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**Steve Wharton**, *Screening Reality: French Documentary Film during the German Occupation*. Oxford and New York: Peter Lang, 2006. 252 pp. Appendices, notes, bibliography. \$53.95 (pb). US-ISBN 0-8204-6882-7.

Review by Martin O'Shaughnessy, Nottingham Trent University.

This book provides a welcome addition to the growing literature on cinematic production during the period of the Occupation. The war years are often seen as a golden era of French feature film production. Classic fictions such as Clouzot's *Le Corbeau* (1943), Delannoy's *L'Eternel retour* (1943), Grémillon's *Le Ciel est à vous* (1943) or Becker's *Goupi mains rouges* (1942) tend to dominate our discussion and understanding of the cinema of the period, with a consequent neglect of both newsreel and documentary despite the centrality of both forms in the cinematic strategies of the Vichy government and the occupying power. While this neglect can be partly explained by a public preference for fictions (then and now), it is also obviously linked to the difficulty of obtaining documentary and newsreel material. Steve Wharton's book is thus a timely one, helping to fill an important gap in our understanding of the period. When Wharton was writing his book, he was indeed able to claim that no work on the Occupation had yet concentrated on the role of documentary. The appearance of Jean-Pierre Bertin-Maghit's *Les Documenteurs des années noires* means that there is now another work covering some similar ground. [1] Bertin-Maghit's book, it should be mentioned, comes accompanied with a DVD that carries a selection of the documentaries of the period, thus allowing the reader/viewer to sample the films for him or herself. Nonetheless, anyone interested in the period would certainly want to read Wharton's book alongside Bertin-Maghit's.

Wharton's book is well-structured. The first section provides a workmanlike overview of Vichy ideology and a very useful and focused discussion of the institutional and legislative frameworks in which cinematic production took place. It is particularly interesting to read how, with the previously routine double bills being abolished and with pre-October 1937 fictions being withdrawn from circulation, a space opened on cinema programmes for the documentary (pp. 34-5). When placed alongside the regime's enthusiasm for the pedagogical and propagandist potential of documentary, this new demand provides a clear explanation of why the genre flourished in the period. Wharton underscores the initial importance of government subsidy for documentary making and suggests that the later disappearance of subsidy is evidence that the form had become able to fend for itself (pp. 44-5). While this may well have been the case, one would have liked more discussion here of how those films produced in the latter years of the Occupation were funded. Were they dependent on official commissions or did they achieve some form of commercial viability?

The second and major section of the book engages both with the films themselves and with the contexts of their exhibition and circulation. Attention is first paid to those films that Wharton identifies as overt propaganda. Titles such as *La journée de travail de Pierre Laval* (1942), *Chefs de demain* (1942), *Forces sur le stade* (1942) or *La garde de l'Empire de l'Atlantique au Tchad* (1942) give a flavour of the nature of the works discussed and their predictable ideological thrust (pp. 67-88). The obvious propagandist nature of these films paves the way for an analysis of the ideological nature of the more apparently neutral films, an analysis which takes us to the heart of Wharton's project in the book which is to ask whether documentary from the period screens (shows) reality or screens (hides) it. Wharton approaches this question by examining films from the officially selected and sponsored "Arts, Sciences, Voyages" programmes, a series of packages of between three and nine largely French, but occasionally German,

documentaries that went on tour around the country.

The persuasive analysis of the films leads to the perhaps unsurprising conclusion that apparently more neutral films display clear thematic similarities with the more overtly ideological productions considered earlier. Thus, a mountaineering film such as Brive and Chanas's *Trente jours au-dessus des nuages* (1942) is seen to celebrate youth, teamwork, leadership, tradition and achievement, while Rouquier's *Le tonnelier* (1943) promotes the values of tradition and artisan craftsmanship (pp. 89-117). Later discussion shows how documentary was harnessed to promote motherhood and pro-natalism or to defend and encourage the *relève* and the *service de travail obligatoire* (pp. 143-63). Consideration of the *Premier congrès du film documentaire*, held in Paris in April 1943, underscores the prominence that the regime accorded to the documentary form as well as the careful blending of French and German works needed to underscore the "partnership" between the two countries and their cinema industries (pp. 119-42).

While all the above is clearly expressed, well handled and persuasive, this reader nonetheless had certain reservations about the work. Firstly, while Wharton is undoubtedly right to insist on the central ideological role of documentary, he does risk inflating its importance by sidelining the ideological dimension of fiction and by suggesting that newsreel, documentary's non-fictional rival, aroused too much audience hostility to be politically productive. Rather than a nuanced account of the ideological interplay of the different cinematic modes, this comes close to special pleading for documentary.

This criticism leads on to a second. One would like to have seen more discussion of how documentary connected to other visual forms from the period and to what extent and in what way iconography and visual motifs were shared by different media. Thirdly, the book seems to omit any sense of divergent or competing positions in the different documentaries of the period thus producing a picture that is rather too uniform. Rather than producing a rounded image of wartime documentary output, it risks presenting a partial vision by focusing too much on Vichy-sponsored film programmes and events. In contrast, Bertin-Maghit's above-cited book chooses to focus on divergence by identifying a central fault-line between a propaganda of "integration" generated by the *Etat français* and a propaganda of "agitation and exclusion" associated more tightly with National Socialism. A fourth reservation concerns the nature of some of the questions that underpin the work.

The book's core question, implicit in its title *Screening Reality*, about whether documentary showed or hid the real, is not necessarily a particularly productive one, given that the answer seems to be so predictable. This is not to say that the book does not perform very convincing ideological analysis but the insufficiently nuanced central question risks distracting from the finer points of detail. A second core question that runs through the book is that of audience response to the films. Given that the only concrete evidence brought to bear is provided by press reports, it might have been wiser to admit that public response fell outside the scope of the project.

Instead Wharton seeks to fill the gap with some rather unconvincing suppositions. He suggests, for example, that documentary was seen by its public "as a truthful and didactic medium" (p. 87), a problematic assertion given the circulation at the time of the very kind of blatant propaganda works that Wharton himself describes. Similarly, he suggests that because documentary recycled themes and messages already familiar through other media, the public was effectively stitched into the desired interpretation (pp. 197-8), leaving no obvious space for divergent (resistant?) or shifting readings, another rather dubious conclusion given the ideological conflicts of the period and the progressive detachment of the population from support for the regime.

Another comment, more a regret than a criticism, is that there is little discussion of a "before and after." The book does find space for a fascinating discussion of the pre-war, wartime and post-war career of André Robert, founder of the "Arts, Sciences, Voyages" programmes and organiser of the first congress

of documentary film (pp. 185-95), but little is said about the broader relationship between pre-war, wartime and post-war documentary. It would have been interesting, for example, to have some comparative production figures to gauge the extent of the wartime vogue for documentary. It would also have been useful to have had some assessment of continuity at the level of personnel. If the future careers of figures such as René Clément (maker of legendary Resistance film *La Bataille du rail* (1945)), Jean Tedesco or Georges Rouquier are reasonably widely known, some sense of whether the lesser figures were able to pursue a documentary career after the Occupation would have been useful.

Despite these reservations, the book is strongly recommended reading for anyone with an interest in the propaganda of the period or in the history of French documentary. It helps to fill a major gap in the literature while at the same time opening up an important area for further research and debate.

## NOTES

[1] Jean-Pierre Bertin Maghit, *Les documenteurs des Années Noires : Les documentaires de propagande, France, 1940-1944* (Paris: Editions du Nouveau Monde, 2004).

Martin O'Shaughnessy Nottingham Trent University martin.oshaughnessy@ntu.ac.uk

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