



Jeux Interdits

Film Guide **Brendan Maher**

Jeux Interdits aka **Forbidden Games**

Director Rene Clément/
France/1952/87 mins/b&w)

Cast

Brigitte Fossey Paulette
Georges Poujouly Michel Dollé
Lucien Hubert Dollé, the Father
Suzanne Courtal Mme Dollé
Jacques Marin Georges Dollé
Laurence Badie Berthe Dollé
Andre Wasley Gouard, the Father
Amedee Francis Gouard
Denise Pereonne Jeanne Gouard
Louis Sainteve Priest
Pierre Merovee Raymond Dollé

Production

Producer Robert Dorfmann
Director Rene Clément
Writer Jean Aurenche, Pierre Bost,
Rene Clément

*Adapted from the novel
'Les Jeux Inconnus' by Francois Boyer*

Editor Roger Dwyre
Musical Composer Narciso Yepes
Art Director Paul Bertrand
Cinematographer Robert Juillard

Introduction

Rene Clément's 1952 film explores the emotional trauma of war on a five-year-old girl, how she deals with this trauma and also, how it is reflected in the world around her. Set during the Second World War, five-year-old Paulette's parents are killed as her family is fleeing a Nazi attack. She comes into the care of the country peasant Dollé family and becomes friends with their little boy Michel. Michel and Paulette, confronted by death around them, build a small graveyard for animals – pets or farm animals that have died. The children's attempts to perfect the graveyard bring them into conflict with the adult world. However the children perhaps are only replicating, in a more simple and innocent form, the inherent hypocrisies and petty jealousies of that world.

Clément's film is often described as an anti-war film and it certainly works on that level. The film also offers an unusual and calm reflection on the nature of psychological trauma and how it reveals itself. The honours go to Clément and his two young leads, who are up to the task of bringing this difficult subject to the screen.

Director Rene Clément

Despite numerous awards and a career that covered over forty years in cinema, Rene Clément died in comparative obscurity in 1996.

Clément was born in Bordeaux in 1913 and studied architecture at the Ecole Des Beaux Arts. Here he developed an interest in film-making. In 1936, he directed his first film, 'Soigne ton gauche' a 20-minute short starring comic actor Jacques Tati. Clément continued to make short films up until 1945 when he filmed the French Resistance story 'La bataille du Rail' aka 'The Battle of the Rails' which won a major prize at the Cannes Film Festival. Over the following years Clément's reputation soared and he won Best Foreign Film Oscars for 'Au-delà des grilles' aka 'The Walls of Malapaga' (1948) and 'Jeux interdits' (1952).

Clément's skill is that of the detached observer, allowing his characters to make a link with the audience. His films are calm and reserved, preserving a natural tone, without the director making any major flourishes within the story. This non-leading style however is all the more compelling given the audience's strong recognition of character and situation in his films.

Clément continued to have international success with several films and his 1960 film 'Plein Soleil' aka 'Purple Noon' should be noted. It's based on the book 'The Talented Mr. Ripley' by Patricia Highsmith (it was more recently made into a film by director Anthony Minghella with Matt Damon as Ripley). Clément's 1966 star-studded epic 'Paris brûle-t-il?' aka 'Is Paris Burning?' written by American writer Gore Vidal and nascent director Francis Ford Coppola was however, a box office failure.

Clément's cinematic style was over-taken somewhat by the more knowing styles of the French



Nouvelle Vague movement in the 1960's and 70's. However he did have some minor successes with later films, making his last film in 1975. In 1984 the French motion picture industry honoured him with a special César Award for a lifetime contribution to film.

Synopsis

June 1940, Paris is falling to the German invasion. Five year-old Paulette flees the city with her parents. On a country road, the Nazi planes bomb the refugees. Paulette's dog runs up the road, she chases after him, her parents following her. Her parents are killed in the attack. Moved on by the swell of people, the separated Paulette carries the lifeless body of her dog into the countryside, where she encounters Michel, a nine-year old boy.

Michel brings her back to his house, a small cottage, and the family who is called Pollé accepts her.

Paulette buries her dog in an old mill and Michel helps. He makes a cross to mark the site. The children begin to bury all the dead creatures they find – a mole, chickens, etc. Michel even kills some insects in order to have more creatures to bury.

Death also comes to the Pollé house, when Michel's brother Georges, injured in an earlier accident, dies. Michel, egged on by Paulette, steals crosses from the hearse and from the church, in order to put them up in the animal graveyard.

The Pollé's are having a disagreement with their next door neighbours, the Gouards and when the cross goes missing from their recently buried brother's grave, a fight

ensues between the two families. The local priest reveals that Michel is the thief of the crosses.

Michel runs away. Sneaking back home to speak to Paulette he finds that the police have arrived, not to arrest him however, but to bring her to an orphanage. His father promises that Paulette can stay, if Michel tells them where the crosses are. Michel relents, telling him of the old mill. His father breaks his promise and Paulette is taken away.

Michel goes to the mill and destroys the graveyard.

Paulette is brought by a nun to a holding area and told that she is going to an orphanage. As the nun goes away on other business, the waiting Paulette walks into the crowded area and disappears amidst the throng of people.

Historical Background

The film is set during the Second World War (1939-45) and the film's main action set piece, the air raid, is a defining moment. However, whilst there is talk of deserters between the feuding families with Gouard's son returning from battle, the majority of the film is set in a pastoral France, away from the fighting. The following timeline should give an indication on outside events during the time the film is set in:

September 1939

Britain and France declare war on Nazi Germany following Germany's invasion of Poland.

10th May 1940

Hitler launches attack on Western front and invades France.

23rd May

The German Army breaks through French lines at Sedan.

4th June

340,000 British, French and Belgian forces evacuate from Dunkirk in Northern France.

June 7th

Rommel's VII Panzer Division advance to Forges-les-Eaux - 37 miles in two days.

June 8th

French troops withdraw from the Somme region.



June 10th

Italian Dictator Benito Mussolini declares war on France.

June 11th

Paris is under threat by rapidly advancing German forces. The capital is declared an 'open city' – meaning that the city is undefended and should not be attacked or bombed. This measure is taken to protect remaining civilians, who have not evacuated.

June 13th

French troops abandon Paris

June 14th

German troops enter Paris.

June 16th

French Prime Minister Paul Reynaud's cabinet, located in Bordeaux, is ousted by Marshall Pétain.

June 17th

Pétain broadcast to the French people urging them to stop fighting. He also asks the Germans for the terms of an armistice.

22nd June

Pétain signs armistice with Germany. France is divided into occupied and unoccupied zones. The Germans directly control three-fifths of the country including northern and western France and the entire Atlantic coast. The remaining section of the country is to be administered by a French government at Vichy under Pétain.

Production Details

One of the most interesting aspects of 'Jeux Interdits' production is the fact the film started off as a short film. This original short was to be the middle part of a film with three distinct segments. Funds dried up for the full film with just 'Jeux Interdits' shot. Clément presented the short to producer Robert Dorfmann who believed that there was more of a story to be told and the film was extended and new funding secured. The cast and crew reconvened a year later to complete work. The child actors had grown slightly and dresses and trousers had to be lengthened. Georges Pojouly (Michel) also had to wear a wig for these new scenes as his hair had been cut for a different film, in the intervening time. The outcome is virtually un-noticeable with the new scenes merging faultlessly with the original production.

Trauma

'Trauma' can mean the physical aspects of an injury, however in psychiatry, 'trauma' has assumed a different meaning and refers to an experience that is emotionally painful, distressful, or shocking, which often results in lasting mental and physical effects.

In 'Jeux Interdits', it's obvious that Paulette is emotionally traumatized by the loss of her parents. Added to this, is the fact that she hasn't been given any chance to grieve her loss. She takes her dog's body with her, perhaps because it is something she can carry that represents her loss.

In burying the dog, Paulette begins a ritual in which she may be playing out her grief - a way of compensating for not having had the opportunity with her parent's death. The ritual becomes even more elaborate as time goes on, with the number of animals in the cemetery increasing and also in the development of the ritual i.e. the names of



the animals; the wish to put up more beautiful crosses.

Taking their lead from adult rituals, the children re-enact the burial rite. Paulette is innocently going with both her feelings and taking from the adult world. Michel is more conscious of what he is doing, understanding right and wrong but perhaps wanting to please this little girl.

The film suggests that Paulette does not ultimately complete her grieving process and she is doomed to wander. Michel on the other hand, deals with his unhappiness in losing Paulette at the end of the film though another outlet – anger.

Style: Story

Although not overt, Clément's film story veers towards naturalism – a

belief that an individual's free will is not central to their actions but rather that their actions are the result of external forces such as one's heredity and environment.

This viewpoint would suggest that human beings can only have a limited control over their lives and that indeed, they may act in a similar fashion to animals.

This notion can clearly be seen at work in 'Jeux Interdits' because the film's action is dictated by:

- a) The savage bombing of the fleeing refugees.
- and internally or instinctively, by
- b) Paulette's unconscious desire to deal with her loss.

Furthermore, Clément expands this link between animal

and human by making animals the cause of future human actions e.g. Paulette's dog running away, Michel's cow escaping and the horse being frightened by the plane and injuring Georges Dollé. In this way, the director interweaves the lives of brute animals with the lives of the humans.

Paulette and Michel's animal graveyard becomes as elaborate as the human cemetery, because Paulette wishes it so. Michel is obliged to steal from the church and graveyard and put the crosses in the animal graveyard and in this way, the human and animal world are mixed together. Paulette's unconscious need to grieve does not make distinctions between human and animal.

This mixing of the human and animal world can then be traced

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back to the start of the film and the essential savagery of the Nazi attack on the fleeing people. This attack is reflected in Michel's blatant killing of the cockroach. The adult, child and animal world are interlinked.

Comic Interlude

Running alongside the main story of the creation of the animal cemetery is the story of the feud between the Dollé's and the Gouards. We have no notion of when this feud began, but we are introduced to it in the first scene outside the Dollé's house.

Elements of the feud relate to a suggested desertion by Raymond Dollé from the army, a jealousy over Francis Gouard's supposed bravery and medal-winning and Michel Dollé's movements around the Gouard house. Ultimately the feud is depicted as comic and provides moments of light relief throughout the story.

Both families are seen as petty-minded buffoons who take a particular delight in seeing the other family fail. The result of their animosity is the fight in the graveyard between both fathers, which is broken up by the priest's revelation that Michel is the one who has stolen the crosses.

The family's interaction with the Church is interesting also in that they seem concerned that Paulette has no knowledge of religion (the film may suggest that she is in fact Jewish). However, it is evident that the family are religious on the surface only and are more interested in the outward displays of religion

(e.g. keeping the grave tidy, saying prayers) than any inner spirituality. It interesting to note that Michel is asked to recite prayers for his brother. The rest of the family does not seem to know them.

Summing Up

Jeux Interdits is rightly regarded as a classic of French cinema. Disimilar to other films dealing with trauma, it doesn't attempt to bluntly state cause and effect. Instead it is left to the audience to make connections with the actions of the children and adults in the film. The film is naturalistic in style and in view, with the children's characters being driven by external factors far out of their control. Clément attempts to link all behaviour in the film as base and fundamental, with the pettiness and cruelty of the adult world, the innocence of the children and the wildness of brute beast undefined and interconnected.



Further information

Books/Articles

1001 films you must see before you die

ed. Stephen Jay Schneider, pub. Cassell, 2003

Children In the Movies

Neil Sinyard, pub. Batsford Books, 1992

Death and the Maiden

Essay by Peter Matthews as part of Criterion Collection DVD edition of 'Jeux Interdits'

The Complete Film Dictionary

Ira Konigsberg, pub. Bloomsbury, 1997

Websites

'Andre Bazin on Rene Clément and literary adaptation: Two original reviews': www.findarticles.com

Information on Trauma:

www.trauma-pages.com

Other Films

La Regle Du Jeu aka The Rules of the Game

Dir. Jean Renoir/France/1939

The Pied Piper

Dir. Irving Pichel/USA/1942

Jean De Florette

Dir. Claude Berri/France/1986

Empire of the Sun

Dir. Stephen Spielberg/USA/1987