charged with such an accusation.<sup>23</sup> The movie is based on a Simenon novel in which the guilty party is Ephraïm Luska, a Jewish man who is an outsider.<sup>24</sup> The film was also shown alongside an anti-Semitic propaganda short, *Les Corrupteurs*, upon its initial release. The film was a sweeping success upon its release in France in 1942.<sup>25</sup> The first response from an English audience came in 1952 in the *Monthly Film Bulletin*. It was received with an unremarkable review: "the story is a fairly commonplace one and Henri Decoin's direction... does little to enliven the long and contrived court scene."<sup>26</sup> The author continues, "[it] does suggest a quality foreshadowing of Clouzot's own films *Le Corbeau* and *Quai des orfèvres*."<sup>27</sup> There is no mention of any anti-Semitic connotation, nor that the film had been banned in the years following liberation.

The second film to be discussed, Clouzot's *Le Corbeau*, has been extensively interrogated by scholars. Its dark atmosphere, the

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<sup>23</sup> Ehrlich, *Cinema of Paradox*, 51.

<sup>24</sup> Mayne, "Les Inconnus dans la maison/Strangers in the House," 403.

<sup>25</sup> Ehrlich, *Cinema of Paradox*, 51, 54.

<sup>26</sup> "Les inconnus dans la maison, (Strangers in the House)," *Monthly Film Bulletin*, (1952): 153,  
<http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/docview/1305817376?accountid=14846>.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

setting in a provincial village, and a strong feeling of the unknown allowed the film to resonate with viewers upon its release.<sup>28</sup> The theme of darkness in *Le Corbeau* mimics the feelings of dimness from *Les Inconnus dans la maison*. The Monthly Film Bulletin in Britain published a glowing review in 1948, the year it was re-released in France, calling it a film with an “unpleasant story — it is, however, gripping, exciting, rather shocking and none the less memorable.”<sup>29</sup> The review calls it one of the great films of France. The film was, however, not as well received by the French.<sup>30</sup>

*Le Corbeau* is set in a provincial French town. Despite the dark atmosphere, the lighting is far brighter than in *Les Inconnus dans la maison*. The film follows Dr. Germain (Pierre Fresnay), a recently transferred doctor to the small town, and his encounters with Le Corbeau (“the Crow”)—an anonymous character who leaves a trail of poison-pen notes. Dr. Germain arrives at the town as a stranger: no one knows his background or anything about him generally. Le Corbeau leaves multiple notes through the film, beginning with a note accusing Dr. Germain of having an affair with Madame Vorzet, the wife of another doctor in town. The most notable is a note left to a patient stating that the patient’s illness is terminal. The film is resolved with Dr. Vorzet being discovered as Le Corbeau. Le Corbeau is then murdered in revenge by the mother of the aforementioned terminally ill patient. The themes of deceit, mystery, and authority all play central roles in the film.

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<sup>28</sup> Nettelbeck, “Narrative Mutations,” 162.

<sup>29</sup> *Le Corbeau*. Online Video Format. Directed by Henri-George Clouzot (Continental Films, 1943).

<sup>30</sup> Louis Daquin, a member of the Comité de Libération du Cinéma Français, maintained the film was an attack on French character and patriotism in 1979, over thirty years after its release in France. Ehrlich, *Cinema of Paradox*, 177.

The film directly challenges aspects of French culture and society such as community, trust, and betrayal that were threatened during the Occupation. It therefore comes as little surprise that the film was met with such strong criticism from the French public. *Le Corbeau* directly attacks the bourgeois of the small town by having an unknown stranger (Dr. Germain) be attacked by co-workers, accusing and gossiping about one another. Perhaps the most direct attack to “Frenchness” is the attack on the Church. *Le Corbeau* drops a note during a funeral procession, thereby violating the procession and disturbing the sacred event. Thus, the film mirrors many themes also present in *Les Inconnus dans la maison*, although *Le Corbeau* certainly has a few differences, especially with respect to challenges to authority and the Church.

Through these analyses of themes central to *Le Corbeau* and *Les Inconnus dans la maison*, one can understand why the films were met with such strong opposition following liberation. Both films draw on many of the same themes deemed offensive by the Resistance, such as challenging the Church, mistrust, deceit, and the Other. Both films take place in a provincial setting, much different than the traditionally quick pace of Paris. Both of these towns have an ominous and dark atmosphere. One would expect the provincial town to foster a communal feeling, a trait that was held in high regard by liberated France. Each of the films challenges this directly by pitting members of each town against one another, making everyone a suspect in the respective mysteries. The films also challenge authority and the bourgeois establishment. *Les Inconnus dans la maison* uses the court system as its authority figure and challenges it: a lawyer who has not practised in a long time plays the central role in finding the perpetrator of the crime. Loursat’s outright attack on the bourgeois society of the

town can be interpreted as a challenge to French society. In contrast, *Le Corbeau* circumvents traditional law enforcement in dealing with crime. The hospital and physicians play a central role of authority in the film. When the head doctor is found guilty as *Le Corbeau*, the entirety of the system is challenged.

With respect to modern interpretations of the two films, there has been much work on *Le Corbeau*, both in popular media and academically. It is perhaps the most discussed film of the Occupation. In one popular article from March 2018, Karen Zarker draws a close comparison to the film and our present-day culture—likening the gossip and rumors in the film to present day “bullying” on social media.<sup>31</sup> *Les Inconnus dans la maison* is less frequently discussed in an academic capacity compared to the other film I have addressed, although it was reviewed in a scholarly journal as recently as 2010.<sup>32</sup> The review makes a point of acknowledging the film’s position as a film noir. The provincial setting and the unsettling atmosphere lend to this argument.<sup>33</sup> Both films are acknowledged as challenges to the Vichy regime and French Liberation culture, leaving little room for doubt as to why they were censored following the war.

In conclusion, this paper has attempted to show that the censorship of *Le Corbeau* and *Les Inconnus dans la maison* following the Second World War was warranted. This was largely achieved by situating the period historically, by attempting to describe French Occupation culture and providing background on German influence in

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<sup>31</sup> Karen Zarker, “‘Le Corbeau’ at the Film Forum (Trailer) (Premiere),” *PopMatters*, (March 2018): 2–3.  
<http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/docview/2018415974?accountid=14846>.

<sup>32</sup> See Mayne, “Les Inconnus dans la maison/Strangers in the House.”

<sup>33</sup> Mayne, “Les Inconnus dans la maison/Strangers in the House,” 402–403.

French cinema, and by identifying certain themes present in both films. These themes include challenging recognized authority and those in positions of power, challenging the church, and undermining values such as community and trust. All of these examples challenge Occupation era French society to some capacity. There is room for further expansion on this project, specifically through examining other films produced by Continental Films. This could include both contemporary and modern interpretations of the films produced by the company. Another interesting avenue of research that could be pursued further would be to examine which camp Occupation cinema falls into: does it belong to *les quinze ans des années 30* or was it truly a radical break in French cinema?

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