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### **Dark Years through Colored Lenses**

After more than twenty-five years of censorship, French cinema finally made a direct approach to *les années noires* in the early 1970s. The history of the period following France's 1940 defeat and subsequent division and occupation came out from its hiding place behind the Gaullist myth of "resistancialism," which held that the vast majority had opposed, actively or passively, the occupying forces or the homegrown Vichy government. "The 1950s and 1960s," Susan Hayward reminds us, "were periods of tight censorship equal to that of the Occupation (40)." Films that explicitly discussed the Algerian War or that portrayed a non-resistancialist view of the Vichy era routinely faced pre-censorship by the Commission d'autorisation de tournage, a board that pre-approved scripts. After French society had been forced open by the events of May 1968, Marcel Ophuls's documentary *Le chagrin et la pitié* (*The Sorrow and the Pity*), began the 1970s by exploding Gaullist myths through its depiction of ideologically committed fascists among the French population. In the years that followed, narrative filmmakers released the repressed history of the war years. In his groundbreaking study of the psychology surrounding the memory of Vichy and Occupation, Henry Rousso divides filmmakers into four categories: prosecutors, chroniclers, opportunists, and aesthetes. Louis Malle's *Lacombe, Lucien*, one of the three films I will examine today, falls into the last category, and what Rousso calls its "flirt[ation] with scandal (234)" will be a

particular focus of my argument concerning the still-controversial myth-breaking in which “mode rétro” films engage.

First, we need to engage a persistent counter-myth that Lynn Higgins has aptly called “Manichean.” Because Lucien is neither hero nor anti-hero, and because his collaboration is accidental rather than ideological, Malle forced his audience to push *The Sorrow and the Pity*’s revisionism one step deeper: not only were there some French people who actively and willingly collaborated, but there were also some who did not take a coherent stand at all. Thus, Malle and his co-screenwriter Patrick Modiano, because they made “moves characteristic of such demystification, . . . were suspected by many of rightist sympathies (190).” Historian Michel Foucault accused *Lacombe, Lucien* of dovetailing with Valéry Giscard d’Estaing’s rehabilitation of collaborators by “proposing a historical interpretation of old popular struggles that took place among us, to show that in fact they never existed (quoted in Golsan 60).” In other words, if resistance or collaboration were choices that one could arrive at for no particular, ideological, reason, then the great Franco-French War was mere illusion. France could once again erase its shame and reconstruct the comfortable bourgeois lifestyle that May ’68 had disrupted. Among contemporary critics, Naomi Greene has been most prominent in echoing this view. “By the time Malle made his film,” she argues, “the darkest zones of the past could no longer be ignored. But it was *still* possible to deny, to soften, degrees of knowledge and/or complicity concerning this past (79).” She also criticizes the other half of what I will call Malle’s Vichy-era diptych, 1987’s *Au revoir les enfants* (*Goodbye, Children*), along with François Truffaut’s 1980 hit *Le dernier métro* (*The Last Metro*) for what she sees as their soft political focus. “Truffaut’s film,” she

claims, “takes us back, once again, to a reassuring world where ideological divisions scarcely existed, and where French men and women were joined in opposition to the invader...*Le dernier métro* virtually ignores the more troubling zones of the past (82).” Meanwhile, “[w]hen evil finally shatters [the] sheltered realm” of the boy’s school in *Au revoir les enfants*, “it is not associated with the murky moral zones and bitter struggles of the occupation (89).”

I argue that Greene is wrong about all three films, and that she is guilty of promulgating the Manichean counter-myth that Higgins discusses. The division of France into heroes and villains is not merely a simplification; it is also an attempt to act as prosecutor of fictional characters and their creators. In the end, the denial of ambiguity violates psychology, as Malle himself claimed about the attacks on *Lucien*. “[E]ach time I come to a turning point in my life, either in work or personally,” he said in an interview, “I make irrational decisions.” Thus, in his portrayal of the collaborator, “I did not want to simplify. I did not want simply to paint a portrait of a traitor. Rather I was looking to analyze an individual in all his contradictions (quoted in Golsan 69-70).” Just as choices made under stress tend to call up unconscious drives more than rational thought, the released memories (in this case after twenty-five years) of traumatic experiences are less likely—not more likely—to fit past experience into a political binary. To Greene’s charge that *Lucien* is an atypical collaborator because of his slight knowledge of the political issues of the day, we may counterpose Malle’s assertion that “there is a part of the population which does not possess a political conscience (quoted in Golsan 63).” Part of the “Vichy syndrome,” Rousso argues, is the “screen memory” that covered the trauma of the war years, the “coherent, relatively self-contained view [of] the

‘Gaullist resistancialist myth’ (18).” The vision that all of France, except for a few traitors, resisted the Nazis enabled the nation to ignore the humiliating defeat of 1940 and its citizens’ complicity in the murder of thousands of Jews. “The postwar citizen clung to the reassuring image of a resisting France,” he notes, “but the desire for a return to normality and the wish to forget the exceptional circumstances of the Occupation stood in the way of any real consecration of the resistance (19).” In a similar fashion, the upheavals that overturned the Gaullist false consciousness retained the feature that shielded the French from facing the unthinkable: the idea that most French citizens were neither guilty nor innocent. If most of a generation can be blamed and morally written off, the next generation can achieve as much closure as they could if most had been blameless and could therefore be morally elevated. Neither history nor psychology is as simple as ideologues would like, however. The dual unconscious, both guilty and innocent, neither guilty nor innocent, escaped the Gaullist repression and then evaded the prosecutorial glare of the new left. The syndrome, then, is a victory for history at the expense of ideology’s screen memories.

If Lucien’s decision to collaborate arises from his rejection by the resistance and from a fortuitous bicycle accident, the guilt of Julien in *Au revoir les enfants* is even more “innocent.” Julien accidentally betrays his Jewish friend to the Gestapo through an inadvertent glance, after having sneaked around to learn the boy’s true identity. To Lucien’s callow adolescence, Malle contrasts in his later film the curiosity of younger children, along with their ignorance of the adult world. The monks at the school naturally hide their support of the resistance from their charges, and Julien, on learning the truth of the adult “game,” becomes guilty of “betraying” his friend because of this

forbidden knowledge. Malle's children and adolescents grow up in a world where repression is matter of survival, rather than just social adjustment. That their developmental dramas are played for life-and-death stakes does not turn children into moral agents of political tendencies, as Greene apparently would have it. Rather, Higgins views Julien's glance as "a primal scene," where "collaboration is not an *essence* but an *act*. More significantly, ...an act of *looking* (194)." The memories of growing up during the war, as both Malle and Truffaut did, do not make them responsible for the situations their parents' generation put them in. To put it bluntly, Malle's film, based on a painful childhood memory, does not have to be *The Sorrow and the Pity* to enrich our understanding of a particular aspect—childhood—of Occupied France. In fact, Malle's second war film is a look further backward from the ambiguity exposed in *Lacombe, Lucien*. Lucien's erotic drive returns from its repression in a violent personality distortion, and his later conversion to the protector of his Jewish girlfriend does not shield him from responsibility for his "accidental" guilt. He is executed, a voice-over tells us, for collaboration. The voice-over that closes *Au revoir les enfants* is that of Julien himself, forty years later. The news, again, is of death—that of Kipplestein and the other Jewish boys, and also that of the headmaster, in the camps—deaths for which the morally innocent Julien takes full moral responsibility.

For Truffaut, on the surface a far more optimistic filmmaker than is Malle, the stage serves as metaphor for contingent choices made in wartime. As in *La nuit américaine* (*Day for Night*), the experience of acting allows the characters of *The Last Metro* to overcome dismal, ungrounded, and dangerous "real" lives. Yet Truffaut's happy ending should not tempt us to dismiss him as a purveyor of saccharine myth, no

more than should the popularity of his film. *The Last Metro*, in fact, depicts numerous levels of moral ambiguity that only fiction can resolve into a satisfactory conclusion. As the Nazis tighten their grip on Paris, the members of a theatre troupe must sacrifice one value for another—and the necessity of these choices imposes itself regardless of each person’s moral worth, or of her place in the social order. Lucas, the director, is a Jew who sacrifices his freedom of movement and his wife’s sexual affection through his insistence on hiding in the basement and continuing his work on the play rather than escaping. Marion, his wife and the lead actress, brutally turns away a Jewish actor to shield her husband from the authorities by letting them believe her an anti-Semite. As we have seen from *Au revoir les enfants* (not to mention the existentialist philosophy that thrived in the wartime environment), her *acting* as an anti-Semite makes her an anti-Semite. Certainly, she is such to the actor she turns away. The man who takes the place of both Lucas and the Jewish actor, Bernard, proves that confronting the evil of the occupying forces head-on does not release one from the profound ambiguity of moral choices in an immoral situation. He misunderstands Marion’s motivations at first, but after learning the truth, nearly betrays the entire company by lashing out at the collaborationist critic Daxiat in public. His inability to act dishonestly, in a reversal of absolute morality typical of Truffaut, has no greater ethical value than that of destructive thrill seeking. Even Daxiat must betray his own love of theatre in order to satisfy his wish to be a critic. He chooses fascism, like Lucien, to fulfill an adolescent fantasy.

Thus, like Malle’s children, Truffaut’s theatre people make their choices without being allowed the luxury of omniscience that speculative philosophy and partisan politics promise. True, Truffaut’s world is one of spectacle, and things turn out well enough in

the end, but the suggestion that fiction makes right what the world gets wrong is hardly the foundation for an optimistic philosophical system. If we are ungrounded, and make political choices out of lives that place politics in the background (and almost everyone *does* live like this), Truffaut implies, the positions we find ourselves in will demand that we sacrifice one absolute value (assuring the safety of a Jewish spouse) for another (refusing to betray Jews as a collective). The magic of performance in *The Last Metro* is just that: magical thinking that allows the lost to return, that allows our choices to be free, that allows the good to triumph and the mediocre to be saved. For DeGaulle, it was a screen; for Truffaut, it's an act.

I'd like to use the last scene of *Lacombe, Lucien* to suggest how the return of the repressed in the Vichy syndrome is a transference-reaction to past horror. Here, Lucien and the daughter of the Jew he had provoked and betrayed share a bucolic moment, believing themselves to have escaped their past into life without memory—without the profound contradiction that their attraction to each other has always embodied. Note that her name, France, signifies both her family's failed attempt at assimilation and her country's false self-portrayal as unambiguous victim....

Despite our disgust at Lucien, we, like France, are attracted to him. We are unable to see his evil as essential. When we share her view of the sleeping Lucien, we too resist the temptation to wish him crushed. The camera angle demands that we consider killing Lucien, then, like France, we draw back. Finally, the voice-over tells us that the other France—the France that collaborated in killing Jews far more actively and extensively than did Lucien—has had no such compunctions. The Vichy syndrome works out, or

continually works at working out, the trauma of collective guilt that was simultaneous with collective victimhood. We cannot wish ambiguities away from any perspective but that of fiction. It is a sign of the importance of the events of the Dark Years that fiction has been making them return—even, as in *The Last Metro*, in the very act of presenting their wishing-away—and the interlocutor with the mode *rétro* must be mindful that the Occupation is something of a national primal scene. Moralism won't do, and it won't do to go without a moral stance. Thus, we diagnose a syndrome, and observe symptoms that reflect both sides of a binary at once. These films will always be difficult, even unhealthy, artifacts. Yet, we owe it to them to probe their fractured consciousness, rather than to apply political yardsticks.

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