Running in REM Cycles: Escapism in the French Postwar Films Le Silence de la Mer and la Vache et le Prisonier

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RUNNING IN REM CYCLES: ESCAPISM IN THE FRENCH POSTWAR FILMS
LE SILENCE DE LA MER AND LA VACHE ET LE PRISONNIER

by

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Abstract

This thesis compares two postwar critiques of escapist entertainment that appear in Jean-Pierre Melville’s *Le Silence de La Mer* (1949), and Henri Verneuil’s *La Vache et le Prisonnier* (1959). Their directorial choices acknowledge the power, even shortcomings of escapism through entertainment. Overall, Melville and Verneuil’s films argue that escapism creates a “dream” cycle in which the audience, in an attempt to escape reality through entertainment. The films’ cyclical narrative structures symbolize their characters’ psychology, a tactic that frames *Le Silence* and *La Vache* into France’s postwar culture. In a side-by-side comparison, the repetitive narrative structure of *Le Silence* and *La Vache* demonstrates that there was no escape from the war, mentally or physically. In addition to the films’ structures, their inverted genre conventions are also didactic. They send a message to the audience that a story’s resolution does not translate to reality, and sometimes, after much effort, resolution cannot be attained. The unfulfilling character arcs for each main character, Werner and Charles, are evidence of this grounded commentary on escapist entertainment. In addition to being similar, these character arcs reflect a continuation of one narrative. Despite being in two different genres, Charles’s struggle is a sequel to Werner’s. This comprehensive examination of the two films describes the several different layers of escapism that French postwar cinema either presented or critiqued.
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Running in REM Cycles:

Escapism in the French Postwar Films

*Le Silence de la mer* and *La Vache et le prisonnier*

This essay examines the critiques of escapist entertainment in the post-World War II films *Le Silence de la mer* (1949), a drama by Jean-Pierre Melville, and *La Vache et le prisonnier* (1959), a comedy by Henri Verneuil. Their directorial choices address the power and shortcomings of escapism. These films argue that escapism can feel like living in a dream that we are too scared to wake up from. Cinema has been criticized as escapist entertainment because it engages audiences only on “an emotional level,” while others praise it for helping them “realize their dreams and fantasies” (Pramaggiore & Wallis 3). This debate is a central theme in both *Le Silence* and *La Vache*. In their argument, Melville and Verneuil use cyclical narrative structures to symbolize their characters’ psychology, a tactic that places *Le Silence* and *La Vache* within France’s escapist postwar culture. In a side-by-side comparison, the repetitive narrative structure of *Le Silence* and *La Vache* demonstrates that, whether the escape be physical or mental, it will not lead to a proper resolution. These films send a message to the audience that a story’s resolution does not translate to reality, and sometimes, after much effort, resolution cannot be attained. The unfulfilling character arcs for the films’ main characters, Werner and Charles, are evidence of this grounded commentary on escapist entertainment. This analysis identifies and contextualizes the consequences of escapism these postwar classics critiqued.

*Le Silence de la mer* was Jean-Pierre Melville’s first feature. Taken with the 1942 novel by Vercors, he decided that *Le Silence* would be his debut film. He fought for the production rights alongside many established and respected directors, including several competitors in the United States and Great Britain. Though he did not receive permission to make the film, he cut a
deal with the author, agreeing to burn the negative if a screening for a group of former resistance members had a single issue with his adaptation (Nogueira 23). In securing the rights and distributing the highly successful film, Melville went on to become a prominent figure in French cinema, as well as an inspiration for pioneers of the French New Wave. Henri Verneuil, born Achod Malakian, did not face the same challenges in making La Vache et le prisonnier; however, he also adapted a novel, Une histoire vraie (1945) by Jacques Antoine. The French-Armenian filmmaker’s family fled Armenia after the genocide in 1924, eventually establishing a life in Marseilles (Lanzoni 266), the hometown of La Vache’s main character, Charles Bailly.

While La Vache was and continues to be quite popular in France, the film has not attracted as much academic criticism over the years as his other works. Though dismissed in the academic world, ideological film critics strongly argue that “even apparently apolitical films made purely to entertain are not free from ideology” (Pramaggiore & Wallis 311); La Vache appears to have a thick surface, but even this type of film “subtly question[s] mainstream beliefs” (319). Known for his comedies starring Fernandel and his thriller The Sicilian Clan (1969), Verneuil made significant contributions as a director particularly from the late 1950s to early 1980s. Both directors offered France, among other countries, diverse and substantial bodies of work that helped shaped the postwar era.

During World War II, filmmakers resisted Nazi cinema restrictions in an effort to unify the country against German oppression. French journalist Georges Sadoul argues that, despite the war’s devastating effects on the film industry, French cinema was superior to all others in occupied Europe because all its “personnel were active in organizations of the Resistance” (235). Filmmakers wanted their voices to be heard through film, though they were also concerned with projecting the voice of the people. Audiences were witnessing part of the Resistance whenever
they sat in a theater, whether they were aware of it or not. However, cinema’s political role took on new challenges and characteristics during the economic crisis of 1948. Audiences were no longer in the habit of seeing movies, being very selective with the films they did see; during this time, quality became a necessity (Sadoul 237). To improve ticket sales, the film industry shied away from subversive messages and replaced them with safer, escapist entertainment.

For about two decades after World War II, before filmmakers began branching out into new styles like they did in the French New Wave, French cinema’s shift towards escapism was viewed as a form of postwar healing. Whether or not these films depicted the war, audiences became reliant on films to help process unresolved trauma. Film historians claim that film “preserves and replays trauma in a form that societies can absorb” (Crouthamel 87), making cinema a useful outlet for postwar recovery. Germans also retreated to theaters for the same reason. Films during this time “provided a mirror for a shell-shocked interwar German society” (86), prioritizing political and personal reflection. Arguably, referring to postwar cinema as a platform for emotional support oversimplifies its place in society. Yet the curative effect it had on postwar France is valuable knowledge in analyzing the films of that era. Cinema, in this regard, not only spoke to viewers on a personal level, but also presented a collective reaction to the suffering of French filmmakers and audiences alike.

In this collective reaction, French postwar films were molded by memories too painful to forget. Though these films uncover “subjective, repressed traumas through images and narratives,” they are also “culture’s most vital ‘containers’ of collective memory” (Crouthamel 88). Therefore, the role of film is complicated into something beyond pure entertainment. They are conglomerates of individual memories represented in one coherent narrative. When the memories are traumatic, “the difficulty of remembering and of representing a past both
unforgettable and yet inadmissible” allows them to take on a “special cast” (Greene 134). Such films are shaped into narratives that are inevitably cathartic. Of the postwar films Naomi Greene has analyzed, such as Le Crabe-tambour and Outremer, she says the characters are “permeated by a deep sense of melancholy and loss,” as they are “survivors for whom time has stopped, men and women who are unable to live in the present because they cannot forget the past” (134). Melville was aware of memory’s effect on his adaptation of Vercors’s 1942 novel. To clarify the purpose of Le Silence, he included a disclaimer in the opening credits that said he had “no pretension of solving the problem of Franco-German relations, for they cannot be solved while the barbarous Nazi crimes . . . remain fresh in men’s minds.” Releasing Le Silence not long after the Occupation, Melville acknowledged his audience’s residual trauma in hopes that their memories of the war could respond to the film’s message.

Reliving these memories through film, however, presented a counter-intuitive approach to healing. The relationship between healing and trauma was bridged by escapism. British film critic Robin Buss observed that “the period of the German occupation and the Vichy government has almost certainly received more attention from film historians than any other in French cinema history” (39). He argues that it was partly out of “the almost prurient delight some take in reopening the sores” (39). This logic, while pertaining to historians, can also refer to the audiences who attended these films and the ones that came afterward. The content of films shifted during the economic crisis, many centered on the war. Because Le Silence and La Vache came five to fifteen years after the Occupation, they were not so much concerned with reopening sores as they were with confronting why the sores were still there. These sores, unforgotten memories, remained scabbed due to escapism. Escapist entertainment, in this way, kept its audience trapped in some form or another. The need to revisit memories of the past, rekindling
anger or sadness, became a cyclical narrative audiences wrote for themselves. Seeing that this narrative did not offer any real resolution, Melville and Vemeuil gave audiences *Le Silence* and *La Vache* to assert that habitual escapism was actually a trap.

To help audiences escape this cyclical narrative, these directors connect traumatic memories and escapist entertainment with psychological realism. Psychological realism focuses on the underlying motives of characters as opposed to the plot itself. French New Wave director François Truffaut, in his 1954 manifesto against conventional cinema, said “in the films of ‘psychological realism’ there are nothing but vile beings, but so inordinate is the authors' desire to be superior to their characters that [they] . . . are, at best, infinitely grotesque” (7). In Truffaut’s definition, characters reflect the minds of their authors. Thus filmmakers allow their characters to represent a certain level of introspection, personally or culturally. *La Vache* and *Le Silence*, however, go against the grain of ordinary psychological realism; instead of presenting the characters’ inner villains, they depict their far-fetched escapist fantasies. In so doing, Melville and Vemeuil combine the allure of escapism with the grit of psychological realism. Their characters’ motives are explored through untenable delusions that mirror the fantasies of postwar French culture.

These fantasies are not to be discounted, as they not only reveal escapist trends in postwar France, but also basic desires of the human experience. While films connect to real human emotions and experiences, the act of watching them is often compared to the more illusory process of dreaming:

The blurring of the boundaries between the imaginary and the real is at the heart of the cinema experience . . . This fact has led researchers to examine the similarities between viewing a film and an analogous condition, dreaming . . .
Dreams don’t ‘really’ happen though we might experience them that way; contradictorily, even though the content of the dream may not have happened, the dream experience itself did. (Turner 111)

Dreams contain “wants and desires” without consideration for what is realistic, ethical, or socially acceptable (111). Like dreams, a film’s narrative must function under “its own laws,” which belong “neither to reality nor to . . . irrational non-logic” (Botz-Bornstein 10). Because films are experienced as something resembling reality and not as reality itself, the audience walks a dreamy middle ground between real and imaginary. It is up to the dreamers to label what they think is real. In *Le Silence* and *La Vache*, this logic works within the protagonists’ cycles of behavior, which are forged from their desire to escape personal conflicts. It should be noted that Melville and Verneuil were not arguing that escapism was unnecessary, nor were they criticizing the audience for seeking it out. Their films only demonstrate the fallible sense of resolution that comes from escapist entertainment.

The cyclical character arcs of the two protagonists, Werner and Charles, ultimately fuse the two films into a cycle of their own. At the end of *Le Silence*, Werner is provided with resolution through a literal escape, volunteering to fight on the Eastern front to sacrifice himself. *La Vache*, on the other hand, begins with a pseudo-resolution as Charles is offered a way to escape from his German labor farm. *Le Silence* is narrated by a man who observes Werner’s cyclical dream logic, listening to his naive fantasies expressed through repetitive monologues. *La Vache* outwardly explores an escapist fantasy in its absurd, unrealistic situations, emphasizing humor over drama. Werner’s tragic cycle naturally contrasts with Charles’s comedic cycle, though there are similarities that link them together. This essay will compare these similarities as they contribute to the directors’ commentaries on escapism. Karl Marx’s argument that history
always repeats itself, “The first time as tragedy, the second as farce” (7), becomes a characterizing pattern in these postwar classics. The films work together to create this cycle: *Le Silence* as the somber prelude, *La Vache* as its comedic sequel.

**LE SILENCE DE LA MER**

*Le Silence de la mer*, considered to be “a symbol of resistance” (Kirshner 90), was based on Vercors’s well-known novel, which aimed to inspire the French to cut any and all communication with the Germans (Vercors et al.). Without the rights to adapt *Le Silence*, Melville made the film in hopes that it would be approved for release; it received this permission a year later and was immediately popular (Neupert 59). Given that the story was well known, audiences knew beforehand not to expect an escapist film. Not wanting to provide a merely entertaining distraction, Melville attempted to draw attention to the years of escapism that preceded it, particularly the post-Occupation fairytale adaptation, *Beauty and the Beast* (1946). The film features an unnamed French uncle and niece and their conflict with the headstrong Nazi, Werner Von Ebrennac, whom they must host during the Occupation. Because the uncle and niece are introduced first, with the uncle’s “incantatory” (Hoberman 12) narration guiding us from pre-Occupation life to Werner’s arrival, the audience is led to believe that problems between these characters and the Nazis will be the central conflict. Werner, however, defies this expectation as his personal conflict with Nazi ideals becomes the film’s true focus.

Because the uncle and niece do not speak for the majority of the film, the uncle’s non-diegetic narration serves as the voice of the French characters. Although their silence was intended to embrace the idea of passive resistance, many viewed Melville’s adaptation as an unequivocal jab at French “hypocrisy” for staying silent during the war, a message that Brett
Bowles suggests was “implicit in post-war cinematic representations of the Occupation” (“Documentary” 253). He argues further “the uncle and niece’s strategy of resistance through silence is ... motivated as much by self-preservation and their own emotional needs” as it is with their “patriotic duty” (253). Working within this postwar hindsight, the uncle and niece are escaping from the potential suffering of Werner’s presence by refusing to acknowledge it. In addition to this underlying layer of escapism, this stylistic choice effectively shifts our focus away from the expected conflict and toward the one Melville wanted to explore, as Werner is the film’s dominant speaker and only named character. He draws the audience’s attention to himself at the same time he inadvertently draws attention to the flaws in Nazi logic.

Werner’s conflict is presented in a series of condescending, yet oddly affectionate dramatic monologues. His attitude is paternal, talking to the uncle and niece as if they were his quiet, obedient children. His monologues praise France as Germany’s equal, yet argue for a unity between the two countries that still assumes his own as superior. This ethnocentric musing creates a cycle of self-deception that also traps the uncle and niece. This cycle consists of the naively optimistic soldier waking up, giving his hosts imprecise lectures on Nazi values, and retiring to bed. Werner’s dramatic monologues are bedtime stories that let him enter a fantasy with no regard for the consequences of his ideals. Because these stories function like dreams, they must, as Botz-Bornstein says, operate on certain laws (10). The laws that govern Werner are not based in a sound understanding of the war. In fact, this freedom from reality allows him to reinvent the war in a way that hardly resembles a conflict. His laws revolve around minimizing the negative and overstating the positive. Werner’s “bedtime stories” are his personal reality. However, he is blind to the fact that this reality is something he has created for himself. Unaware of the drama around him, he treats the uncle and niece as if they were stars in a fairytale he gets
to write. Deeply rooted in his delusions, Werner remains idealistic about the Nazis’ intentions for most of the film. This optimism propels his cycle, making it difficult for him to escape it.

Werner’s spoken fantasy eventually becomes his interior monologue, a dream he cannot wake up from. The uncle and niece witness the strangely ignorant Nazi bumble through his routine for months, staying quiet while he dreams up a world he forces them to live in. This routine becomes a cycle in which the uncle, who describes Werner’s monologues as “the long rhapsody of his discovery of France” as the movie becomes “powerfully repetitive” (Hoberman 12). Werner’s genuine admiration for the French, particularly their thinkers and writers, removes him further from reality, allowing him to hide from his own political background. Melville portrayed Nazis similarly to how they would portray themselves, as deeply loyal, motivated strictly by national pride and honor. However, Melville subverts this image whenever Werner, acting according to his dream logic, says something positive about French culture. Nazi leader Joseph Goebbels “strongly believed in the power of cinema and especially fiction films,” being careful to curtail the production of “high-quality films which might give an exalted idea of French culture” (Buss 39). Melville drew from this attitude to further complicate Werner’s struggle with reality, making him a mouthpiece for Nazi principles who simultaneously violates them. As the embodiment of two opposing ideals, Werner remains trapped in the cycle until he recognizes much later that he must separate his inhumane Nazi beliefs with his underlying human morals.

Werner’s conflict plays into Le Silence’s narrative structure, which leads the audience into the film’s dream logic by blurring the definition of reality. The film never clearly defines an objective reality outside Werner’s dream version of it. By pulling the audience into the film’s subjectivity, the audience is trapped into Werner’s dream like the uncle and niece. We are rarely
shown what is happening outside the house, and the scenes that do take place in the house are often stationary. The lack of movement not only around town, but also in a small, dark room, visually expresses the uncle and niece’s imprisonment so viewers can experience it as well. Greg Taylor argues that *Le Silence* “[heightens] our sense that the inner life of character and story rests upon a base of photographic authenticity,” making sure to trim the narrative “to evoke this inner life in all its existential richness” (52). Because the narrative is so contained, consistent, and guided by one-sided conversations, mental and verbal, *Le Silence* maintains the dream-like state of hyper self-awareness. With the exception of two flashbacks, Werner’s monologues are always told while his face is shown, relying on “photographic authenticity” to create the illusion of reality, one that Werner wants for himself and his audience.

While viewers are navigating Werner’s odd, fairytale world, they must also question what is real in the film’s unofficially established points of view. The film is a story from a novel that we assume to be written by the uncle. The film opens with a man delivering this novel inside a briefcase to another man who opens the book before the camera cuts to an image in the story. The viewer is watching the story as it is visualized by the unidentified reader, who is reading the subjective account of the uncle. From that point onward, the audience is receiving a retelling of a retelling. We do not enter Werner’s mind at any point, with the exception of one flashback, which keeps his fantasies self-contained and separate from the film’s subjectivity. To complicate this structure further, the film does not stay faithful to the uncle’s first-person narration, often breaking from his perspective to explain what is happening behind the scenes. In these instances, the audience is usually shown what Werner is doing, such as running into the niece, visiting Paris, or packing up to leave, which, miraculously, the uncle narrates without any mention from the other characters. Therefore, “reality” is built upon impressions that are told like truths, and
supposed secrets that the uncle shares publicly. Approaching the genre this way allows Melville to shape the narrative structure into a dream cycle, trapping Werner in an effort to mirror the imprisonment of his viewers.

The course of Werner’s cycle turns from bad to worse as the film progresses, his logic gradually becoming more disturbing with each scene. The uncle and niece not only witness this deepening self-deception, but become cast members in his fantasy. In an early scene that precedes his monologues, Werner’s lack of self-awareness shows when he pokes at burning logs in the fireplace while praising the war for what he believes are its intended, positive outcomes. Instead of letting the logs fall into place, he shifts them to where he thinks they are the most secure. Marat Grinberg, in his analysis of Melville’s addition of Treblinka in his adaptation, rightfully argues that the fireplace conjures the image of a crematoria oven (81). Because this image is tied to discoveries Werner makes in the film’s conclusion, this comparison is perhaps realized through hindsight. It can be argued that his prodding symbolizes not only the Nazi’s aggravation of the French, but also his perceived sense of control over the war, his hosts, and his future. Considering Grinberg’s comparison allows us to place the uncle and niece into the bigger picture, expanding the view of the Occupation to include the Holocaust. The effect of this expansion only darkens the film’s tone, particularly the uncle’s view of Werner. While the uncle and niece listen to his foolish dreams, they do not correct his outlandish claims in the spirit of silent resistance. Though this choice is intended to subvert Nazi authority, the uncle tells us through narration that he admires Werner for not being like other Nazis, a sign that he, too, has become a part of Werner’s dream cycle. The realities of WWII, however, do not allow for tidy escapist narratives; the two characters’ optimism for a better future is in vain.
Operating on this naive optimism, Werner's dream cycle traps him in a lonely, childish perspective. Oftentimes, Werner dismisses the weight of the war's physical and emotional consequences through the irrelevant comparisons he draws between France and Germany. In one of his monologues, he compares the great writers of France and Germany with their composers. He admits that France has a "crowd" of writers to choose from, but it is the German composers who "shine." After implying that Germans have made a greater impact on the modern world, if only through their music, he acknowledges the war briefly, then ends his lecture with an abrupt marriage proposal to the niece. Only a Nazi so removed from reality could bounce between comments on the war and proposing marriage with an enemy. Werner also connects his desire for the niece with the "marriage" of France and Germany, hoping that the two countries can find harmony through their conflict. Pretending the French aren't his real opponents is the biggest cog that turns Werner in illogical circles, dragging his hosts along with him.

When his cycle is interrupted, however long or short the scene may be, his dream cycle no longer follows its laws. During these interruptions, according to Melville, the main characters realize something about themselves. These moments of consciousness either accelerate or stall Werner's cycle. The first and quickest interruption occurs when the uncle and niece are out walking through the snow with their dog. Early in the scene, he tells her he is cold and returns home. The niece continues walking, sees Werner, and walks past him without verbal acknowledgement. Werner maintains his normal smile, but surprisingly remains silent. This scene is the first time these two characters are free from his cycle of denial, roaming the bright, open world outside the house's physical and mental confinement. Melville himself said that he added the niece's encounter with Werner in order to show the changes she was experiencing. Because she shows affection for Werner in the end, Melville wanted to give the characters
“every possible opportunity to recognize their love” because “she couldn’t change in her uncle’s presence” (Nogueira 27). Melville is making an argument for breaking free from the ongoing cycle of escapism; stepping outside of a dream world to reconnect with reality can resolve personal trauma more effectively.

The ominous zooms and jump cuts Melville used to shoot this exchange allows it to be interpreted as political, not necessarily romantic. Thankfully, he has verbalized his desire to make this open-ended, saying if the audience is made aware of his intentions in the scene, “the rhythm of the film is inevitably broken” (Nogueira 28). While they both walk toward each other, Werner is captured in a tracking shot. The shot of the niece is fixed-focused. This technique builds suspense by showing a threat quickly approaching the niece with a smile. Yet Werner’s silence and that he walks past without causing any harm to her shows that the opposing sides don’t have to collide, or go to war, in order to resolve conflicts. Although Werner is the niece’s political enemy, their brief escape from his cycle helps her recognize his humanity. With the hostility that she and the uncle have for Werner being temporarily lifted, she sees him as a prisoner capable of being freed from his escapist dream.

His process of ending this cycle involves breaking from delusion as well as shirking his duties as a German soldier. Before his visit to Paris, Werner’s uninformed patriotism protects him from confronting the French’s humanity. His belief that the French are of lower importance than the Germans is an escape from nonconformity. To preserve his delusions, Werner debases the French in ways he considers polite, often masking his comparisons in romantic metaphors. Throughout several of his monologues, he compares Germany and France to a traditional married couple, a masculine, authoritarian Germany taking care of a feminine, submissive France. Werner believes this to be a harmonious comparison in which both parties are where
they belong, Germany clearly placed on a pedestal. By denying the equality of other cultures, he maintains a comfortable position of ignorance.

As an extension of his delusions, Werner’s retelling of the fairy tale, “Beauty and the Beast,” presents a conflict within his fantasy. Werner draws parallels between this fable and his one-sided relationship with the niece to actively fight for harmony between France and Germany. Amplifying his marriage metaphor, he refers to Belle, the niece’s role in his fantasy, as the “helpless prisoner.” He casts himself as the Beast not only to justify his actions in the war, but to frame his own story in one with a happy ending. With the Germans having recently lost the war, Melville’s French audience would have recognized that this dream was typical escapist thinking. The most dangerous aspect of Werner’s cycle is not that his beliefs are fantasies, but that he believes these fantasies will reward him with a happy, postwar life. Contrary to his intentions, his dreamy retelling of “Beauty and the Beast” is more pathetic than frightening, a threat that induces no fear. Although he maintains a dreamy outlook, his reality will soon be shaped by his interactions with those he respects most, his fellow Nazis. He compares himself to a beast, an animal, thinking that he will be transformed into a prince in the eyes of the niece when the war is over. By placing himself inside this fantasy, even projecting this fantasy onto a French girl, he unwittingly comments on the complex, dynamic nature of escapism. He escapes by placing himself into a story with a happy ending, not only denying that his actions will have consequences, but believing that they will lead to happiness.

Though he is cast as the Beast in both his fantasy and the audience’s perspective, there have been cues all along that Werner’s humanity is there, whether he purposefully shows it or not. These slivers of kindness are prominent in his fairy tale monologues. In a flashback of Werner’s pre-war life, we see that he is as uncomfortable with German cruelty as we are. When
his ex-fiancé takes pleasure in tearing the legs off a bug who stings her, this ruthless, exaggerated representation of German callousness causes Werner to recognize his own humanity. Framing this scene with his monologues allows the audience to empathize with Werner as a human being under his Nazi uniform. However, these brief moments of discomfort only carry him so far. With this particular flashback, Werner is still using the cruelty of his ex-fiancé as a scapegoat for persisting in his fantasy. His humanity stands out against the Germans in his life, yet he continues to support Nazi Germany nonetheless. Werner rationalizes his own misdeeds just as he does with his desire for the niece. As long as he chooses to live out his dreams, he must carry the “Beauty and the Beast” metaphor with him to shirk the realities he would miserably face. Any love or hope he has for France, in addition to his respect for his fellow Nazis, would be lost.

In the same scene, the film’s editing and composition help to visually render his delusional marriage proposal. While Werner relates his past failures with love, the camera cuts from Werner, to the uncle, to the niece, to Werner, to the niece, back to the uncle. Cutting to each of them in this order, symbolizes the niece’s lack of control, each shot trapping her in between two men who have conflicting visions of her future. While the uncle admits his admiration for Werner, we see his distaste for Werner’s proposition of marriage to his daughter, perhaps recalling the naive soldier’s fantasy of a princess who “learns to love her chains.” The framing of the niece during Werner’s marriage monologues also places her in position of prey. She is shown silently knitting in her chair from Werner’s point of view, trapping her in both Werner and the audience’s downward gaze. At this point in the film, Werner appears to be the most far gone. He is hung up on romantic prospects, almost completely ignoring the war. Given that Werner is in his most delusional state, the uncle and niece are oppressed further as a consequence.
Due to the film’s use of “Beauty and the Beast” as a motif, it made a greater impact on audiences than the book. Jean Cocteau, who worked with Melville several times throughout his career, directed a popular adaptation of the fairy tale only three years prior to Le Silence’s release. He wanted his audience to “return to the world of creative freedom and vitality” (Pauly 86) that the war diminished. Werner’s retelling of this fable reflects a very French desire to escape “five years of hate, fear, a waking nightmare” (Cocteau 57). Audiences would have been aware of the purely escapist film while watching Le Silence, which would have made watching a Nazi revel in the same escapist fantasy off-putting. Because he is a Nazi, it is not intuitive for a French audience to see the connection between Werner and themselves. Instead, he continues to fulfill his role as “the Beast,” and perhaps forfeits the chance of becoming a prince by the end. In the final shot, the scarf with hands reaching out to each other was a design by Cocteau himself (Nogieru 28). This image represents the desire for France and Germany to reconcile their past, an idea that is complemented by his adaptation which focused on resilience and resisting hatred. This symbolic appearance of resolution is achieved only after Werner is shaken awake from his fantasy.

In the moments leading up to Werner’s “escape” from his dream cycle, he is invited to the Kommandantur, a German command post in Paris, where he will witness the signing of a contract binding France and Germany. This scene removes Werner from his personal fairytale and transplants him into a horror film. It builds up to this bitter realization by establishing a pleasant, surreal atmosphere, then shifting to a darker tone. When he arrives at the Kommandantur, he greets a high-spirited Nazi playing a romantic song on the guitar, surrounded by smiling men who offer him a warm welcome. When the guitar player finishes his serenade and enters the meeting in the other room, Werner hears his violent, warmongering agenda, which
involves turning the French into “cowering dogs.” Analogies that compared certain people to dogs were not uncommon in Nazi rhetoric. In an inversion of this analogy, Werner does the opposite of what Nazis did to the Jews, referring to himself as an animal, even a “Beast.” In hearing the Nazi’s comparisons, he realizes that his inversion of the French-animal analogy is his unique, personal view of the French, one that his Nazi cohort cannot comprehend. In fully recognizing the realities of war, he is awaken from his dream in which the Nazis are the heroes, that he will be the niece’s prince, and France will benefit from Germany’s leadership. After Werner is freed from his escapist cycle, the uncle and niece no longer have to live out his fantasy. No one is forced to deny reality any longer because of the war. With freedom, however, comes reflection. He realizes that he is not a villain, but has created a cycle that has led him to believe he is a hero. Unable to cope with reality, the “innocent monster” (Hoberman 11) announces that he will volunteer for the front lines, a suicidal gesture disguised as patriotism. After this selfless declaration, the uncle and niece fall out of the role of resistance and into one of empathy.

With the exception of the uncle’s narrations guiding the audience toward empathy for Werner, the silence of the uncle and niece defies the fantasy placed on them. This defiance, the uncle admits, is not toward Werner as a person, but his narrow-minded discourse. In so doing, they are divorcing Werner’s irrationality from his Nazi identity to emphasize his humanness. The uncle and niece twist the audience’s cultural expectations by violating the laws of their reality. The silent hosts not only pardon Werner for his destructive naiveté, but also outwardly express their admiration for him when he returns from Paris. What seems to be a counter-intuitive level of acceptance highlights the dream logic which Le Silence uses to operate. Notwithstanding, Melville is offering empathy as a cure for escapist.
The film's attempt to trap its audience into Werner's cycle is evidence of Melville's critique of escapism. Melville is reaching out to the audience to hold them in, just as escapist films tend to do in a passive way; they are deliberate in doing so, yet lacking the sort of depth Melville was going for. However, he allows for his viewers, like silent hosts, to experience Werner's escapism alongside the uncle and niece. The emphasis placed on psychological resistance and its limits allowed Melville to craft an effective “alternative to mainstream action cinema, particularly the flood of post-war French productions glorifying armed resistance” (Bowles, “Résistance” 77). However, the lingering desire for resolution remains problematic. The audience is forced to choose between a happy or sad ending for a Nazi. Yet Werner is a paradox: a hero, but a villain; a monster, but a victim. The significance of having an antagonist who doubles as a protagonist demands the viewer to think critically about empathy and the depiction of Germans as a whole. All along, his monologues only served to provide an escape just as French films encouraged, purposefully or otherwise. Werner's postwar fantasy is not a probable resolution, but the film's actual resolution is also unsatisfying because of his paradoxical relationship with the uncle and niece. When the hero is also a villain, there is nothing to celebrate in the end. Instead, we are left with the challenge to feel empathy. When the director demands what seems to be the impossible, the film drags its viewers into an ambivalent place, refusing to offer resolution.

LA VACHE ET LE PRISONNIER

La Vache et le prisonnier is a deceptively simple comedy that slowly reveals itself to be critique of the escapism that dominated French entertainment after the war. Looking back on a decade and a half's worth of escapist entertainment, Verneuil chose to address this trend in the form of a seemingly escapist film. La Vache stars Fernandel, who by 1959 had been France's
most prominent comedic actor for two decades; Verneuil operated on the assumption that
audiences expected a purely escapist film. To add a layer of irony, his critique is embedded in an
allegory in which the main character literally escapes from Nazi Germany. The film follows a
quirky French prisoner of war, Charles Bailly (Fernandel), as he attempts to cross the German
border to return to his wife in Paris. To give Charles an excuse to be alone in public, his
guardian, a kind German farmer, offers him her best cow, a travel companion he names
Marguerite. Each effort he makes to move forward on his journey is interrupted by obstacles in
the form of Nazis, German civilians, Russian prisoners, or the loss of his bovine escort. These
interruptions impede Charles’s efforts to escape by trapping him in a dream-like cycle of little
victories and failures.

Because *La Vache* begins with a resolution between a French POW and a German, the
film has already defied expectations, opening the film to a number of surprises. Starting the film
with the resolution of a seemingly darker, more dramatic story—Charles's experience as a POW—
extremely gives the audience the false impression that they are in for a breezy romp, belying the
fact that Verneuil's comedy is actually thirty minutes longer than Melville's drama. *Le Monde*’s
review of the film in 2010 agreed with this notion of the odd length, tying it to the film's loose
ends and comedic genre conventions, yet views it as another escapist trap. Jean Baroncelli said
that, “Sans la pirouette finale, on partirait sur une impression de longueur” [Without a grand
finale, we are led to believe that the film will be longer], though it is “un film qui est très
exactement ce que les auteurs ont voulu qu'il soit. Un spectacle familial, certainement promis au
succès [a film that is exactly what the creators wanted it to be. A family film with the promise of
success]” (2). While the film offers many light-hearted moments that adults and children alike
can enjoy, the implications of Charles’s failures extend beyond mere slapstick to offer criticism
of postwar entertainment. That Verneuil baits the audience with an opening resolution and then switches to relentless, episodic perils shows that La Vache cuts deeper than surface-level escapism. It quickly becomes apparent in the second act that his escape will not be easy, that he is actually stuck in what is essentially Werner Von Ebrennac's twisted "rom-com" dream cycle of Le Silence. Werner's fantasy of Germany as Europe's benevolent patriarch becomes Charles's reality. Instead of escaping his own house in his home country like the uncle and niece, he is trapped in a fantasy version of Germany. Because the Nazis pose neither physical nor intellectual threats, and the Germans only offer Charles help along the way, there is no sense of oppression in this film. In the absence of such oppression, it seems like he is trying to escape this fantasy to return to reality back in France, making La Vache a dark, comedic sequel to Le Silence de la Mer. Not only is the drama replaced with humor, but Charles is the comedy version of Le Silence's uncle and the niece. He is being held prisoner in a German house, just as the hosts in Le Silence live in an Occupied home. Far from home, Charles requires a physical instead of mental escape. His sojourn, however, leads him into situations that force him to listen to and confront Nazi rhetoric, unlike his unrealistically cozy and ideology-free stay at the farm. Escaping becomes a waking nightmare. Although it seems at first that he is making a strictly geographical escape, over time, his escape becomes just as psychological as Werner's.

Verneuil urges his characters as well as his viewers to be careful what they wish for. His message, like Melville's, is that dreams can trap us in a cycle of denial that allows us to avoid reality's ugliness. Though Werner is trapped psychologically, Charles's cycle explores the consequences of escapism through physical imprisonment. The waking reality that Charles experiences restricts him to baby steps on the long path to freedom. When he was a prisoner, he had to complete the same arduous farming tasks over and over, day in and day out, yet he
accomplishes much more here while plotting his escape than he does on his actual journey. When he is finally on the road, supposedly free from the immediate conflicts of the war, he has to compensate for the constant interruptions trying to push him back to his starting point. Like an audience using escapist cinema, Charles escapes this cycle with actual dreams each night, offering him temporary resolutions on his quest for actual escape. Verneuil and his two other screenwriters, Henri Jeanson and Jean Manse, expanded this concept and designed the narrative structure in a way that would schedule his misadventures around his actual dreams, fading in and out each night so he can get a break. The pattern becomes expected, even entrancing, to the audience. In so doing, viewers who watch the film become trapped like Charles, both seeking a form of escape: one physically from the war, and one from the memories of it.

The resolution of receiving Marguerite and making peace with a German delays the audience’s entrance into Charles’s cycle until he falls asleep the first evening on his journey. It is also ironic that a German gives him his method of escape, one that keeps him trapped in a cycle of success and failure; Marguerite often causes him to backtrack, requiring that he stay in Nazi Germany longer. The conflicting messages given by the good-natured Germans and their interference with Charles’s goal at the beginning and throughout the film illustrate how complicated France and Germany’s relationship was, and perhaps still is for some. Even though the war ended almost 15 years prior to its release, the French were still wrestling with their past. The dream cycle is only beginning for Charles, but filmgoers at the time had already been trapped in it for years. What seems to be resolved is, in reality, an escapist dream. When Charles leaves the farm with Marguerite on a leash, his fairly benign farm-life cycle becomes rooted in a demoralizing illusion of success, taking one step forward on the road for every two steps back. Though Marguerite is a safeguard for Charles, the very thing that will get him to France, she is
often a source of failure in his dream cycle, the wandering catalyst for his conflicts with the Nazis.

From this standpoint, Marguerite’s role in Charles’s cycle presents an interesting paradox. While it is easy to point out that she helps and hurts him throughout the film, she is also cast as Belle in this fable-like sequel to Werner’s fantasy. In this paradox, she is tied like a prisoner; this analogy, oddly, would place Charles in the position of Germany, a force that imposes its will on another. Her relationship to Charles is the inverted version of Werner’s to the Uncle and Niece; she is forced to trudge along day in day out regardless of her will. She “learns to love her chains,” however, always returning to him after escaping his grip. Employing this metaphor not only draws a connection between *La Vache et Le Silence*; Verneuil is also inverting Nazi rhetoric. Charles speaks to Marguerite as if she understands what he says, humanizing a cow just as Nazis dehumanized Jews. Animal or human, powerful or powerless, Charles’s dream cycle operates on the implications of this metaphor. By placing Charles in a position of power, he is under the impression that he controls his dream cycle. He believes that Marguerite will make his process smooth, disregarding both the nature of war, and of arduous journeys. This detachment from reality is the greatest consequence of escapism, one that keeps a naively optimistic Charles trapped for the duration of the film.

Over the course of Charles’s escape, things turn from bad to worse. Shortly after his journey begins, he encounters a POW camp where, after tying Marguerite to a tree, he enters to ask for directions. Blending in with the rest of the prisoners, he is detained for a short time. In the camp, he learns two things: first, working hard and faking it are equally rewarded; second, Nazis are extremely gullible. The POW camp is dedicated to log cutting, where prisoners saw trees in the heat for hours. Whenever the Nazis on guard are out of sight, the men use their mouths to
create the sound effects of a saw cutting through wood. Charles is baffled by their clever technique of tricking the Nazi guards into believing a false reality. In creating an illusion of progress for the Nazis, they are able to escape from their duties. This theme has bearing on Charles's dream cycle as well as the audience's viewing experience. When Charles is released after convincing the soldiers there has been a mistake, he sleeps as a reward for reaching some kind of resolution for the day, unaware that his cycle of dodging and succumbing to interruptions will continue. Not only does the audience's viewing experience align with Charles's dependence on mini-resolutions, this pattern functions as a metaphysical critique of escapist entertainment the audience seeks. The viewer's search for escape through entertainment, especially comedy, mirrors the cyclical narrative that traps Charles.

In line with the nature of classic, narrative cinema, the audience is given brief moments of "resolution" throughout the film, only to have them lead to bigger issues. The tension that is built over time drags Charles back and forth: closer to France, then further away, closer to freedom, then back to imprisonment. In this sense, the plot's retracing of Charles's steps mirrors the patterns followed by a sleeping brain. It periodically brings the audience close to consciousness through these resolutions, like stages one and two in a sleep cycle ("Understanding"), then brings them plummeting back into REM sleep, or rather, Werner's anti-war dream. After Charles escapes the POW camp unscathed, he spends his first evening sleeping under a tree. Having tied Marguerite up to ensure she does not wander, he then stares at a picture of his wife as a romantic reminder to stay motivated. The screen fades to black on a close up of her face, signifying that Charles is escaping into his own dreams, and that resolution has been achieved for the day. After he wakes up, he immediately has to make his first detour. Though Marguerite has wandered off while he was sleeping, he eventually finds her walking alone by a
fence in a field of cows. Despite his annoyance with her, he makes sure that he leaves with Marguerite specifically, refusing to replace her with the many available options. Over the course of the film, Charles’s relationship with Marguerite develops in subtle ways, often through the mix of frustration and gratitude he feels toward her. This relationship imitates the effects of breaking from escapism in that it escapism has a positive effect on the viewer, though the need for it often comes about from life’s frustrations. This dynamic, in an allegorical sense, makes Marguerite a catalyst for consciousness, a reason to wake up.

Yet when Charles is awake, he is bumbling through Werner’s amusement park version of Germany; the further he makes it down the road, the more absurd his journey gets. The first interruption that actually sends him backwards occurs when a German man stops his car and insists that he take Charles and Marguerite where they need to go. Because he is unable to give a good excuse not to accept, he is taken back to the farm, Marguerite in the trailer behind them. This trip is the only return to square one, but it is not the first time that Charles has to backtrack, given Marguerite’s earlier escape and capture. When they reach the farm, Nazis are there to investigate Charles’s absence. Charles watches from afar, hiding behind a farm wall. In lecturing these farmers on neglect and ingratitude, one of the Nazis tells them “Si tu es prisonnier, c’est que Dieu l’a voulu [If you are a prisoner, it is because God wanted you to be].” He translates this reasoning into pressing them to be grateful for their jobs on a farm in a beautiful country, the echo of Werner’s delusions ringing once again in French ears. The Nazi is essentially using Beauty and the Beast logic to encourage these workers to love their chains. In addition, he compares Germany and France to Heaven and Hell. He ties this comparison to their working ethic, which echoes the log cutters’ odd moral to this fable, that the impression of making an effort equates to success. The appearance of gratitude and hard work, according to this Nazi, is
Paradise. The recurring theme of appearance, which could be boiled down to the trite phrase, “fake it until you make it,” is revisited frequently to ensure that Charles continues dreaming in his waking moments. To him, the appearance of escape will eventually help him escape in reality.

When Charles starts on the road a second time, resting near the same river he slept by the first evening, a Russian POW spots him and offers to take him to his camp. There, Charles communicates to his fellow prisoners through drawings to ask them a favor. He explains that he needs a civilian’s suit in order to take a train out of Stuttgart. The Russians are happy to give it to him, on the condition that they can feast on Marguerite. Charles hesitates, torn between his desire for freedom and the travel companion he has grown fond of. Though this disguise could save him time, perhaps even save him from his dream cycle, Charles unapologetically keeps Marguerite. In rejecting the suit, Charles and Verneuil are demonstrating another consequence of escapist entertainment. After the failed exchange with the Russians, Charles returns to the post outside the camp where he has tied Marguerite and sees that she has run away once again.

Dramatic irony creates distance between the audience and Charles, allowing it to reflect on his experience for him. This plot device links to Verneuil’s message about escapist dream cycles. While he is calling out to find her, the mood is lightened—presumably a comedic effort—when the camera cuts to Marguerite eating grass further up the hill. This shot is the only one that takes place outside of the limited omniscient point of view that keeps the audience close to Charles. By offering a larger perspective than Charles’s, the film is using this joke to reassure them that they know more than he does. They are the ones watching Charles fail to escape. They are also in a position to tell him what he is doing wrong. This detachment from him prods the audience to also detach themselves from their limited perspective. In doing so, Verneuil is
critiquing the ease with which viewers follow the main character, unable to escape from his point of view until forced. Not being able to break from this character identification independently, let alone his chaotic routine, is one of the ways *La Vache* critiques escapist entertainment.

After Charles begins his search for Marguerite, a group of Nazis drive by him to set up camp, preventing him from moving forward. Charles quickly hides in the bushes, unaware that he will be trapped in this location well into the night. Oddly enough, he witnesses these Nazis defeat the strict and heartless stereotype. The Nazis set up their camp in seconds, throwing everything on the ground. They sing, drink, and fantasize about Paris. Charles nods along to their songs from the bushes as if he knows he is in a comedy film and will not be caught. Structurally, Charles is placed in a position similar to the audience. His casual attitude in hiding is similar to that of someone watching a comedy film. In this regard, he is watching a comedy about Nazis. By engaging in escapist entertainment, Charles’s cycle mimics the audience’s. However, Charles is unable to leave the bushes until long after the “film” ends. At night, one of the soldiers paces the outside of the camp during a thunderstorm, preventing Charles from sleeping out of fear and distraction. The day cannot end in resolution for him.

When Charles escapes, he stumbles into a revamped, inverted comedy version of *Le Silence de la mer*. The next day, Marguerite runs back to him while he is wandering haggardly through the woods. However, this reunion is short-lived. When Charles has his back turned, she runs off again to a nearby bullpen on a German farm. As part of the film’s “romantic-comedy” element, the scene implies that Marguerite is pursuing the bull sexually. This scene complicates Marguerite’s symbolism; while she does symbolize France in relation to Charles, she is still technically “German.” The gesture is possibly Verneuil’s attempt to acknowledge that culture and identity remains despite an imposition of another, which is exactly the uncle and niece’s
situation in *Le Silence*. Marguerite ignores Charles’s pleas to leave the “young man” alone, trapping him into soliciting the family’s help. Resembling Werner’s cycle, Charles knocks on their door and enters, though he is greeted verbally by a pipe-smoking father and his beautiful French-speaking daughter. The family urges him to give Marguerite a break and invites him to dinner. He accepts their invitation and begins helping with preparations. This scene gives Charles the opportunity to step out of *La Vache*, and, consequently, enter Werner’s reality.

In this new version of *Le Silence*, Charles takes on the role of Werner through his overt patriotism. He gushes about France to this family, reminiscing about the sunshine in Marseilles and the relaxed atmosphere of the southern coast. Though he admits it is by accident, he cuts their potatoes into *frites*. Like Werner, Charles does not realize that he is imposing his culture on his hosts. Yet unlike him, Charles gets to live in the fantasy that Werner, as a Nazi, could only hope for; the family happily embraces his culture and is open to him. This amicable exchange between Charles and the German family parallels the first act of the film, the “resolution” with the German farmer. This particular feeling of resolution differs from the first act in that Charles is more aware of the cycle he is trapped in, that Marguerite may run off again or that he may run into more Nazis before he reaches the train station in Stuttgart. Noting the difference in these resolutions helps Charles acknowledge the cycle he has been trapped in.

Like escapist entertainment, Marguerite is intended to serve as a protection for Charles, though she occasionally causes him to stall. The evening after leaving the German farm, when the two reach the Danube River, Charles leaves Marguerite tied to a post because he would sink with her in the small paddle boat he finds on the shore. After crossing the river alone, he uncomfortably settles by a tree to sleep off his guilt. Comedy genre expectations dictate that Marguerite return for a quick relief of tension. She finds her way to him the next morning on a
bridge, and not unlike a romantic comedy, bawls for him to come back to her. When they are
reunited, they are confronted by a group of Nazis. When Charles tries to move out of their way,
and possibly flee, Marguerite refuses to move. Before stepping in to help him push Marguerite, a
frustrated Nazi berates Charles and his “vache française.” Charles is quick to correct him,
emphasizing that she is definitely German. Because the audience is escaping from memories of
the war, including interactions with Germans, Vemeuil is demonstrating that escapist
entertainment like this film can only serve as a temporary respite from reality. Charles is taking a
reminder of Germany with him everywhere he goes, unable to forget what the war has done to
him.

The film is purely drama and suspense after Charles makes it through security. He is now
able to strategically make his way toward Paris. As soon as he finds a safe place in the woods,
Charles gives Marguerite a dramatic goodbye, leaving her untethered and alone. Before boarding
a freight train to Stuttgart, Charles takes off his prisoner uniform and blends in with the men
loading the cars. When he reaches a safe place to hide, he watches Marguerite as she cries and
walks toward the train. Marguerite does not appear again for the rest of the film. The tone also
shifts; it no longer feels like a comedy, but a drama. Verneuil is arguing that stepping out of the
escapist cycle is difficult. When he is chased by soldiers, Charles quickly boards the first train he
sees, which, in a painful turn of events, is a train back to Stuttgart. At this point, the movie could
start over, starting with Charles resolving his differences with a German farmer and asking for a
cow. This “resolution” shuts the door on France, which implies that his sense of freedom was an
illusion for the entire film. While he looks out from the train window, smiling, the soldiers on the
train are singing, “Juder Heimat, in der Heimat, da gibt's ein Wiederschen [Back home, we will
see each other again],” which evokes an image of Werner, the uncle, and niece sitting around a
fireplace waiting for his arrival. Charles is transported not only to the beginning of his own
dream cycle, but is also reentering Werner’s dream world. La Vache feels like a story Werner is
telling about a POW, the film’s logic suggesting that Germany is too pleasant to leave. Verneuil
withholds a satisfying resolution as a way of asking for a deeper reflection than most comedies
receive. The audience will be tempted to ask why they wasted their time watching a man get
from A to A. However, the real question La Vache wants its viewers to ask is why they needed to
watch this man get from A to A.

When Charles arrives at the train station, the atmosphere immediately becomes tenser;
the regulations are stricter in France than they are in Germany. On one of the platforms, he is
offered a glass of milk which he declines. It would be easy to say that Charles is trying to forget
Marguerite, though his gesture is more so a symbol of defiance toward the escapist dream
cycle. After German soldiers ask for his papers, they pursue him as he flees toward the tracks. The
escapist cycle may never stop, though Verneuil is drawing attention to the differences between
emotional escape and physical escape. There is a poignant symbolism in Charles’s failure to
reach Paris that applies to viewers. Being trapped in the escapist cycle prevents resolution of past
traumas from being attained. Without the ability to escape the trauma of the war, victims of Nazi
crimes are living in the strict, Nazi-regulated France, being sent back to Stuttgart with every
escapist film. The addiction to escapism, that need for a fantasy version of memories, keepings
the audience running in fictional characters’ REM cycles. Films become dreams that we visit.

“A FILM ABOUT PEACE”

Films can be a wake-up call to revisit and engage with ongoing traumas. Whether we are
accompanying an uncle and niece in a soldier’s ignorant fantasy, or stumbling through Nazi
Germany in a silly, oneiric fable that could affectionately be called, “A ‘Pow’ and his Cow,” these films brought French audiences to a crossroads. They radically told their viewers to empathize with a Nazi, view Germans as considerate human beings, and break out of an escapist dream cycle. When held up to a rich and expansive history of European cinema, their messages can be found in films across cultures in the postwar era and beyond. Many films, viewed with a consciousness of their postwar context, take on similar, dream-like qualities in their efforts to bring audiences closer to resolving personal grievances.

The opening scene in the British adaptation of the French novel, The Bridge on the River Kwai (1957), acknowledges that it will bring buried traumas to the surface. As “the World War II film that more French people chose to see than any other in the history of French cinema up to its day” (Cragin 297), the film broke through the “repressive state of French public memory” (303), encouraging audiences to explore these traumas more openly and frequently. The first bout of dialogue takes place around a large number of graves, both finished and in the process of being filled, containing British prisoners of war. After one of the diggers, Commander Shears, attempts to bribe a guard with the buried man’s lighter, he returns to the grave to stick a cross into it. When he begins his eulogy, he pauses, turning to the other who helped him fill the grave to say, “I’ve forgotten who we just buried.” This movie warns its viewers up front that it is going to dig up memories that have been buried and are slowly being forgotten. Not only does the film remind us of the many lives lost to the war, it also gives us a fantasy version of this Burmese POW camp. The film eventually wanders away from its harsh portrayal of war conditions into La Vache territory, making the relationship between the British and the Japanese working on the bridge seem more amicable than antagonistic. Once Commander Shears returns to the bridge in the third act, negative depictions of the Japanese stop, pulling us toward empathy for the
Japanese. Colonel Nicholson, similar to Werner’s attitude toward the French, sees the Japanese, not necessarily as friends, but in a more neutral light. His obsession of building the bridge keeps him trapped in a fantasy until the end of the film, where he acknowledges that the pride he placed in the bridge blinded him from its purpose, which was to enable the Japanese to manage their new conquered territory in East Asia. Among the countless other parallels between these films, it is clear that “the decade of repression largely silenced Boulle’s [implicit] critique” (Cragin 303) of the French’s defeatist reaction to the events that occurred in Vichy, France. Trying to bury memories diminishes their personal and cultural significance, just as living in a fantasy can prevent an accurate collective from forming.

In films that did not specifically critique escapism, several filmmakers used Verneuil and Melville’s technique of humanizing the enemy to implore their audiences to think critically about conflict. In Louis Malle’s semi-autobiographical war drama *Au Revoir les Enfants* (1987), we are visited by Verneuil’s prisoner-friendly Germans in a brief segment. When a group of Nazis catch Jean and Julien on the outskirts of a forest, having wandered away during a school activity, they offer the boys a ride home. The boys, like Charles and Marguerite, are forced to accept. On the way to their Catholic boarding school by the church, the Nazis do not ask for directions because, as one of them asserts, “we Bavarians are all Catholics,” and already know where it is. Placing Nazis in a casual, friendly position reminds the audience of their humanity. While forgiveness is a theme mainly introduced by Jean and Julien’s pivotal contretemps, the outing of Julien’s Jewish heritage, the film also extends the invitation to view Nazis as humans doing what they were told by a barbaric regime. In John Simon’s review, “Revisionist Autobiography,” he insists the film does not make too many lasting impressions since “the memory seems almost eager to relinquish . . . because a subject of immense import emerges rather disembodied” (53). Though it
could be argued that Malle avoided delving too deep into a story that so painfully resembled his own childhood experience, it would be selling his message short. In moments where we see Malle’s trauma being processed into forgiveness, it creates the same counter-intuitive appeal to empathy that we see in *Le Silence* and *La Vache*.

Like *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, Alain Resnais’s *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959) focuses on empathy and memory to combine differing perspectives on the war with those of the Japanese. The film is reminiscent of *Le Silence*, using narration and flashback in a way similar to Melville’s. In intimate scenes of dialogue between the French “Elle” and the Japanese “Lui,” Elle explores memories of the war and her traumatic postwar experiences through monologue to “represent the unrepresentable” (Cowley 73). As an actress, she came to Hiroshima to play in an anti-war film, “a film about peace.” In the opening scene, she narrates over newsreel footage of the devastating aftermath in Japan after the atomic bomb was dropped, paring the story with her visit to a museum where she looked at photographs of the bombing. Remembering the photographic evidence of the event creates the illusion of objectivity, though the film goes on to show that hers, as well as Lui’s, memories are limited, subjective, and conducive to bias. In searching for a mutual understanding between France and Germany, one that does not take place in a fantasy, Melville also made “a film about peace.” Ending on the embroidered image of two hands reaching toward each other on the niece’s scarf symbolizes these intentions. The design equally applies to *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, as the characters in both films offer hands to their political enemies.

When Werner peers into the window of his hosts’ living room one evening, witnessing a talkative uncle and a giggling niece enjoy temporary freedom from his dream cycle, the camera shifts into his point of view. In so doing, we experience the perspective of Werner’s character
long enough to sense a longing to be in their lives. Audiences cannot avoid seeing through Werner’s eyes; whether or not one feels empathy for him by the end, Melville has taken away the film’s responsibility for clean resolution. It becomes each viewer’s personal responsibility to see from his perspective. The reason Melville disclaims the film’s implications in the beginning, saying that it had “no pretension of solving the Franco-German relations,” is because the film itself cannot forgive nor resolve existing trauma. Verneuil, who transports you to Werner’s fantasy, gives remaining viewers who still seek resolution another chance. Instead of luring the audience into empathy from the outside in, or rather from reality into fantasy, he wants his audience to escape into reality. To continue running in the cycle of escapist entertainment is to be taken back to Nazi Germany, further away from resolution. Breaking from the cycle allows the viewer to experience another side of the war, a side that Werner began to see by the end of Le Silence, a side that Charles sees at the dinner table of a German family in La Vache. For cultural, political, or personal reasons, these two narratives come together to create “a film about peace.”
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Reflection

If I could, for a moment, compare writing a thesis to riding a boat through the tunnel in *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*, only in reverse, I will, for a moment, compare writing a thesis to riding a boat through the tunnel in *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*, only in reverse. In the film, the group of obnoxious children accompanied by their equally unbearable parents arrive at the end of the tunnel relieved and excited to move on to the next feature that awaits them. The drafting stages for this thesis were captured in those moments of panic being released, then immediately replaced with excitement. That panic, as any student beginning their senior year feeling like they have nothing to show for themselves might have, is replaced with a creative outlet. This outlet not only made my undergraduate experience more fulfilling, but gave me the opportunity to pursue my interests in ways that my program could not.

I will always stand by the claim that this project will push you beyond any standards you were given in even your hardest classes. For the little stretch of the tunnel, when the lights dim and the music amplifies, Wonka’s eyes widening at the imbeciles before him, I was experiencing the drafting stages of my thesis. When I sat down to flesh out my argument in muddled, pseudo-coherent paragraphs, I felt like an imbecile on that boat, overwhelmed by all the research I had to do, all the connections I had to make. When I finally arrived at a draft my benevolently patient mentor and I could talk about, the tunnel became quieter, even if the end was not in sight.

Though I was rushing to get out of that terrifying part of writing, I learned that effective time management would have made it a lot easier. In the future, I plan to start each stage of whatever project I am working on much sooner so the tunnel only gets loud on occasion. It is too easy to get buried under work because a deadline is not in sight. My best thinking and writing always came in moments I did not have to drown out a noise.
The most enjoyable aspect of writing a thesis, in my opinion, was working with mentors who could aggravate my critical thinking side into working harder. I am so glad I had an English professor, a French professor, and a Film professor in the boat with me. I did not realize just how important it is to choose committee members who can do more than hold you accountable for deadlines. I learned a lot from Dr. McCuskey, who could help me break down such a dense topic and arrange my ideas in a way that made sense. I had never written an essay longer than 20 pages before my thesis, which would have been much more enjoyable to write had I known what I learned with Dr. McCuskey as my mentor.

The rest of my committee was just as helpful. Dr. Jones pushed me to look at France’s history more closely, which I appreciated on so many levels. Her advice not only made my argument stronger, but helped me become more aware of the people I was writing about. I hope that the essays I write in the future are sensitive to the culture I choose to write about. It was challenging, as a young American who has never has to experience war firsthand, to delve into the topic without feeling like I was projecting whatever preconceived notions I had onto the films. Dr. Wall helped me avoid these generalizations and focus solely on what the films were doing. As a student who wants to continue writing about film, his advice will remain with me for the rest of my career.

The revision stage was still bumpy, but the waters were much calmer and easier to navigate. The biggest challenge with this part of the process was refreshing my brain every time I looked at my own writing. Despite the difficult time I had with this slightly more tedious task, my thesis felt more and more rewarding. Once I was able to straighten out a lot of the kinks in my prose (unfortunately, there still may be a few hiding in there) and rearrange ideas that were not building my argument smoothly, I started to see the whole project coming together. All of the
research, free associative writing, and drained coffee pots were worth the revision portion. As an English major, the amount of condensing and clarifying I had to do (and will probably continue to do) was the most enjoyable part of writing my thesis, if not the most manageable.

If I could go back and rewrite this thesis, I would first of all have committed to a more specific work plan that held me accountable for something on a day-to-day basis. I did not get to perfect my final draft in the ways that I wanted before the deadline. However, I am impressed with what I could accomplish under the time constraints I had given that I started the Honors program my senior year. Another thing I would have done differently is map out the formal aspects of my argument more so that I could fit them in with the research I was doing. I feel like my final draft was lacking in cinematographic terms and examples, which is the greatest part of film analysis.

Choosing to write a 35-page film analysis has changed the way I watch films. I cannot watch a movie anymore without itching for a notebook to take notes, even if I am with a group of friends. I have been journaling and posting blog entries for a film blog that I am planning to maintain for the unforeseeable future (at least until I start graduate school). Writing about what films accomplish visually, ideologically, and otherwise is something that I am so grateful I was able to do as an undergraduate with no specific program that would let me do that kind of work as an emphasis. I look forward to applying the knowledge that I gained from this project in a variety of outlets, and hope that the work I have done will lead to more research on French cinema in the future.
About the Author

Danielle Green graduated from Utah State University in the spring of 2017. She majored in English with an emphasis in Creative Writing and minored in French. Her research interests extend beyond French cinema into German and contemporary American cinema as well. In the fall of 2016, she conducted research at the UCLA Film and Television Archive on silent film techniques, which developed into an essay that was accepted into the Sigma Tau Delta national convention in addition to inspiring two shorts she has written. She recently directed and edited the documentary, Resilience, a collection of interviews about religion and female sexuality, body image, and relationships. She hopes to continue her studies in film on the east coast, where she will also blunder on as an independent filmmaker.