

Shaping and Reshaping WWII: French Cinema and the National Past

Michelle Royer

In his book *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France since 1944*, Henry Rousso looks at how France's way of talking about its past has changed in the last fifty years.¹ The author identifies distinct discourses on the period of the Occupation, reflecting the political and social concerns of the era as much as the events of the Second World War. Throughout its history, French cinema has contributed to the shaping of the past through documentaries and fictional narratives and has provided a profound insight into the country's national identity. In this article, I will show that the filmic representations of World War II and more specifically of the period of the Occupation have been essential elements in the construction and reconstruction of collective memory, and at times in its repression, and that they also bear witness to the times in which the films were made. I will focus on two French films representative of two distinct periods and two different discourses on the French Occupation: René Clément's *Jeux Interdits* (1952) and Louis Malle's *Lacombe Lucien* (1975), and will show how these films have contributed, through fictional narratives, to the shaping of France's past and identity.

When studying historical films, it is important to bear in mind that, "Just as written history is not a solid and unproblematic object but a mode of thought, so is the historical film".² Moreover, film "must be taken on its own terms as a portrait of the past that has

¹ Rousso, Henry, (1991) *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France since 1944*. [1987]. Translated by Arthur Goldhammer. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

² Rosenstone, Robert A., (1995: 4) *Revisioning History: Film and the Construction of a New Past*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

less to do with the fact than with the intensity and insight, perception and feeling, with showing how events affect individual lives, past and present".³ For this reason, cinema, and especially fictional cinema, participates in the history of memory rather than in the objective reconstitution of historical events. As pointed out by Rousso, the history of memory is "the study of the evolution of various practices and, more specifically, of form and content of social practices whose purpose or effect is the representation of the past and the perpetuation of its memory within a particular group or the society as a whole".⁴ As we will see, French cinema has had a very effective role as cultural carrier of memory in the construction of World War II.

During the Occupation, the French film industry, free from Hollywood competition, thrived: many films were produced and the French public, keen to avoid the harsh reality of daily living, flocked into the comfortable, heated and secretive places that were movie theatres. However, in order to escape censorship, films were mostly fantasy films and kept silent on what was taking place in France at the time, although the country was going through a crisis of unprecedented gravity which was to have a determining effect on its national identity.

During this period not only was France divided into two zones, the free and the occupied zones, but the French population experienced the war in many different ways: they were ordinary people attempting to survive the Occupation, prisoners in Germany, male youth working as forced labour or STO (Service du Travail Obligatoire), persecuted Jews, members of resistant networks inside and outside France, collaborators, black marketers and Vichy supporters. Moreover, the country was in a state likened by historians to a civil war between collaborationists and resistants. This "*guerre franco-française*" continued in 1944 with the *épuration* (the purge of those who had collaborated with the Nazis). As explained by Rousso, this civil war and particularly "the inception,

³ *Ibid.*, 1995: 7.

⁴ Rousso, *op. cit.* 1991: 3.

influence, and acts of the Vichy Regime, played an essential if not primary role in the difficulties that the people of France have faced in reconciling themselves with history".⁵ During the post-war period, although France had to deal with many urgent problems including economic and political problems, national unity was perceived as a crucial element in the country's reconstruction, but this unity would have to be rebuilt at the expense of historical memory: the repression and the neutralisation of the memory of the Collaboration years.

French cinema of the Occupation did not record history, but it could be said that its silence came to be seen as a very powerful witness to the censorship of the time. The same goes to some extent for post-war cinema, which also suffered from partial amnesia as most films about the Occupation were limited to the portrayal of the Resistance, although according to Susan Hayward the Resistance film was not to become a genre or a sub-genre until the 1960s.⁶ Very few films mentioned the acts of the Vichy government, the persecution of the Jews and the communists or attempted to explain why French people collaborated with Nazi Germany. Cinema served to reinforce the *mythe résistancialiste* as it became known, rather than to represent the profound divisions of the country and its people. France needed to repress the dark aspects of the Occupation (black market, Collaboration, persecution of the Jews and the communists) in order to re-unite the French around an acceptable image of France and to rebuild the country and its morale. René Clément's film *La Bataille du rail* (*The Battle of the Rail* 1946), winner of the 1946 Cannes Best Director and the Jury Prize, is a prime example of this period of filmmaking. Using a documentary-like style, it shows railway workers combating the Nazis stranglehold over France. The film was a massive success as it portrayed the French working-class as heroic and self-sacrificing in the struggle to liberate France. Collaborators were not mentioned in the film and the references to anti-Semitism tended to exonerate the

⁵ *Ibid.*, 1991: 9.

⁶ Hayward, Susan, (1993: 137) *French National Cinema*. London: Routledge.

French including the French authorities. While offering a realistic image of the Resistance, the film “made possible a *post hoc* identification with the Resistance [...]. The French could all become Resistance fighters with hindsight”.⁷ The emphasis on the Resistance became crucial in the reconstruction of France’s national unity, and cinema was instrumental in shaping a discourse that allowed this Resistance-based unity.

Clément’s film *Jeux Interdits* (1952), which won the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film in 1952, focuses on a period at the beginning of World War II, ‘the exodus’, which is the least controversial aspect of the war. When the German army invaded France, they arrived from the northeast then moved into Paris. In May and June 1940, thousands of French people fled the invaders and rushed with all their belongings on the roads of France to what they perceived to be safer places. However, Luftwaffe planes bombed the roads killing many refugees. *Jeux Interdits* narrates a story set in this period. During a Nazi air raid, and while fleeing the German occupier, Paulette, a five-year old Parisian girl, witnesses the death of her parents and her dog. She meets Michel Dollé, a ten-year old peasant boy whose parents agree to look after her. The children become very attached to each other and in order to cope with the devastating effect of the war, they build a cemetery where they bury Paulette’s dog and other dead fauna (cockroaches, chicks, moles, butterflies, worms). They steal crosses from the graveyard to adorn their private cemetery but eventually get caught and Paulette is sent to an orphanage. The fact that the film approaches history from the perspective of ordinary people and that the main protagonists are children, has made this film popular and it has become a classic of French cinema.

The beginning of the film has a stark authenticity with documentary-like footage although scenes recalling Eisenstein’s *Battleship Potemkin* (with the close-up of a woman screaming) and Rossellini’s *Open City* detract from this realism to remind spectators that the exodus they see is a filmic representation and not a

⁷ *Ibid.*, 1993: 136.

historical document. Later, when Paulette walks on the bridge and down along the river to reach the woods, looking for her dead dog, the film offers a contrast between the violent images of war and images of natural spaces, with the famous nostalgic guitar solo of Narciso Yepes creating the sense of a return to a mythical past of peaceful harmony. The long shots of the child have an appeasing effect after the short, noisy shots of the opening scene. Her meeting with Michel, filmed from a low angle and from Paulette's perspective, constructs Michel as the saviour and their encounter possesses a mythical like character. While the refugees and the children are represented as the victims of war, the two children respond to war and destruction with a form of resistance through solidarity, mutual protection and intimacy. Together, they will attempt to control and make sense of death, ironically by repeating again and again the rituals of death through killing fauna or looking for dead specimens to put in their own beautiful cemetery.

Throughout the film the Germans are omnipresent but remain faceless. War news comes to the hamlet via newspapers and the young neighbour. The film does not attempt to present an objective viewpoint on the events but adopts the subjective point of view of the children. This leads the spectators to identify with them and their emotions rather than with the adults who are represented as rough and unsophisticated. While "the filmic image cannot abstract or generalise", it individualises collective suffering: the film does not convey historical data, it brings to the screen the traumatic event of the exodus of 1940 through personal narratives and with very powerful emotions.⁸ *Jeux Interdits* is structured around sets of binary oppositions: children/adults, country/city, male/female, human/animal, life/death thus creating a mythical world, with fairytale qualities although the end is a devastatingly cruel return to the real world. It embodies important issues about the effect of war on children through allegories, lyrical scenes, touching characters. The film recreates the effects of history through paradoxically mythical representation. In the context of the glut of films on the

⁸ Rosenstone, *op. cit.* 1995: 8.

Resistance which portrayed the French as heroes, *Jeux Interdits* stands out as it paints a different picture of the period by focussing on and giving voice to ordinary innocent victims rather than heroes. However, like the Resistance films, this vision of the war period obliterates the more controversial events of the time. In keeping with the films and the general discourse of the post-war period, *Jeux Interdits*, by carving out the least divisive piece of the history of the period, in a similar way to *The Battle of the Rail* and other 'resistancialist' films, contributes to the myth of a united France, victim of a cruel enemy. Although the films *The Battle of the Rail* and *Jeux Interdits* were made well before the de Gaulle political era, they are clearly positioned within the Gaullist discourse of national unity. Between 1958 and 1962, thirty films were produced, half of which dealt with the Resistance. For Susan Hayward, there is nothing surprising about this situation considering "de Gaulle's prominent role as leader of the Free French during World War II".⁹ Although Clément was not a Gaullist and had political sympathies with the communists, in the aftermath of the Liberation, communists and Gaullists had similar political strategies and both films can be read in the context of the Gaullist discourse.

Cinema played an important role in the post-war reconstruction of a positive national unity which was based on the reshaping of the past by mythical 'resistancialist' and pacifist discourses. Films also played their role, until the 70's, in the concealing of the dark elements of the Occupation. If the Resistance myth was central in the process, anti-war films such as *Jeux Interdits* were also carriers of collective memory and had a uniting role by representing the French as the innocent victims of faceless murderers, by silencing the division in the population and by rallying the French around pacifism. The solidarity between the two children and the country folks' care for the child alludes to solidarity amongst the French which contributes, alongside the 'resistancialist' myth, to the rebuilding of a positive image of France. This is not to say that solidarity and heroic Resistance were not a feature of the period, but

⁹ Hayward, *op. cit.* 1993: 250.

cinema gave them mythical proportions and obliterated other less glamorous episodes for political expediency. It is not a case of propaganda conspiracy but "the indications are that producers had seen a winner in cashing in on de Gaulle's iconographic prestige and milked it for what it was worth".¹⁰

It is only in the 70's that other aspects, seen to be the truth of the Occupation, came out, radically changing the established identity of France as a united nation. The explosion of Vichy memory that occurred in the early 70's has been likened to the psychoanalytical 'return of the repressed', as the force of it indicates the extent to which memories had been buried and the past obliterated for twenty-five years.

The first film to demystify the Occupation was Marcel Ophuls' four-hour long documentary *Le Chagrin et la Pitié* (*The Sorrow and the Pity*, released in 1971) which led to a national obsession about the Occupation and began the 'Forties Revival'. Domains as diverse as fashion, journalism, literature and cinema were influenced by this new preoccupation with the past. According to Naomi Greene, between 1974 and 1978 forty-five films dealing with the period were produced; in 1976 eleven films were made, that is 7% of the total French production and French cinema became "the site of a dramatic struggle for memory".¹¹

Following *The Sorrow and the Pity*, the second most controversial film was Louis Malle's fiction film *Lacombe Lucien* (1974). Both films offered counter legends to the myths of the Occupation and the unity of the French as they revealed the division of France, the extent of the Collaboration of the Vichy government, the brutalities of the French Milice, the anti-Semitic legislation, the deportation of the Jews and the popularity of Pétain. The films caused a considerable stir. *The Sorrow and the Pity* for instance, although intended for television, was banned on television until 1981, and *Lacombe Lucien* was quite controversial. The fact that these films shocked so many spectators and critics is emblematic of the

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 1993: 250.

¹¹ Greene, Naomi, (1999: 65) *Landscapes of Loss, The national Past in Postwar French Cinema*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

profound difficulties France has had in coming to terms with its past.

Many scholars have asked the question why it took so long before the French could confront their past, before they were able to question the myths of a resistant and united France. What factors converged to make it possible after many years of repression to unleash the Vichy memory?

As explained earlier, the myths owe a great deal to de Gaulle who dominated political life after the Liberation. He embodied the Resistance and the 'grandeur de la France'. Political parties, including the powerful Communist Party, had no interest in awakening divisions; neither had existentialist philosophers such as Jean-Paul Sartre who believed in a philosophy of action focused on projects and future rather than introspection. However, in the 60's the new generation, the baby boomers born in the 40's, was a questioning, soul-searching generation, as the 68 revolution showed. Unlike their parents, they had nothing to hide and no interest in preserving what had become a national secret; on the contrary they wanted to know what had really happened. Moreover, in 1969 de Gaulle resigned from the presidency and a more open political era began. Jankowski points out that filmmakers and novelists preceded historians in investigating the reasons behind the choice of ordinary people to resist or to collaborate. There was almost no available evidence, so historians preferred to leave private lives and personalities - micro history - to filmmakers and novelists. Cinema took the role of reconstituting the hidden and shameful past at grass-root level, but this raised serious controversies about the ability and legitimacy of cinema to reliably represent the past. Eventually, social historians started to catch up with their times, but only in the 80s "clinically dissecting the who and sometimes why of Resistance and Collaboration at the ground level".¹²

Lacombe Lucien was a turning point in the representation of Vichy memories. It shows Lucien, a young peasant, who "might just as

¹² Jankowski, Paul, (1991: 460) "In Defence of fiction: Resistance, Collaboration, and *Lacombe Lucien*", *Journal of Modern History* 63: 457-482.

well have become a resister and who enters the service of the Gestapo by accident" after being refused by the Resistance and having a bike puncture outside the headquarters of the Milice.¹³ Lucien naively tells the Milice about the leader of the Resistance, the schoolteacher, who is later tortured before his eyes. Lucien seems to feel indifferent. Soon, he becomes a member of the German police and is given power and responsibility for the first time in his life, although he does not always know how to use them. However, he does enjoy showing his power and is not reluctant to perform cruel tasks. Lucien is not a coherent character: although he becomes a member of an anti-Semitic Milice, he is also in love with a Jewish girl named France, whom he showers with gifts and attention. He is then shown to be a more vulnerable and simple young man, craving approval from France's father Monsieur Horn. At the end of the film, Lucien opts for love and escapes to the countryside with France and her grandmother where, in an idyllic setting, we see him care for them. The lovers act for the first time like any other young people, but a freeze-frame of Lucien interrupts the scene. A written text closes the film: Lucien will be captured and executed at the end of the war, during the *épuration*, for having collaborated with the Germans.

Although a fiction, *Lacombe Lucien* has an authentic feel: it was shot on location in the South of France with non-professional actors. Pierre Blaise, a teenage country boy who plays Lucien, had never acted before and never gives the impression of performing a character, but rather of having been placed in a war situation to which he reacts. The film refuses to comment on or accuse Lucien whose reactions are always unexpected, which prevents categorisation and spectators' identification. The film does not overdramatise and the camera is used as an investigative instrument, creating a documentary-style film which reminds us of *The Sorrow and the Pity*. In addition, the period is seen from the perspective of ordinary people, giving a realistic and convincing value to the story. Unlike Ophuls, however, Malle says that he did not want to make a

¹³ Malle, Louis, (1978: 49) *Louis Malle par Louis Malle*. Paris: Edition de L'Athamor.

moral judgement but “wanted to scrutinise a kind of behaviour that is very hard to understand and was certainly contemptible”.¹⁴ He also wanted to focus on an individual collaborator in a limited period of a few months in 1944, rather than a group and was “less concerned with advancing an ideological message than with revealing the plausibility of the implausible”.¹⁵ Lucien is the embodiment of “the banality of evil”.

Lucien was a disturbing character because he did not conform to the established patterns of a collaborator. The French were disconcerted by Lucien’s lack of political or ideological motivation as the film blurred the boundaries between resisters and collaborators and questioned the well-accepted idea that “a collaborator was necessarily a monster” and therefore an exception.¹⁶ Malle also refused to clearly delineate between good and bad, as they could cohabitate in Lucien. *Lacombe Lucien* shocked “the diehards of *résistancialisme* or *Gaullien* mythology, for whom collaborators, Laval above or Lacombe below, amounted to a handful of miscreants in an otherwise united France, not hapless might-have-beens”.¹⁷

The film was ranked sixth at the box office when it was first released, and attracted 250,000 Parisians in the first three weeks. The controversy was intense: critical reaction was divided and impassioned. Some accused the film of being historically inaccurate, while others considered it to be the first real film about the Occupation. Communists and Gaullists criticised the film for tarnishing the image of the Resistance and legitimising a collaborator. However, whatever the reaction, the film altered the simplistic image of the Occupation held by the French until the 70’s. Some critics have said that it did so more subtly than *The Sorrow and the Pity* and therefore more efficiently.

¹⁴ Malle, Louis and French, Philip, (1993: 104) *Malle on Malle*. London: Faber and Faber.

¹⁵ Hewitt, Leah D., (2000: 73) “Salubrious Scandals/ Effective Provocations: Identity Politics Surrounding *Lacombe Lucien*”, *South Central Review* 17: 71-87.

¹⁶ Malle, *op. cit.* 1978: 49.

¹⁷ Jankowski, *op. cit.* 1991: 457.

The critics' reactions point to the difficulty for cinema to represent the past as shown by Naomi Greene's comment on *Lacombe Lucien*: its reshaping of the memory of the past is misleading according to her. "It is safe to say" she writes "that few marginalized peasants joined such units [The Milice]; safer to say that few made this fateful choice because of a combined desire for social status and the sheerest of accidents. Moreover, in sharp contrast with Lucien, the vast majority of the *Miliciens* were, in fact, motivated by ideological beliefs and convictions".¹⁸ She adds that most of them would have joined the extreme right because they hated popular democracy and the Popular Front. She also questions the fact that anyone, after four years of propaganda and Occupation, could ask the question "What is a Jew?" The end of the film has also raised enormous controversy: was it ever possible that a collaborator be so gentle to and protective of a Jewish girl? The end of the film with the redemption of Lucien followed by a caption about his execution during the *épuration* adds, for Greene, to the "troubling historical and political issues raised by the film".¹⁹ The fact that for the first time a black *Milicien* appears in a film was also considered to be a misrepresentation since very few *Miliciens* would have been black. However, Malle's choice was based on specific historical facts: two Gestapo torturers in Bordeaux were from the West Indies. Malle never intended to make a general statement and to accuse Black Martiniquais of Collaboration: he wanted to force spectators to question their simplistic representation of the Milice and have access to a more complex understanding of the time.

This type of criticism treats the film as historical document and not as a fiction wanting to provoke thought rather than be historically accurate. Interestingly, the questions of historical accuracy were not raised about the post-war Resistance and pacifist films. Moreover, the above criticisms do not recognise that *Lacombe Lucien* narrates an individual story with the aim of questioning the widely accepted Manichean thinking of the time which was no more

¹⁸ Greene, *op. cit.* 1999: 77.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 1999: 78.

accurate. As Jankowski rightly reminds us “Louis Malle was an artist, not an ideologue” and he was not the first artist to shun “historical mythology and social geometry for human portrait”.²⁰

Susan Hayward points to a very different reading of *Lacombe Lucien*, taking into consideration the aim of the film, which is to provoke questions among spectators. She suggests that *Lacombe Lucien* is a film about “the discours fascisant” and that fascism has always been ‘an attraction’ for young people. Although Lucien’s joining the Milice appears at a superficial level to be accidental, “the film points in fact to the true nature and function of fascism; it invests people with power, has a sado-masochistic dynamic and has the manifestations of ideology but no ideological content”.²¹ This is why young people like Lucien can be trapped by fascism. It is indeed significant that Lucien is young and vulnerable; it is because of these qualities that he can embody this critical discourse on fascism. Hayward’s analysis highlights the role of cinema in the reshaping of the past, not as provider of accurate historical documents and data, but as a medium which processes historical facts through its narratives to construct, revise and reconstruct ideas about the past.

Lacombe Lucien’s controversy, including the accusation of historical misrepresentation, is a symptom of the difficulty the French have had in accepting a less than glamorous image of France. The fact that cinema was in the forefront of the revelations did not help as the legitimacy of cinema as a medium capable of reconstituting history has always been questioned. However, as we have seen, the criticism of historical inaccuracy does not take into consideration the specificity of filmic narrative.

A film like *Jeux Interdits* did not raise questions of accuracy because of its mythical quality and its effect of rallying the French around a comforting idea of a unified nation. Not only did the film present the image of a supportive population, but it also provoked a sense of solidarity among spectators faced with an emotional

²⁰ Jankowski, *op. cit.* 1991: 458.

²¹ Hayward, *op. cit.* 1993: 251.

representation of their suffering. The filmic coherence, the linear narrative, the pacifist message did not require from spectators an analytical distance; the film played on their emotions through the cuteness of the children. The beginning and the end of the film are certainly poignant moments which revived painful memories, but they did not call for analysis. The historical accuracy of the film has to do with the intensity of the feelings conveyed by the story and the characters and with the depiction of the effects historical events had on individual lives.

Contrary to *Jeux Interdits*, *Lacombe Lucien* placed the 70s spectators in an uncomfortable position: they did not know where to stand in relation to the narrative and the main character, and therefore they were divided in their reading and understanding of the film. By provoking a rethinking of accepted ideas, the film could only engender division among spectators, mirroring and even reigniting past conflicts and allegiances.

Twelve years later, Malle made a second film on the period of the Occupation, *Au Revoir Les Enfants* (1987), but it was not as controversial as *Lacombe Lucien*. *Au Revoir Les Enfants* won Césars for the best film, best director, and best script and appealed to the public who by then had accepted the dark years of their past, thanks partly to the re-evaluation of history and the liberation of memories by cinema.