

Jeux Interdits

("Forbidden Games"; aka: "The Secret Game")

France : 1951 : dir. René Clement :

: 84 min

prod: Robert Dorfmann (Paul Joly) : scr: Jean Aurenche & Pierre Bost

: dir.ph.: Robert Julliard

Brigitte Fossey; Georges Poujouly

Lucien Hubert; Suzanne Courtal; Jacques Marin; Laurence Badie; André Wasley;

Dénise Perronne; Amédée; Louis Sainteve

Ref:	Pages	Sources	Stills	Words	Ω □ ∅ Z ∞	Copy on VHS	Last Viewed
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Georges Poujouly and Brigitte Fossey, rapt in their own displacement of the terrors of war and mortality, reducing death to something resembling a doll's tea-party. Ceremonial is everything. Source: indeterminate

Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide
2001 review:

"During WW2, young Parisian girl is orphaned and taken in by simple peasant family; she develops friendship with their youngest son and shares with him a private world which the grown-ups cannot understand. Sad, intensely moving drama earned a Best Foreign Film Oscar. ***½ "

Speelfilm Encyclopedie review:

"Girl whose parents and dog are killed during the evacuation of Paris in 1940 is taken into a farm. Together with the farmer's young son she secretly sets up an animal cemetery for which she steals all the crosses in the village. Famous film about the absurdity of war set against the self-evident detachment of children leads via humorous observations to a gripping dramatic climax. ***½ "



Within minutes of the air strike which killed her parents, Paulette (Fossey) is anxious to retrieve the body of her puppy, callously discarded by refugees anxious only to be on their way.
Source: *Children in the Movies*

Halliwell's Film Guide review:

"In 1940, the little daughter of refugee parents sees her parents killed, and takes refuge with a peasant family, the small son of which helps her bury her dead puppy. They make a game of building a cemetery, which leads to a village feud... Poignant anti-war tract which seemed a masterpiece at the time and is full of marvellous moments, but no longer holds up as a whole. Academy Award: Best Foreign Film. Academy Award nomination - François Boyer, Best Original Story. *** "

"A truly imposing achievement of blending several seemingly unrelated elements into a totally meaningful whole." - John Simon, 1967

The Critics' Film Guide review:

"An orphaned refugee (Brigitte Fossey) makes friends with a peasant boy (Georges Poujouly), early in the Second World War. The anti-war message now seems "vieux chapeau" and the contrast between childish innocence [*sic*] and adult corruption is too schematic to be convincing: it just looks naïve and sentimental. Still, the performances are very touching, and this remains one of the most charming films ever made about childhood. Winner of the main prize at the Venice Film Festival. 8/10"

"A touching little tale... Though a bit too concerned with the trappings of death for my taste, it is beautifully done... an experience to remember"
- Roy Nash, *Star*

"Certainly one of the greatest examples of motion picture craft seen in post-war years... A



too-boisterous comedy scene in the graveyard, out of key with the rest of the
Lucien Hubert, Poujouly and Fossey Source: *A Pictorial History of the Talkies*

picture, is the only flaw in this screen masterpiece.”

– Jympson Harman, **Evening News**

“A sad, sad film that, even this early in 1953 I predict will be among the ten best of the year.”

– Leonard Mosley, **Daily Express**

“A truly imposing achievement of blending several seemingly unrelated elements into a totally meaningful whole.” – John Simon, 1967

“Clément’s method of presentation – a series of harsh contrasts, with on the one side the lyric understanding between the two children and on the other the ludicrous comedy of the quarrelsome, ignorant peasant adults – is perhaps unfair to the adults. But it’s an act of kindness to the audience: without this element of gross caricature, we might dissolve in tears.”

– Pauline Kael

The Good Film and Video Guide review:

“Virtually everyone who saw it was impressed with this picture, which details the funeral games played by a country boy (Georges Poujouly) and the little girl (Brigitte Fossey) from Paris whose parents have been machine-gunned by Nazi planes while fleeing their city. Significance was found in this story, perhaps not wrongly; it remains painful to watch, as directed by a film-maker who was then as sensitive as he was skilful. *** ”

Halliwell’s Filmgoer’s Companion review:

“A powerful anti-war film and a plea for innocence with a fresh angle: two children whose parents have been killed in an air raid¹ are sheltered by peasants and invent their own game of death. Their world is shown as the only innocent one [*sic*], all adults being in some way corrupt; but the world does not understand. Directed by René Clément from a novel by Françoise Boyer; with Brigitte Fossey and Georges Poujouly.”

Excerpt from **The International Encyclopedia of Film** entry on Clément:

“...Clément’s initial passion for accuracy and eye for detail was better shown in **"JEUX INTERDITS"** (1952), a *film noir* about the effect of war on two small children, a country boy and an orphan refugee from Paris, who create their own secret world in a cemetery for animals. Clément draws his audience into this film which is strangely sympathetic in spite of its necrophiliac atmosphere...”

Movies on TV and Videocassette 1988-89
 review:

¹ *Wrong!*

“Superb, poignant film about a poor family who take in a little girl whose parents are killed in an air raid. The youngest son and the little girl become great friends and learn to rely on one another for understanding. **** ”

The Time Out Film Guide review:

“Clément’s notorious eclecticism can surely never have been so marked within a single film as in this all-purpose allegory, anti-war tract and *noir*-ish morality. Waifish children create their own secret animal cemetery and honour it with the monuments of the human dead, while World War II holocaust and petty family feuds form a perverse backdrop to their “innocence”... or, perhaps a mirror to the “perversion” of their forbidden games. Unfortunately, such a potentially fascinating patchwork is glossed over with an irritating layer of heartstring humanism, and now looks “touching” rather than challenging.”

Video Movie Guide 1993 review:

“It has been said that **"FORBIDDEN GAMES"** is to World War II what **"GRAND ILLUSION"** is to World War I. The horror of war has never been more real than as portrayed here against the bucolic surroundings of the French countryside. At the nucleus of the plot is Paulette, played by 5-year old Brigitte Fossey. Witnessing German troops kill her parents twists the girl² who acquires an attraction for the symbols of death. A truly tragic, must-see work. In French with English subtitles. ***** ”

The Virgin Film Guide review:

“One of the best films ever about war and its effects, **"FORBIDDEN GAMES"** also speaks beautifully to the need of children to construct their own fantasy world away from adult supervision. Director Clément’s most famous film carefully begins with its one action highlight, as refugees flee WWII Paris in the face of a Nazi attack. At a bottleneck on a bridge, German planes swoop down in perfect formation and strafe the confused column. Paulette (Fossey) is seen standing alone on the bridge, her parents and dog dead. When someone throws the dog over the bridge, she goes after it and meets Michel (Poujouly), the

² Nonsense!

11-year old son of peasants (Hubert and Courtal). The boy takes the girl home with him, and his parents take her in. When Paulette sees her parents buried ³ she decides that her dog also needs to be buried in a grave with a cross. She and Michel steal a cross from the hearse carrying his older brother ⁴. He and Paulette begin to expand their secret animal cemetery to include moles, chickens, and even insects, all given elaborate memorial services with stolen crosses. The eventual discovery of the children’s secret and their future together⁵ make for a moving climax.

"FORBIDDEN GAMES" derives most of its power from Clément’s painstakingly methodical direction and the remarkable performances of the two child leads. Poujouly and the amazing five-year old Fossey are highly expressive actors who give this stunning film its emotional core. The visual and narrative style is a potent blend of stark documentary, pastoral realism and film noir. Seeing war through the eyes of children who cope with its atrocities by constructing their own little game of death was a brilliant move – it seems morbid and grotesque to all the adults, but the problem is that they are the ones who really lack understanding and respect. *****”

World Cinema – A Short History general note:

“Other French directors of the post-war decade tended towards darker themes... René Clément (born 1913) returned to the fatalist themes of the pre-war with **"AU-DELÀ DES GRILLES"** (1949), though he also made the tender **"JEUX INTERDITS"** (1953) and, in England, a dazzling light comedy, **"MONSIEUR RIPOIS"** (1954), which starred Gérard Philipe, the most popular male star of the post-war French cinema...”

[no listing (inexcusably) in “Classics of the Foreign Film”, “Rating the Movies (1990)”, “The Sunday Times Guide to Movies on Television”, “TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995” or “Variety Movie Guide 1993”]

Time Out [?] review:

³ she certainly never does

⁴ no, Michel does it alone, as a gift to her

⁵ eh??

"Soppily humanistic anti-war tract in which two waifs create a secret cemetery for animals

Two. Exactly what the brazenly allegorical story is meant to convey remains a tad obscure while the whole movie is ruined by its excessive



against the ravaged backdrop of World War

determination to be moving."

Despite his father's promises to keep the girl, a crestfallen Michel watches Paulette marched off to be – as they say – "put into care". Never trust the word of a parent, Michel!

Source: International Encyclopedia of Film

Children in the Movies analysis:

"France, 1940. A little girl Paulette (Brigitte Fosse), whose parents have been killed during a German bomber attack on a bridge outside Paris, is found wandering forlornly in a wood by a peasant family and temporarily given shelter. One evening she overhears a stray remark about the tragedy on the bridge, to the effect that there were not enough coffins for all the dead and the rest had to be buried "like dogs". "At her age one doesn't realise", says one of the speakers when he suspects Paulette might have been listening.

In fact, all the tensions, misunderstandings, and tragedies that are to come are to stem from this overheard fragment. For her dog has also been killed in the raid and, with the aid of the family's youngest son, Michel (Georges Poujouly), she resolves to bury her dog properly and find a cross for its grave. Finding other dead animals in the countryside, they steal other crosses and establish a pet cemetery in a

deserted mill. When Michel's elder brother Georges (Jacques Marin) dies, they steal a wheelbarrow-load of crosses from the village graveyard. Just as their obsession begins to intensify towards morbidity, so does it increase tension amongst the adults, particularly when the family begins to suspect their hated neighbours of desecration.

"It took me five years of patient negotiations to convince the producer", said René Clément when talking about the difficulty of setting up the film. "Then, although the censors never touched it, certain producers and critics tried to scuttle the film: it was refused by the selection committee for the Cannes Film Festival ..."

Although it is now acknowledged as a classic of world cinema, and in 1979 was voted by the French Academy of Cinema Arts as the eighth best French film ever made, it is still possible to appreciate the discomfort it originally provoked. Its tone is not serious, solemn or sentimental, but sardonic, satirical and strange.

There is a strong element of the grotesque not only in the actions of the children, but also in the buffoonery of the peasants ("It's Georges's cross!" / "So it is – it's still got the price on the back"). Indeed, by copying the rituals of adult worship, the children may be exposing its hollowness. Moreover, they may even be usurping the authority of the Church and challenging its monopoly on death.

The subject is childhood but the imagery and language are saturated with death. "Cross my heart and hope to die" has never sounded a more sinister childhood pledge. The bizarreness of their obsession is taken to an extreme, since Michel kills a cockroach specifically for their act of devotion, and they become collectors of the materials of death (for example, the altar cross), which they plan to use for purposes of adornment more than symbolism. This seems less consciously sacrilegious than a purely innocent enterprise in copying adult worship, which unfortunately has implications beyond their understanding. Also the morbidity of their obsession probably stems from their premature proximity to death,⁶ which makes for a poignant conjunction of elements: a babes-in-the-wood ambience, but with the wood smelling of corpses

What interested Clément most was the situation of the girl. The opening scene of the aerial bombardment of the bridge, where she loses her parents, could hardly have been more brutally, effectively done: a series of vivid contrasts between animal and human, the mechanical precision of the bombers and the chaos of the panic-stricken people as a car gets stuck, a horse stampedes. in a daze of shock, Paulette has been clinging to her dog. "Can't you see he's dead?" says a woman who pulls it from her and throws it in the water. Everything that follows – the girl, like the dog, helplessly swept along by the tide of events – relates to the desolation and disorientation experienced by the girl after her first confrontation with death.

After her escapades with Michel she will be signed away to an orphanage by Michel's father, who is betraying a promise to his son that they can keep Paulette if Michel tells them where the crosses are hidden. That lie is the definitive end of Michel's innocence [*sic*] and he will wreck the crosses and throw them in the mill

⁶ *A facile thought in Michel's case. No child raised on a peasant farm would be any stranger to death or slaughter.*

pond. Meanwhile, at the end, on hearing the name "Michel", Paulette will drift away from her protectors and become lost in the crowd, swallowed up in the chaos and once again cast adrift in her loneliness.

Pauline Kael once called the film "the greatest war film since **"LA GRANDE ILLUSION"** – neither it should be noted, deals with actual warfare. " Its greatness comes from its observations on the kind of human folly and foolishness that can start wars, particularly in a scene where a fight erupts between feuding families during a burial service. In this audaciously incongruous reversal of convention, a graveyard is suddenly turned into a battlefield. It is about incomprehension, irrational familial hatred, and the kind of adult betrayals that leave lasting scars on the development of the young. From casual cruelty towards children, it is a comparatively small leap to crimes against humanity."

The Moving Picture Boy entry on Poujouly:

"The memorable creator of "Michel", farmboy protector and slave of the little war-orphaned Parisienne Brigitte Fossey in **"JEUX INTERDITS"**, was discovered by the film's director, René Clément, at a children's holiday camp in the Yonne. Soon after his first film his unmarried mother left her factory job and spent all his earnings.

In **"JEUX INTERDITS"**, Michel's first service to Paulette is to help her bury her dead puppy, which has been machine-gunned from the air, together with her parents, among the fugitives on the crowded highroad from Paris. Burials of further creatures (birds, mice, even an earthworm) take place in a mounting ecstasy of sublimated mourning: a barn is transformed into a grotto of funereal splendour, aided largely by crosses pilfered from the village churchyard. The outcome is inevitable and, in its authentically childish way, tragic.

Poujouly's muddy Michel is a touching, sometimes grumpy cavalier to Fossey's capricious Paulette. Two high-points of his performance, though, are solos: his recital of the Lord's Prayer in a furious temper, and his final heartbroken destruction of the fantastic cemetery in the mill.

His defiant little face was seen powerfully again the following year in **"NOUS SOMMES TOUS**

DES ASSASSINS“ and several other films. (In his more genial moments he reminded one faintly of a small snub-nosed Jean-Pierre Aumont.) On disc he partnered Gérard Philipe in “*Le Petit Prince*“. Later, in his teens, he had leading parts in Italian films.

In the mid-Fifties Poujouly was the original choice to play the boy in “**THE OLD MAN AND THE SEA**“, but by the time it was ready to shoot he was too old, and the Mexican Felipe Pazos (born November 22nd 1944) took his place.

Poujouly didn’t lack work, though: in “**ET DIEU CRÉA LA FEMME**“ (56, with Brigitte Bardot), “**LES OEUF DE L’AUTRUCHE**“ (57), a lead in “**L’ASCENSEUR POUR**

L’ÉCHAFAUD“ (57, Louis Malle’s first feature), “**GUINGETTE**“ (58), “**PÊCHEUR D’ISLANDE**“ (59), “**UNE FILLE POUR L’ÉTÉ**“ (59, Fr/It), “**VACANCES EN ENFER**“ (60), “**UNE GROSSE TÊTE**“ (61, another lead) and “**LE VICE ET LE VERTU**“ (62).

The the parts thinned out, and apart from “**PARIS BRÛLE-T-IL?**“ (66), “**HELLE**“ (71) and “**BIRIBI**“ (71) not much more was seen of this admirable lad in the cinema. He became a floor manager for Fox, and also did dubbing work – providing, for instance, the voice of Dustin Hoffman in “**MARATHON MAN**“.

Adapted from the François Boyer novel “*Les Jeux Inconnus*“, (“Unknown Games” - which is less susceptible to misinterpretation than the film title). Regrettably, the only copies of this film I’ve seen were the lamentable American-dubbed version, but it’s a testament to the film’s charm and strength that it manages to surmount this indignity. “**JEUX INTERDITS**“, unless taken on a level of obscure allegory (feuding neighbours etc), is not actually about war at all, but about death, and the comprehension of mortality. After the strafing of the refugee column at the film’s opening, the war does not obtrude at all upon the quiet rural calm into which Paulette wanders. Newspaper reports are read aloud, a neighbour’s son returns from the front a deserter, and angry flares are seen by night, but at no time is there any sense - even among the adults - of encroaching menace or the world turned on its head. This is an oasis of normalcy, largely oblivious to events in the wider world.

Paulette wanders away from the refugee column, then, more distraught at the loss of her puppy than her parents. Here Michel discovers her as he retrieves a cow stampeded by the same air raid which slew her family. He promises to replace her dead puppy, and she goes along with him blithely enough. It has to be added that the puppy, or so it would appear, was actually killed for the scene (film-makers were less punctilious about animal welfare in those days) and that Michel’s promise to replace it is never mentioned again.

“**JEUX INTERDITS**“, by my reckoning at any rate, is squarely Georges Poujouly’s film, although - not untypically - his importance is understated in most of the above reviews. Fossey certainly gives a very assured performance for a five-year old, and teeters on the verge of tears with the skill of a mountain goat, but that scarcely merits the epithet “amazing“. Paulette is essentially a passive focal point of the proceedings, while it’s Michel who is the active agent throughout, displaying a degree of solicitousness to the needs and wishes of this little girl not generally associated with 11-year old boys. His father is at first reluctant even to take the orphan into his home, but Michel knows just how to manipulate him, playing on a long-standing feud with the neighbouring farm, just a stone’s throw away.

It is Michel, not his parents, who comforts the girl when she wakes in a fright. While she sleeps he overhears his family discussing how the civilian casualties are being buried now in mass graves. He explains this to Paulette later, when she fears her parents may still be lying on the road where she left them. She understands that burial is to keep them out of the rain, and wants the same comfort for her dead dog. Michel explains that people are buried together in cemeteries so that they won’t get bored on their own, so Paulette, having buried

her dog in the barn with his help, wants company for it too. In this way the idea hatches in Michel's brain to console and divert her by constructing a cemetery of their own in the barn.

Without her knowledge he also has to organise various dead creatures to fill it. The project elaborates, as such projects do, when they set to work, and they start ornamenting the graves with crosses, which Michel steals first from the family hearse, and later from the church itself. He reveals these sins during confession, so that when a cluster of markers disappear from the town cemetery overnight, the priest loses no time in pointing the accusing finger at Michel, and the sanctity of the confessional be hanged. Michel goes into hiding to escape the wrath of his father, during which time gendarmes arrive to whisk Paulette away to an orphanage. We are spared the embarrassment of a happy ending.

For a film so absorbed with death and its paraphernalia, "**JEUX INTERDITS**" is surprisingly bright, happy and life-affirming. Even when Michel's older brother George is kicked in the chest by a startled horse during the air raid of the film's opening, and days later dies of internal bleeding for want of a doctor, the handling of the scene is anything but glum or maudlin. Director Clément uses it to make several wry and touching observations on rural poverty: George's mother tries to give him some cod liver oil for want of any better medication and, when she realises he is dead, quietly pours the contents of the teaspoon back into the bottle. An aunt arrives at the church for his funeral with a wreath marked not "nephew" but "cousine", and she hastily picks away the feminine "e".

While certainly dated, and for all its romantic fondness for rustic life, this is a pleasant film sensitive to the strengths of children as well as their gaucheness, and it is more reminiscent to me of Leacock's "**THE KIDNAPPERS**" (53) - the single-mindedness of the protector boy - than an anti-war film. **Recommended.**

Georges Poujouly made "**NOUS SOMMES TOUS DES ASSASSINS**" the same year, and two years later was the pupil who repeatedly gets himself into trouble in "**LES DIABOLIQUES**" when he claims to have seen the dead headmaster. He was born in 1940. Brigitte Fossey was later seen in "**LE GRAND MEAULNES**" (55, aged 10), "**ADIEU L'AMI**" (60) and "**M. COMME MATHIEU**" (71).

See subject index under **BOY MEETS GIRL, DEATH/DYING CHILDREN, FARMS & FARMING, OSCAR WINNERS, PASTORALS, RECOMMENDED TITLES** and **WAR**.