

## Primal scenes

This chapter focuses on *Au revoir les enfants* (1987). The film is especially critical to our knowledge of Malle's work because its content implies that one can reinterpret Malle's artistic output as a long struggle with the memory of his traumatic childhood experiences suffered under the Nazi occupation of France.

Psychoanalytic interpretation of *Au revoir les enfants* reveals many important insights, not least those suggested by Lynn Higgins in her discussions of Mallean cinema and the primal scene (1992: 198–211). However, I will also demonstrate that Malle is too complex to be explained by one theory or interpretation, however tempting its conclusions. Other forms of psychoanalytic reading, not so directly related to trauma or the idea of the primal scene, can be applied. Notably, Freud's notion of *Das Unheimliche* ('the uncanny') is an important intertextual reference point. Likewise, in the concluding pages of this chapter I return to a more politically informed consideration of *Au revoir les enfants*. Here, I will delineate the libertarian critique that Malle offered in this film. Arguably, it is one of Malle's strongest and most successful interventions.

### Four decisive hours in a child's life

Before examining *Au revoir les enfants* in any depth it is helpful to present the historical–biographical context Malle reflected on when making his film. This is important because the work is the most overtly autobiographical of Malle's films. It is also unlikely that

readers will be fully apprised of the precise details that form the backdrop to the later dramatic reconstruction.

For the 11-year-old Louis Malle, 15 January 1944 was probably going to be another mundane Saturday of classes in his still relatively new boarding school, the Petit Collège des Carmes. Located near to Fontainebleau, on the outskirts of Paris, the Petit Collège was a logical place to house a child in a time of war and political confusion. It was for precisely this purpose that Malle's parents had sent him to this rural outpost of Catholic education. However, by approximately 10 o'clock that January morning the relative tranquillity of the safe haven was shattered. Malle, his school, its pupils and masters, were suddenly catapulted into the violence and cruelty of the occupation and Nazi genocide. German forces, Gestapo officers and ordinary Wehrmacht soldiers, executed a raid in search of hidden Jewish children.

Briefed by an unknown informer, the soldiers targeted several specific classes, including Louis Malle's fifth-grade group. In the middle of a lesson, two Gestapo officers broke into the room and abruptly interrogated the group. The Germans called out the name of one pupil who they believed to be Jewish and to be hiding in the class under an assumed identity. The name that the German shouted out was 'Bonnet' and after calling it twice, Jean Bonnet (the alias used by a German Jewish boy, Hans-Helmut Michel) stood up and surrendered himself. According to Malle's later memory of the event Bonnet then tidied his books and made a tour of the classroom, passing among his colleagues, shaking their hands and saying 'Au revoir Malle ... Au revoir Boulanger' (Malle 1978: 14; Malle cited in Guérin 2000: 465–6). Three broadly comparable scenes to the one I am describing were played out in other classrooms of the school.

Within one hour of the start of the raid, the Nazis forcibly moved all the children attending the college outside their classroom into the yard. Terrified and cold, no doubt shivering and sweating from fear in the winter air, the pupils discovered that their head teacher, the priest, Père Jacques had been arrested. Next, a Gestapo officer treated the children to a humiliating lecture. Just a few months later this scene was recorded in a privately printed review devoted to the history of the college, *En famille ... quand même* (1944) (key extracts from which are reprinted in Braunschweig and Gidel 1989: 36–7; see also Carrouges 1988: 175–6). The officer began with a question to the children:

'Trois élèves juifs ont été arrêtés dans ce collège; y-a-t-il encore des Juifs parmi vous?'

Ce à quoi les élèves répondent ensemble: 'Non'.

Un élève, P. de la Guiche, réplique: 'On ne savait pas qu'ils étaient juifs.'

Ce qui a le don d'exaspérer le chef de la Gestapo, qui crie: 'Vous le saviez'.

'Ce sont nos camarades, comme les autres'. S'écrie un élève de seconde, Germain de Montauzan.

L'Allemand répond: 'Vous n'êtes pas camarades avec un nègre, vous n'êtes pas camarades avec un juif.'<sup>1</sup>

This vile rhetoric was soon exchanged for a more physical, ritualistic form of abuse. The historical documentation suggests that a soldier called out the surname of each pupil from the school. Without any explanation, on hearing their name the Nazis required each pupil to walk towards the wall of the chapel. We know from the same school yearbook that describes these events that the first name to be called out was Aussenard. Terrified at being moved apart from the group, Aussenard stood by the chapel wall fearing for his young life, visibly shaking as he awaited his fate. Slowly, the other boys rejoined him, one by one, as each responded to the German soldier's orders. Since the exercise was probably conducted in alphabetical order one can plausibly presume that 'Malle' must have been barked out roughly at the middle point of the register. While this brutal process followed its unremitting alphabetical logic the captured children, including Bonnet, were marched past their colleagues. Bonnet appeared bruised from a beating that he had already received at the hands of his captors. A few minutes later, the Nazis escorted Père Jacques from the institution. As he passed his former pupils he bravely said a good-bye. The group responded together with a similar greeting.

Perhaps angered by the children's courage and loyalty the Germans released a guard dog to run among the boys. In response they remained standing in silence next to the chapel wall. During the role call the

1 'Three Jewish pupils have been arrested in this college; are there any more Jews among you?' To which the pupils replied together: 'No'. One pupil, Pierre de la Guiche replied: 'we did not know that they were Jews.' A reply which seemed to exasperate the head of the Gestapo who cried out: 'You knew.' 'They were our friends, just like the others,' cried out a sixth former, Germain de Montauzan. The German replied: 'You are not friends with a negro, you are not friends with a Jew.'

Nazis divided the boys into separate subgroups of four. Presumably this was a standard Nazi strategy to maintain order and to assert complete symbolic domination over prisoners. The report in the school yearbook underlines a further act of heroism. One pupil, Pierre de Laguiche, kicked the dog. In retaliation the Gestapo officer hit de Laguiche four or five times in front of his young colleagues. The officer subsequently shouted out to the other pupils: 'Vous faites du mal à un pauvre animal ... c'est donc "l'élevage" que vous recevez dans ce collège' (cited in Braunschweig and Gidel 1989: 37).<sup>2</sup> The tension was broken a little. The boys had noticed the Nazi's misuse of the French language which was ironic in the light of his new-found interest in national educational standards. Nonetheless, the school was closed by later that day and Malle's attendance at it had been brutally suspended.

It remains in doubt as to precisely which Nazi officers were directly responsible for these actions. In one report of the raid, reference is made to an officer who is named as 'Turrel from Danzig' (*En famille, quand même*, [1944] cited in Braunschweig and Gidel 1989: 36). In contrast to this assessment other accounts of the episode have emphasised the role of the Gestapo agent for the Melun region, Sergeant Wilhelm Korf (Braunschweig and Gidel 1989: 115; Malle has also sometimes referred to a German called Kopf, with a 'p', in his accounts of the episode. See Malle cited in Guérin 2000: 466; likewise a Korf(f) is cited as the key figure in a third historical description of this episode found in Carrouges 1988: 175. Despite the linguistic slippages it is plausible to accept 'Korf'). Korf was tried before a French military tribunal in 1953 for a different but comparable attack on a Catholic institution. Despite being condemned to death Korf's sentence was commuted to imprisonment. However, as the post-war years unfurled, the authorities granted amnesties as former Nazi war criminals were reintegrated into new civilian lives. Korf was released from prison in 1960, the same year that the still relatively young Malle collaborated with Jean Paul Rappeneau and Volker Schlöndorff on a first colour feature, *Zazie dans le métro* (Braunschweig and Gidel 1989: 116).

2 'You are doing harm to a poor animal ... so that is the "breeding" that you receive in this school.' Note: here the German officer misuses the term 'élevage' which literally means rearing or breeding.

The bureaucratic ruthlessness of the persecutors of the Holocaust means that the records of their victims are meticulously documented. The three boys that the Nazis took from the school, Hans-Helmut Michel (alias Bonnet), Jacques Halpern and Maurice Schlosser were deported to Auschwitz. We also know that Hans-Helmut Michel was sent to the death camp in convoy number 67, leaving from the Paris holding-camp Drancy (Braunschweig and Gidel 1989: 3). Neither he, Halpern nor Schlosser survived. The Nazis eventually released a fourth boy who had also been taken in the same round-up. They had designated him as an Aryan and he was consequently returned to his family. Père Jacques, the resistance fighter, who had used his institution as a sanctuary for children fleeing anti-Semitic persecution, did not survive the war. The Nazis deported him to Mauthausen-Gusen concentration camp, in Austria, where his treatment resulted in his death. Each of these micro-historical decisions tellingly reveal the logic of genocidal racism.

During the occupation of France, Nazi and Vichy authorities deported eleven thousand children to their deaths (Klarsfeld and Bochurberg 1997: 230). Their suffering and that of approximately one and half million other Jewish children murdered in the course of the Holocaust was a long and protracted process. The story of the hidden children is one of sudden friendships, hopes raised and then instantly crushed. For Jewish children across Nazi-controlled new Europe there was first the pain of separation from their parents as they were desperately placed in hiding. Subsequently, there was the inevitable disorientation of flight and unpredictable clandestine existence. Eva Fogelman explains just one common experience: 'They witnessed naked men, women, and children – among them their own relatives – lined up and machine-gunned in town squares and in the outskirts of cities ... The imminence of their own deaths was pervasive' (1993: 293).

### ***Au revoir les enfants*: film and the representation of catastrophe**

The final fifteen minutes of Malle's film dramatise many of the historical scenes I have just documented. *Au revoir les enfants* is in fact a work predominantly about school life under the Vichy regime. The picture is a touching but tragic portrayal of one class, Malle's own, and their experiences of the vagaries of wartime existence. Thus, Julien

Quentin (Malle's filmic alter ego) is sent back to the countryside school by his mother. Slowly, the new term brings new experiences and lessons. There are of course the banal classes in mathematics, literature and Greek. As Malle's plot develops we watch Quentin encounter a new boy in his class, Jean Bonnet (alias Jean Kippelstein, in historical reality Hans-Helmut Michel). The dynamics of this relationship shape the rest of the work. Gradually the two boys become friends: Julien, who is fascinated by Bonnet slowly learns that he is a hidden Jew. As the friendship grows Quentin loses his confused childhood prejudices towards the Jews. Subsequently, the relationship is abruptly halted by the Nazi raid. Malle's work concludes with the dramatic scene of Père Jean (based on the real-life Père Jacques) saying good bye to his pupils. Seconds later the adult Malle asserts via voiceover that he has never been able to forget this period of his life.

It is all too easy to understand *Au revoir les enfants* as Malle's attempt to reintegrate a childhood trauma into his adult life. History, autobiography and film-making come together in this work to form a site for a painful but curative 'working-through.' This perspective is the overwhelming implication of the final minutes of Malle's film. Here, in the voiceover from Malle, one dominant meaning of the film is asserted. Quietly, but firmly, Malle underlines his fidelity to the terrible episode from his youth. He explains: 'Bonnet, Négus et Dupré sont morts à Auschwitz, le Père Jean au camp de Mauthausen. Le collège a rouvert ses portes en octobre 1944. Plus de quarante ans ont passé, mais jusqu'à ma mort je me rappellerai chaque seconde de ce matin de janvier' (Malle 1987: 132-3).<sup>3</sup> Malle's incisive but simple words carry great authority as they recall the essential facts of this single episode from the Holocaust. In addition, they highlight Malle's own deep and complex loyalty to his formative childhood experience and then also project it forward to his own anticipated death. The voiceover functions as a reintegration of the historical trauma into the contemporary life of the director. By concluding *Au revoir les enfants* in this way Malle had found a new sense of moral purpose in his cinema. This statement is an original example of unambiguous

3 'Bonnet, Négus and Dupré died in Auschwitz, Father Jean in the camp at Mauthausen. The school reopened its doors in October 1944. Over forty years have passed, but I will remember every second of that January morning until the day I die.'

political and ethical duty towards a formative disaster. Certainly, in just a limited period of film time Malle's voiceover organises his work into a coherent and moving narrative on memory, loyalty and attempted closure.

Much of the content of *Au revoir les enfants* problematises the dignified but reassuring conclusion to the work. In particular, Malle's handling of the development of the key relationship between Julien Quentin and Jean Bonnet is replete with suggestive material. As Lynn Higgins has argued, through the exploration of Julien Quentin and Jean Bonnet's friendship Malle addressed a 'primal scene' from his youth. The key scene to which Higgins refers is at the heart of the tragedy: the Nazi raid on Quentin and Bonnet's class. Here, Malle portrays his schoolroom as a site of danger, betrayal and guilt. A Nazi officer, Müller, walks slowly between the wooden tables and demands whether there is a Jewish child in the classroom. The officer turns his back from the children for a moment, he dismissively plays with a war map that is on the wall, and in that split second, Malle shows Quentin glancing back at Bonnet. Out of fear, friendship or fascination, we watch the Mallean alter ego betray his new friend. So, in the blink of an eye, Quentin is presented as partially responsible for the arrest of Bonnet. Persuasively, Higgins explains: 'I submit that it is this moment of Julien's glance that constitutes the primal scene, or in Lifton's words, the "residual image – the pictorialization of [the individual's] central conflict in relationship to the disaster" that haunts the narrator in the final voiceover, presumably Malle himself' (Higgins 1992: 207).

Here, Higgins is arguing that Malle's wartime experience has come to haunt his later career as a film-maker and that in *Au revoir les enfants* he is finally publicly revisiting the founding episode. The interpretation that Higgins offers does not refer to the classic Freudian primal scene, in which the child observes his or her parents during sexual intercourse (see Freud's writing on *The Wolf-Man*). Instead, she reapplies the same term to identify the impact of a non-sexual, violent and traumatic episode from Malle's childhood. Or, as Emma Wilson has slightly more cautiously described the same scene: 'this moment, this involuntary glance is the film's *raison d'être*' (1999: 97).

Quentin's betrayal of Bonnet foregrounds the importance of guilt in Malle's work. This aspect is repeatedly hinted at throughout the film by Malle's recurrent use of similar scenes of guilty glances between the boys. The first appearance of the theme is offered when

Bonnet is introduced to his new class (Malle 1987: 21–3). As the teacher drones on about the qualities of Charles Péguy's poetry Malle briefly includes a shot of Quentin looking back across the room towards Bonnet. It is almost exactly the same image as the later primal scene to which Higgins refers. The links between this first and last encounter are further highlighted by Malle. In scene seven (the first look) a noise from outside the classroom disturbs the boys. A German soldier has arrived in the schoolyard and is talking to a monk. This shot prepares the way for the betrayal, violence and guilt that will follow. The fact that Malle repeats the exchanges of looks and glances between Quentin and Bonnet throughout the film adds to this implicit psychoanalytic subtext that is finally played out in the aforementioned primal scene of Bonnet's capture. The subtle redundancies in *Au revoir les enfants* work up to the final scene of denunciation. On the one hand, this repetition confirms Higgins' thesis. One would exactly expect to see a recurrence of versions of a traumatic or primal scene before its full execution. However, visually speaking, the repetitions of looks and glances between the boys also nuance the meaning of the primal scene. Inevitably, when it takes place, it is one further example of the common relationship that Quentin and Bonnet share. Repetition makes Quentin's last fatal glance almost an instinctive, accidental betrayal.

Since Malle informs us in the *Malle on Malle* interviews that he did not in fact give Bonnet away, the guilty looks in the film are not to be taken literally (Malle and French 1993: 179). Instead, they each reflect a more general shame on Malle's behalf. Or, as Higgins again underlines: 'The story is not a confession for a wrongdoing, rather it is invented to account for the guilt' (1992: 211). One might go on to say that the centrality of guilt in Malle's film adds a deeply critical quality to the work. It brings the question of how to respond to the meaning of the Holocaust directly into a retrospective filmic representation of the Holocaust. Malle conducts this exercise without trivialisation or glib reconciliation.

Nevertheless, as we should by now know, Malle rarely provides work that falls neatly into unambiguous, analytical categories. One must underline the fact that *Au revoir les enfants* contains another, supplementary scene of looking and denunciation that is as suggestive as the passage we have been discussing. In the later scene from the film, Malle reverses the roles earlier ascribed in the 'primal scene



in the classroom'. Thus, in the middle of the Nazi raid, Malle shows Julien Quentin in the school hospital ward trying to save one of the other hidden boys. A German soldier arrives in the ward and at first thinks that Quentin is another clandestine Jew. Subsequently, Malle shows the German soldier force Julien Quentin to lower his shorts to establish whether he is circumcised. Seconds later, the nun, who stands by watching this symbolically sexual attack on Quentin, nods towards one of the other boys who is hiding in a nearby bed. The soldier captures the boy and leaves. One of the resistance priests arrives in the ward and subsequently Quentin looks at the nun with complete contempt. He cries out: 'C'est elle', she replies: 'Foutez le camp!' (– 'It was her'; – 'Go to hell!') (Malle 1987: 127).

In these dramatic passages from the film, Malle inverts the dynamics of the earlier scene from the classroom. Now, Quentin is presented as the subject of the German soldier's visual interrogation. Here, Quentin endures his humiliation without giving away the boy who is hiding in the ward. Finally, as the German soldier exits, Malle allows Quentin to adopt the gaze of a resistance fighter: casting his eye on the nun and accusing her of betrayal. What I think Malle is doing in this part of the film is producing a troubling postscript to the earlier classroom episode. In short, he is deliberately problematising the former classroom scene's status as the 'primal scene', the defining episode through which to interpret his work. In his decision to invert that earlier scene Malle is suggesting that the experience of the Nazi raid meant that one did not have time 'to be guilty', or 'to be innocent', to behave well or badly, to think, or to feel anything other than fear. Chaotic events simply took place and a child could show great cowardice and courage within a matter of seconds of each other. Experiencing such adult brutality meant that for bystanders and victims all psychological and moral positions were thrown into turmoil. In episodes like those that concluded *Au revoir les enfants* betrayal and heroism went hand in hand. In these moments of history anything could happen and that was what was so terrifying for a child who was used to a more ordered world. A similar discourse to Malle's work frames much of Roman Polanski's more recent treatment of the Holocaust, *The Pianist* (2002). As a perceptive critic has noted of that film, Polanski's greatest achievement is found in his depiction of the entirely arbitrary nature of life and death during the Nazi genocide (Frappat 2002: 76–7). Malle's earlier dramatic reconstruction of the

two scenes from the round-up precisely anticipates Polanski's later more extensive representation.

One could also argue that the hospital ward sequence that I am raising for attention here represents *the key* Mallean primal scene. The scene includes several elements that do seem critical to Malle's work and that are absent from the classroom sequence. Here, Malle includes the implicit questioning of his own identity; in turn, this is related to the question of circumcision and genital-religious-racial identity. Furthermore, the figure of the nun is cast as a female voyeur witnessing Malle's own humiliation. Speculatively, Malle's prolonged interest in childhood sexuality could be interpreted as a slow processing of this type of terrible encounter, a desire to return to this scene, to repeat it. Similarly, his tendency towards misogyny is also anticipated, but not justified, in the role played by the woman in this episode, with Malle transferring his own guilt to her. Perhaps too Malle's deeper guilt does not revolve around the question of the act of scopical betrayal but rather the guilt that he was not identified as a Jew, and hence not taken in Bonnet's place? This would in turn be closer to the guilt of a survivor rather than of a voyeur turned collaborator. At the very least, the hospital scene includes the key figures of a terrifying family unit: soldier/resistant as authoritarian father, nun as punishing mother, and Quentin/Malle as child. However, an alternative reading of this passage, more in line with Higgins' original thesis, is equally plausible. One can interpret the second hospital ward scene as a rapid re-enactment of the original classroom episode, with the guilty Quentin now unburdening his earlier shame onto the nun.

Familiarity with Malle's wider work provides further insights on his decision to film the same style of scene twice over in *Au revoir les enfants*. In this context, the presentation of Quentin as first guilty in the classroom and subsequently heroic in the hospital ward looks like that favourite Mallean strategy of ambiguity so consistently applied in *Lacombe Lucien*. The strategy pays off whenever it is used because it quickly creates ambiguity and poetic richness. Importantly, it allowed Malle to say the same thing in different ways and with different variations of political, social or moral emphasis. The technique brings depth and sophistication, while astutely avoiding precise repetition. The strategy also cleverly protects Mallean film from simplistic critical analysis.

It is now productive to move away from the idea of the primal

scene in Malle's film to an equally intriguing line of psychoanalytic enquiry. The fact that two relatively similar scenes are filmed closely together by Malle raises the wider question of duplication and doubling in Malle's cinema. These ideas are the subject of Freud's work on the *Unheimlich* – 'the uncanny' – (1919). Certainly, 'the double' or *Doppelgänger* forms a powerful thread in Mallean cinema and also seems to underpin the repetitions I have been discussing in the context of *Au revoir les enfants*. Throughout Mallean film twins implicitly form single or complementary social outlooks: Wally and André from *My Dinner with André*, as well as earlier the two Marias from *Viva Maria*. *Lacombe Lucien* offers a comparable but different variation. Here the idea of the 'double' is captured in a single protagonist with Lucien embodying two different value systems: good and evil. The apogee of Malle's filming of the double is *William Wilson*, the adaptation of Edgar Allan Poe's *Doppelgänger* short story. Wilson is the literal 'uncanny double' of folklore and horror fiction. In the light of this feature of Mallean cinema one could run an argument that suggests that Quentin and Bonnet from *Au revoir les enfants* are a further pairing in the series.

What does the visual and narrative propensity to use the figure of the double in Mallean film mean? Potentially, it is the presence of 'the double' in Malle that is the defining projection of an inner psychological melodrama. Here, Freud's original hypothesis on the double in his work on 'the uncanny' supports the hypothesis. For Freud the phenomena of the uncanny is explained as follows: 'this uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression ... the uncanny as something which ought to have remained hidden but has come to light.' ([1919] 1985: 361–2) So, this would mean Malle's doubles, his repetitions, twins and split-personality anti-heroes, are manifestations of a struggle to repress or to accommodate a childhood trauma. Each of the second figures representing a shadowy projection of a memory that will not quite go away.

Alternatively, as Nicholas Royle suggests, when working with a reading of Jacques Derrida's interpretation of the uncanny, there is something about the creative process which is always intrinsically about a question of doubling (2003: 198). Royle asserts that in the act of writing there is always a duplication – the written 'I' in the text, and

the writer sitting at his or her table. I do not think it is a disservice to Royle's thesis to see an equivalent process at work with a literary filmmaker like Malle. With Malle, there is always the 'I' of the director, behind the camera or at the editing suite, and more often than not there is also the 'I' of the character in the autobiographical films, in this case Julien Quentin. Indeed, Malle is so often doubly present in his work: as director and projected central protagonist. Among the many *Doppelgänger*s to choose from there are Malle and Alain Leroy/Maurice Ronet (*Le Feu follet*); Malle and Georges Randal/Jean-Paul Belmondo (*Le Voleur*); Malle and Laurent/Benoît Ferreux (*Le Souffle au cœur*); and finally, to repeat, Malle and Julien Quentin/Gaspard Manesse (*Au revoir les enfants*).

Malle's repeated emphasis on Julien Quentin's scopic power, his fascination with, and objectification of, Bonnet, of course quickly raises a further key question. Astutely, Lynn Higgins asks whether Malle's obsession with watching and looking, the strong element of voyeurism in *Au revoir les enfants*, indirectly comments on Malle's adult career as a director. Higgins states: 'The figure of the fatal glance ensnares the profession of filmmaking as well, here the traumatic memory, "pictorialized" as a guilty glance, offers an insight into Malle's vocation as a filmmaker. Is the making of fictional images symptomatic of a repressed trauma that gets repeated and transformed as it inevitably returns?' (1992: 210). The implication of Malle's film, his recurrent emphasis on identity and looking, strongly implies that this is precisely the case. Moreover, the fact that much of Malle's oeuvre displays a similar fascination with the power of the look/camera, adds supporting evidence in favour of Higgins' contention. In fact, if one reviews Malle's films then anticipations of 'the look' later deployed more fully in *Au revoir les enfants* are everywhere. Malle's brief and repeated portrayals of a child witnessing a disturbing act look like a signature motif in many of his films. One might begin a survey with *Ascenseur pour l'échafaud*, where a little girl approaches the building in which the murderer is trapped in the lift. Likewise, Malle shows youngsters playing outside Alain's asylum in *Le Feu follet*. What do they accidentally witness as they look into the garden of the private clinic? There are many other comparable cases. However, the sharpest anticipation of the theme of the look offered in Mallean cinema is found in *Black Moon*. Its opening sequence offers a series of 'scenes of witness' where Lily sees the mayhem and

murder produced by the fantasy sex-war that haunts Malle's dream-film. In short, voyeurism and the objectifying power of the look, are emphasised throughout Malle's work, from *Ascenseur* to *Damage*.

Freud's work on the uncanny, to which I have already referred, also offers an alternative interpretation of the recurrent 'looks' in *Au revoir les enfants*. Here, Freud's discussion of 'the evil eye' (*der Böser Blick*) is relevant. He recalls that in folkloric superstition there are many examples of understanding looking as a way of bringing harm, giving the evil eye. This issue is clearly relevant to understanding Malle's filming of Quentin's visual interrogations of Bonnet. Freud explained the evil-eye phenomenon as follows: 'Whoever possesses something that is at once valuable and fragile is afraid of the other person's envy he would have felt in their place. A feeling like this is betrayed by a look even though it is not put into words' ([1919] 1985: 362). The analysis works well with *Au revoir les enfants*. Malle is potentially implying that Quentin's glances at Bonnet are a form of the evil-eye relationship. From this perspective they would represent the disturbing fact that Quentin knew that in Hitler's Europe, and Pétain and Laval's France, he held a terrible advantage over the Jew Bonnet. It is because Quentin cannot cope with the guilt that this power brings that he recurrently casts his glances at Bonnet. Thus, it is Quentin's fear of being envied that is relieved through the act of visual aggression. So, Bonnet is now placed not only at the mercy of his racial-political enemies (the Nazis/French fascists) but also in the hands/eyes of his shamed Gentile schoolfriend. And, if one agrees with the above interpretation, then one inevitably also senses that Malle's film completely understood the terrible psychological implications of living in Nazi Europe. This is an insight that goes well beyond the parameters of Malle's own retrospective assertion of his memory and guilt offered at the conclusion of *Au revoir les enfants*.

### **Adolescents, disasters and other failed escapes**

If *Au revoir les enfants* is taken as a complex attempt to reintegrate a historical trauma into the present, what does this perspective mean for our understanding of Malle's previous work? As I raised in the previous chapter of this book, films like *Atlantic City USA* work entirely around discussions of the difficulties of recovering from

traumatic events. Likewise there seems to be a more general propensity in Mallean films for repression, with each project rewriting the legacy of the previous film. To begin to offer a more developed answer to my question I want to analyse two different, earlier Malle films from the 1960s to assess whether they already point to repressions, allusions or screened recollections of January 1944. Let us concentrate on *Zazie dans le métro* and *Le Voleur*, one a well-known Malle film, the other a less popular work from his canon. These early films, both pre-May '68 pictures, are powerful examples of how Mallean cinema does quickly seem almost saturated with meanings that originate in the historical episode only later fully revealed in *Au revoir les enfants*. However, in pursuing this discussion I want also to show how this type of *post-facto* psychoanalytic explanation of Malle's career runs into difficulties. In short, paradoxically, the clarity that this type of psychoanalytic reading offers is ultimately reductive. It is too heavy an analytical device for a director who so prized ambiguity, multiple explanations and libertarianism.

Malle has regarded *Zazie dans le métro* as the beginning point in his journey to making *Au revoir les enfants*. Talking about the film to Philip French, he implied the connections: 'I suppose with *Zazie* I discovered what has possibly been a major theme in films like *Lacombe Lucien*, *Le Souffle au cœur*, *Au revoir les enfants*, and certainly *Pretty Baby* too – at the centre of the film is a child, an adolescent who is exposed to the hypocrisy and corruption of the world of grown-ups. Its very obvious to me now but I'm not sure I knew it at the time' (Malle and French 1993: 28). This statement highlights just the type of links a psychoanalytic reading of the work would exploit. A scan through the filmography provides numerous depictions of Mallean children and their damaged lives, their losses of innocence. In short, Malle's work displays an almost obsessive preoccupation with teenagers, their youth and corruption. On a certain level, much of Malle's work seems to anticipate *Au revoir les enfants*.

However, despite this thematic overlap, one must also show caution when pursuing the argument. If we acknowledge the intriguing overlaps between Malle's own traumatic youth and his later propensity to make films like *Zazie*, we must also be alert to the fact that Malle's choices were not only determined by such psychological factors. In the case of *Zazie dans le métro*, there were numerous reasons why Malle chose to film this story of a young girl's loss of

innocence, her ageing, that are completely unrelated to unconscious deliberations on January 1944. Malle was attracted to novelist Raymond Queneau's surrealist background, similarly, he saw the work as a way to be more experimental in his film-making. Malle's decision to adapt a recent hit novel was also a reasonable economic proposition. *Zazie* was a project that the still relatively young production company NEF could handle with some confidence. None of the above factors suggest a profound psychological process at work. What they do remind us of is the fact that one should not too quickly reread all of Malle's work in the light of the revelations of *Au revoir les enfants*.

Nonetheless, the final scenes from *Zazie dans le métro* point to a second recurrent trope in Mallean film that can be interpreted as an artistic attempt to grapple with a childhood trauma. As Zazie's Parisian vacation is ending, the family-run café-bar where she and her relatives are staying is suddenly disrupted by a bizarre black-shirted tyrant and his aggressive supporters. Zazie, the young teenager on her first trip to the capital city, witnesses the world literally falling apart before her very eyes. Innovatively, Malle's café set is smashed to pieces by the gang and beneath the 1960s chrome and mirrors a more traditional bar room, from a different era, is revealed. Zazie sits at her table as the mayhem ensues. The Paris of the present violently collapses into the Paris of the past. Notwithstanding the broadly comedic register of the work, it seems to me that this passage from *Zazie* relates to Malle's own experience. The filming of the scene, the proximity of its content to Malle's own experience of violent fascist disruption, form strong grounds to suggest that we are watching a tentative attempt to address a buried shame, to forget by turning tragedy into comedy.

Malle's camera was regularly attracted to societies or social groups that appear to be in collapse. Malle's quasi-fascist anti-heroes of *Ascenseur pour l'échafaud* and *Le Feu follet* are exemplary. They too represent an interest in an ideology that was in turmoil, if not complete collapse. Malle's choice to work on these figures, these defeated individuals without political hope in a post-war Europe, is indicative of a fascination with disruption and failure. Similarly, Malle's documentary work offers rich illustrations of the wider tendency. Malle's final remarks from the *L'Inde fantôme* series capture a similar emphasis on despair and violent rupture. The director explains:

In India we have been fascinated by another kind of existence – another kind of looking at things, for which we all feel a yearning – as if for some secret lost forever. Yet we feel all along that this traditional India was going to pass away to be crushed by civilisation ... The modern world brings with it the exploitation of man by his brother. (1968: Episode 7: *Bombay – the Future of India*)

The black-shirts shattering of the café in *Zazie*, the almost pathological recurrence of figures of failure, the above assessment of India, these examples are indicative of a man whose early life experiences drew him to such bleak subjects. So, generally speaking, it is safe to say that Malle did experience a sudden trauma (the Nazi raid) in his youth and he did choose to film comparable but different experiences across a wide range of different contexts and settings. On the other hand, as I have discussed in Chapter 1 of this book, one must also recall that a majority of Malle's filmic decisions can be seen to be more related to the cultural trends of their own day than to the experience of 1944; for instance, the similar attractions to pessimism and disaster found in the work of the Hussard novelist, Nimier or in F. Scott Fitzgerald's 'Babylon Revisited', a short story Malle evoked in *Le Feu follet*. It is therefore too simplistic to see Malle only as a director who was exclusively driven by his demons. Malle was surely just as shaped by the wider social environment: his family, his education, the success of the New Wave, the Hussard literary movement and the spirit of May '68 ... as he was working under the shadow of 1944.

The subject of *Le Voleur* is the compulsive thief, Georges Randal. Although no direct references are made to Malle's experience of the occupation, it is a relevant work to our discussion for several reasons. The plot and thematic ground of *Le Voleur* hinge around an account of a trauma and its long-term psychological consequences. At the beginning of the film Malle depicts Randal enjoying an idyllic childhood, he is a happy-go-lucky fellow who is passionately in love with his stepfather's daughter, Charlotte. Suddenly, Malle's narrative crushes this optimism. In a vertiginous passage, which gains in dramatic power by being telescoped into just a few minutes, we witness Randal returning home from national service. He discovers that Charlotte is engaged to be married to a different suitor and that his stepfather has squandered, or indirectly stolen his substantial inheritance. As a direct consequence of these disasters Malle shows how Randal is



thrown into a life of crime. Towards the conclusion of *Le Voleur*, Randal reflects on his lifestory:

Charlotte: Is it stronger than you? [stealing]

Randal: Stronger than anything. The first time, at Montareuil's house I didn't realise it ... but when I broke into that bureau and I saw the jewels glitter in the darkness ... I felt their weight in my hand. I had done that to vindicate myself against your father as an act of defiance. Suddenly I achieved happiness ... I felt alive ... I was fulfilled ... joy ... At night in an unknown house, while everything sleeps and I arrive ... and with that disembowelled thing ... it's as though I was born into the world.

Charlotte: And afterwards?

Randal: Afterwards? I feel ashamed ... I am nothing once more. I wait for the next time. (Malle, Carrière and Boulanger 1967 [printed and translated typescript, BFI collection]: 39)

Malle presents Randal's addiction to stealing as his psychological response to a childhood trauma: the moment when Randal's dream's were cruelly dashed by his stepfather. Obsessive re-enactments are the addictive driving force of Randal's life and self-identity. So, in filming *Le Voleur* Malle captures the emotions of an individual who is trapped in a perpetual struggle with a founding, but highly negative, experience, a kind of rebirth. Here, Randal's fictional life and Malle's historical experience seem to collide. The two men have experienced major turmoils in their youth: one plays them out through crime, the other through his life as a director, repeating the scopic scene of betrayal (guilt) with every look through the camera lens.

The narrative structure and visual composition of *Le Voleur* bring an additional dimension into play. *Le Voleur* begins with an extended burglary in which Randal starts to violate a bourgeois mansion. The manner in which Malle films the sequence is I think especially telling. Impressive sets of heavy dark furniture, and gold and black cabinets loom out of the night. In their midst Randal pursues his task with an unremitting violence, smashing anything that stands between him and his treasure/pleasure. The psychological depth of the action is underlined by Malle's use of lighting, with Randal often being surrounded by darkness, his white cuffs and collars gleaming out of the gloom. In fact, Malle's film portrays the burglary as a kind of passionate struggle to escape, to break out, rather than the empirically

more accurate aim of breaking in. Finally, Randal does escape, he leaves the building and casually strolls to a village railway station to return to Paris. However, the clear inference of these scenes is that Randal is anything but a free man. In the melancholy light of a cold winter dawn, similar in some ways to the colours used years later in *Au revoir les enfants*, it is plain to see that Randal will commit new burglaries. Time and again he will have to repeat his initial reaction to his stepfather's betrayal. Notably, the scene captures Malle's wider preoccupation with the idea of failed escapes. This thematic preference began right at the beginning of the career with *Ascenseur pour l'échafaud*, it is hinted at throughout *Le Feu follet* and only concludes with the doomed lovers that are the subject of *Damage*. With this type of repeated psycho-narrative on show in Malle's fiction it is tempting to interpret his work as a repeated dramatic struggle for freedom from guilt, freedom from trauma. This struggle is shown to be an impossible battle and by implication the childhood trauma becomes a dead-weight on the director's imagination.

One can reread Malle as a director whose work does strongly reflect a gradual working towards the completion of *Au revoir les enfants*. Malle's is a career in which one can discern the long shadow of 1944. However, as I have already also explained there are so many other cultural, social, artistic and political factors that cast light on Malle's films and that have little if any relationship to the psychological or traumatic. As Pierre Billard's biography frequently implies, Malle's decisions to choose a project to film were subject to numerous external factors: factors of production, the availability of actors and actresses, literary influence, and so on. Indeed, as I have shown there are numerous possible interpretations of Mallean film available today, and his films resist interpretation through a deliberate ambiguity. Furthermore, as Thomas Elsaesser wisely highlights in relation to this theoretical ground there is a further major complexity. If the trauma requires complete repression/forgetting then our only evidence for it would be silence and absence, a complete forgetting. Elsaesser explains the logic: 'If trauma is experienced through its forgetting, its repeated forgetting, then paradoxically, one of the signs of the presence of trauma is the absence of all signs of it' (2001: 199). Film – especially Mallean film – works on the basis of the opposite of this situation. Paradoxically, it reverberates with disturbed adolescents, social worlds at their breaking points and so many failed escapes.

Rereading the Philip French interviews it is clear that Malle favoured a trauma theory reinterpretation of his work. Here was a version of his life and work that he was most happy for the public to use. We need not dispute that point of view, it accurately illustrates Malle's own thinking of the late 1980s and early 1990s. However, we should also be aware that the pose does not provide a definitive response to the artist's work.

### ***Au revoir les enfants*: a political reinterpretation**

I want to return now to *Au revoir les enfants* and to offer a more politicised discussion, in so doing to demonstrate that there are other enriching ways of interpreting Malle's film. The work is a significant contribution to the portrayal of the Holocaust in French cinema. It also represents Malle's most persuasive libertarian confrontation with authority.

Notwithstanding the relative attractions of applying psychoanalytic theory to the work, or the theme of guilt, what does Malle have to say about the Holocaust in *Au revoir les enfants*? Saul Friedländer has suggested that most representations of Nazi genocide will work around a basic characterisation pattern based on the portrayal of persecutors, bystanders and victims (1988: 66–77). Malle's work conforms to Friedländer's basic character types but it also projects new and resonant meanings on to them. Clearly, Malle's work has its victims: Bonnet, Négus and Dupré. Similarly, Malle sharply defines the persecutors as the Nazis, notably the Gestapo officer, Müller, who leads the raid in the film. Likewise, the brutally anti-Semitic French militia men that Malle also presents in his film fall into the same category. However, the psychoanalytic vector through which Malle casts his surrogate, Quentin, disturbs and problematises the figure of the bystander. On the one hand, the introduction of Quentin's guilty looks, his final act of betrayal, positions this version of the bystander nearer to the role traditionally occupied by the persecutors in other Holocaust narratives. As Higgins correctly identified, in the final scenes of the film Quentin practically becomes a collaborator when he indirectly betrays Bonnet (1992: 207). Here, then, is a representation of the bystander that is relatively common in most liberal depictions of the Holocaust. It is the variant that presents the bystander as

complicit to the act of persecution. As Friedländer remarks of this variation: 'It is the representation most of us have of what has happened' (1988: 69). Similarly, as Friedländer also explains, variations on the rhetorical pattern are found across genres: 'the narrative implies global historical responsibility ... It has found manifold modes of expression, over the last forty years, in the news media, literature and film' (Friedländer 1988: 69).

However, Malle's bystander is also filmed from a different perspective. Notably, through the film's emphasis on Malle's framing memory of these events (I'll remember that morning') we see Quentin as another kind of child victim, and also a traumatised adult remembering a life-long guilt. Malle suggests that he/Quentin have lived under the memory of a tormented past, rather like a Holocaust survivor. With this emphasis Malle allows his autobiographical figuration of the bystander to slide very close to the category of victim. In his emphasis on the ambiguity of the bystander, Malle is creating an original discourse on the Holocaust. Now, it is important to be precise: the portrayal does not represent a version of the right-wing revisionism along the lines of the German pulp fiction (the novels of KONSALIK) that cast Nazi perpetrators as 'victims' of new 'Stalinist persecutors'. Instead, in Malle's problematising of the bystander the basic categories of persecutor and victim are left unchallenged. They are not Malle's central concern. What Malle is saying in this powerful film is that the role of the bystander implies not only complicity in the Holocaust. The very same position also encompasses the fear and terror of being a victim, the shared sense of guilt of surviving the disaster.

I suppose, given what we know about Malle's propensity for ambiguity, the above handling of the bystander is a predictable strategy. Nevertheless, unlike the oscillating portrayals of fascism or child prostitution found in *Lacombe Lucien* or *Pretty Baby* (that are discussed in Chapter 4), the ambiguous Mallean bystander achieves a level of poetic truth. Malle's representational strategy in *Au revoir les enfants* captures a genuine tension in the experience of bystanders. His film functions around the blurred boundaries of what it means to have witnessed, suffered, but not actually to have been the subject of genocidal persecution. This portrayal invites audiences to think beyond Nazis and Jews and to interrogate the role of everyone else living in Europe in that period of genocide. In this way Malle's film

charts new gradations and subtleties in the historical experience of the Holocaust.

Malle's interpretation of the bystander is also important because it inevitably comes closest to the position of contemporary cinema-goers who are too young to have experienced the Holocaust itself. Most viewers born after 1945 cannot literally share the space of persecutor (Nazi) or victims (Jew, resistant or other targeted minority group such as Roma Sinti, homosexuals or lesbians). Therefore, the temporal distance from the events of the Holocaust place many of us closer to the role of the bystander: Malle/Quentin. So post-Holocaust generations strangely resemble Malle's subject. Like Julien Quentin in his classroom we are unable to do anything to alter the course of European history in the 1940s. In that sense we resemble the powerless victim side of Malle's bystander. On the other hand, this paralysis is equally suggestive of the shared guilt of former persecutors. These interactions between Malle, *Au revoir les enfants*, and its late 1980s audience combine to make the film a unique representation of the 1940s.

Even the best readers of Malle – Golsan (2001), Higgins (1992) or Kedward (2000) – have overlooked the profound attack on authority that Malle pursued in *Au revoir les enfants*. While many previous Malle films critique bourgeois society, sexual hypocrisies or social inequities, it is arguably in *Au revoir les enfants* that the most subtle and controlled version of Malle's dignified anger with society is articulated. Importantly, in this film Malle presents two key speeches on the idea of duty and good behaviour. Malle's handling of these statements show a continued hatred for order, authority and the pain that these values bring.

Caught in the emotional drama of a first viewing of *Au revoir les enfants* it is easy to disregard the final words Malle attributes to the Nazi officer, Müller. While the children take part in the humiliating role call, a German soldier interrupts his superior to report that he has found three young women in the chapel. The soldier stands by them looking at his officer, Müller. Subsequently, one of the women cries out: 'On était venues se confesser' ('We came to confession'). Pompously, Müller states, to the women, to the schoolboys and also to the audience of the film: 'Ce soldat a fait son devoir. Il avait l'ordre de ne laisser sortir personne. La discipline est la force du soldat allemand. Ce qui vous manque, à vous Français, c'est la discipline.'

Nous ne sommes pas vos ennemis. Vous devez nous aider à débarrasser la France des étrangers, des juifs' (Malle 1987: 131).<sup>4</sup>

Malle's decision to include this speech and the scene that frames it is important. Certainly, it asserts the subtle historical comment that not only German Gestapo officers but also ordinary soldiers were part of the Holocaust (a point of some historical controversy in West Germany and Austria by the late 1980s). However, more significantly, in the context of the politics of Malle's wider filmography, the scene also offers a decisive confrontation with the value system that Malle's libertarian imagination detested: discipline, duty, order, authority. The implication Malle makes here is that the martial values that Müller praises – discipline, the unthinking respect for authority (for that is what following orders ultimately represents) – are the very qualities that underpin genocide. This is an unusually *unambiguous* rhetorical move on Malle's part. Nevertheless, it asserts a continuity in his work in that it clarifies his anti-authoritarianism of the 1970s by weaving it into his most decisive cinematic intervention.

Müller is not the only authority figure dissected by Malle in *Au revoir les enfants*. Indeed, Malle generally shows the Petit Collège des Carmes as a hierarchical institution in which Catholic morality is the controlling ideological force. Importantly, also towards the end of the film, but prior to the Nazi officer's speech, Malle allows Père Jean (based on Jacques) to pronounce a statement that summarises a second political and moral outlook. Jean presents a sermon and the words that he employs are radical. He proclaims: 'Mes enfants, nous vivons des temps de discorde et de haine. Le mensonge est tout puissant, les chrétiens s'entre-tuent, ceux qui devraient nous guider nous trahissent. Plus que jamais, nous devons nous garder de l'égoïsme et de l'indifférence' (Malle 1987: 86).<sup>5</sup> He continues by citing the classic parable of the rich man and the eye of the needle. However, the sermon is concluded with a very Mallean sounding assertion on the perils of judgement. Jean declares: 'Saint Paul nous dit dans l'Épître d'aujourd'hui: "Frères, ne vous prenez pas pour des

4 'That soldier is doing his duty. He had orders not to let anyone leave. Discipline is the strength of the German soldier. That's what you French lack: discipline. We are not your enemies. You have to help us rid France of foreigners, of Jews.'

5 'My children we are living in times of discord and hatred. The lie is all powerful; Christians are killing other Christians; those who should lead us, betray us. More than ever we have to guard against egoism and indifference.'

sages. Ne rendez à personne le mal pour le mal. Si ton ennemi a faim, donne-lui à manger. S'il a soif, donne-lui à boire." Nous allons prier pour ceux qui souffrent, ceux qui ont faim, ceux que l'on persécute. Nous allons prier pour les victimes, et aussi pour les bourreaux' (Malle 1987: 87–8).<sup>6</sup> Clearly, on one level of interpretation, here is a statement that Malle introduces to his film in order to agree with it broadly. Jean's sentiments correspond to Malle's own cinematic and moral preference to try to understand all experiences, to be careful not to judge or condemn too quickly. Similarly, Jean's speech functions as a symbolic counterpoint to the value system that is later presented though the words of the Nazi, Müller.

Significantly, Malle does not leave the meaning of the Priest's speech as an unproblematic lesson, a simple moral to live by. Instead, Malle shows that it is the same Priest's later breach of his values that incites the Nazi raid. Only minutes later in the film Joseph, a crippled teenager who works in the school kitchens, is found engaged in black-market dealing. The pupils found to be involved in the black market are left with only a minor punishment. Conversely, the Priests send the kitchen-hand Joseph away from the school. He is expelled from the community that he had been a part of. So, at precisely the moment in Malle's film when Jean is offered an opportunity to 'not return harm for harm' he fails to follow the lesson of Saint Paul that he had cited in his own oration. Joseph is wrongly punished, he is treated with egoism and indifference. Subsequently, Malle's narrative informs us that because of this decision Joseph finds solace in collaboration with the Nazi authorities. Indirectly, it is the failure of Père Jean to live up to his own worldview that precipitates the tragic conclusion to the film. I think what Malle is saying through Jean's speech, and the subsequent plot developments that follow from it, is that there is an intrinsic danger to any moral pronouncement, however worthy it might sound. The words of Père Jean's speech offer a value system that Malle supports. However, when tested in practice, Malle implies that the words of the speech are actually meaningless and deceptive froth. So for Malle even a moral code that he can sympathise with is

6 'Saint Paul tells us "Brethren, do not think you are all knowing. Do not return harm for harm. If your enemy is hungry, give him food. If he is thirsty, give him drink." We shall pray for those who are suffering, those who are hungry, those who are being persecuted. We shall pray for the victims and for their tormentors.'

inevitably tainted. Malle's film implies that a priest cannot instruct forgiveness any more than a uniformed Nazi can order discipline. Both are politically damaged in advance because of the speaking positions from which they emanate. In *Au revoir les enfants* we are shown the consequence of hierarchy and authority. The words of the Nazi officer lead to barbarity, the words of the priest to hypocrisy and tragedy. Both men and the sites of power they hold are utterly condemned.

Malle also uses *Au revoir les enfants* to underline two positive models of social learning and interaction. Once more abandoning his former preference for ambiguity and resolute avoidance of political judgement, Malle's film implies that art is perhaps the only road to happiness and social freedom. Thus, Malle cleverly shows cinema and jazz music as providing ways of creating friendships that are not based on authority or elitism. There are two touching and relevant scenes from the film where Malle outlines these possibilities. First, there is the role played by the cinema in *Au revoir les enfants*. To make his point Malle introduces a 'film within his film'. A little improbably, the priests organise a showing of Charlie Chaplin's *The Immigrant*. The whole school is gathered to watch the film and in front of the flickering images of Chaplin they look more like a strong and rounded community than at any other time. In a period of genocidal warfare a passage of respite has been found through the cinema. Malle's handling of the scene implies a kind of new-found social egalitarianism. The children, Gentiles and Jews, the monks, and Joseph (the future victim of Catholic hypocrisy), are presented by Malle as a united group.

Malle later implies that jazz music can bring a similar moment of relief and social freedom. Thus, Malle films Quentin and Bonnet together by the school piano. An air raid siren screams out but the boys stay together. Bonnet, who is the better pianist, kindly teaches Quentin a series of simple notes. Next, Malle portrays the two boys playing an impromptu two-handed boogie-woogie number together. Their combined efforts produce an exuberant tune. Now, Malle's dominant representational handling of the relationship, the voyeuristic looking from Quentin to Bonnet, is briefly abandoned in favour of a far more egalitarian perspective. Standing side by side the boys laugh and play together. Malle suggests that all racial boundaries are now temporarily broken down, and perhaps also that the two sides of this 'double' are united in a single aural experience. To emphasise the



point, it is only following this scene that Malle indicates that Julien and Bonnet's conversations have become relaxed and terrifyingly honest. Malle portrays Julien trying to understand humanely Bonnet's terrible plight. Calmly, Quentin asks: 'tu as peur' and Bonnet replies: 'Tout le temps' ('Are you afraid?'; 'All the time') (Malle 1987: 115).

In *Au revoir les enfants* cinema and jazz offer transcendence and hope. More importantly Malle shows these art forms as not being dependent on any kind of system of authority, power or moral regulation. *Au revoir les enfants* contains one of Malle's clearest and most attractive political excursions. Life has choices and in this work Malle suggests that authority leads to corrupt, if not evil, actions. By way of contrast, the life of the community and Quentin and Bonnet are shown to be far better served by the popular arts of cinema and jazz. The implicit comparison Malle pursues represents a refreshing and different kind of Mallean politics to that found in his films from the 1950s or 1970s. With the lightest of touches a critique of power is offered. Similarly, a loose, perhaps utopian, alternative socio-political position is sketched out by way of the glorification of the arts. It is unusual to witness Malle offering a positive quasi-political assertion such as this. It is less surprising that when such a discourse is presented that it should valorise cinema itself.

## Conclusion

Malle's cinema quickly lends itself to psychoanalytic interpretation. Despite some of the reservations I have expressed, Lynn Higgins' application of the idea of the primal scene/trauma theory to *Au revoir les enfants* is a fruitful line of enquiry. Numerous Louis Malle films evoke the events of January 1944 and thus also anticipate *Au revoir les enfants*.

It is tempting and plausible to present Malle as a director haunted by history, his childhood trauma played out throughout his career. This version of Mallean cinema was what Malle was most happy with in public discussions of his work at the end of his life. Malle was clearly happy with the idea that *Au revoir les enfants* resolved a trauma, that it revealed a repressed episode, and offered unified thematic ground through which to look back on his life and films. The interpretation functions as a kind of negative foundation myth explaining

everything from *Ascenseur pour l'échafaud* to *Damage*. The interpretation also has its functional side, providing Mallean cinema with a defining leitmotif that was very much in tune with the commemorative mood of the later 1980s, the bicentenary of the revolution, the fortieth and fiftieth commemorations of the Second World War. However, to borrow from Thomas Elsaesser's recent theorising on trauma and film we must also recall that this is ultimately just one interpretative mode based on the discovery of referentiality across Malle's films (2001: 201). Like most interpretations then it is subject to its own ambiguities, weaknesses and concealments. While films like *Zazie dans le métro* or *Le Voleur* seem to exemplify a cinema of trauma and repression, so much of Malle's work also falls outside the terms of this perspective that it becomes reductive to force Malle in to a single psychologically driven mode of interpretation.

Thinking about Louis Malle in the light of Freud's notion of the uncanny is a different critical opportunity to the trauma-repression approach to his work. Malle's treatments of 'the double' or the 'evil eye', bring new insights to *Au revoir les enfants* and Malle's wider work. This is a second look at the director's work that deserves greater attention. Indeed, one gains much through reference to the question of the 'double' when returning to Malle's rhetoric of ambiguity, for it too hinges on uncanny duplications and repetitions.

Finally, there is a powerful political subtext at work in *Au revoir les enfants* which makes the film a far more important contribution to cinema than has been sometimes surmised by other critics of Malle. *Au revoir les enfants* reminds us of the dynamics and consequences of social authority and political power. In counterpoint, Malle also explores how film and music provide ways of communicating, community-building and enhancing social experience. In our own times of academic, intellectual and political conformity, every opportunity to reassert a political reading of *Au revoir les enfants* is surely at a premium.

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