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Source: *Cinéaste*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (1991), pp. 12-17

Published by: Cineaste Publishers, Inc.

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41687809>

Accessed: 19-05-2020 10:51 UTC

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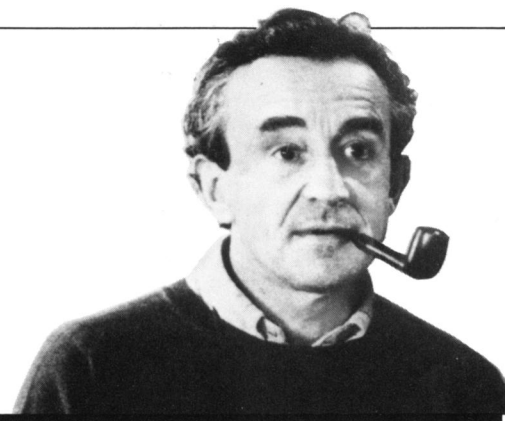
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# My Discussion With Louis

AN INTERVIEW WITH LOUIS MALLE

by George Hickenlooper



Unlike most of his colleagues in the generation of French New Wave filmmakers, Louis Malle has become a transatlantic director, making critically acclaimed films both in France and the U.S. over a nearly forty year period. While Malle's films have over the years won their share of Golden Palms and Golden Lions and other major European awards, they have also frequently been honored in Hollywood by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. Three years ago, his *Au revoir les enfants*—Malle's autobiographical account of his childhood friendship in WWII France with a Jewish boy being hidden from the Gestapo at a Catholic boys' school—was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Foreign Film. In 1982, *Atlantic City* was nominated for five Academy Awards. And Malle actually received an Academy Award as early as 1956, at the age of 23, when *Le Monde du Silence* (*The Silent World*), received the Oscar for Best Documentary, an honor he shared with his codirector, Jacques-Yves Cousteau, who had discovered Malle studying in Paris at l'Institut des Hautes Etudes Cinematographique. Malle was studying cinematography there after majoring in political science at the Sorbonne, which had been preceded by an austere Catholic education at the Jesuit school in Fontainebleau. Born into one of France's wealthiest industrial families, Malle says, laughing, "I knew that fate would somehow bring me into the cinema."

After his auspicious debut with *The Silent World*, Malle's later landlocked assignments included a brief apprenticeship with Robert Bresson (on *A Man Escaped*) before his directorial debut, at the age of 25, with *Ascenseur pour l'échafaud* (*Elevator to the Gallows*) in 1957. *Les Amants* (*The Lovers*, 1958) stirred controversy because of its uninhibited exploration of human sexuality; the visual tour-de-force *Zazie dans le Métro* (1960; see review in "Homevideo" this issue) marked a radical change of pace; while *Le Feu follet* (*The Fire Within*, 1963) was praised for its compelling portrayal of the last days of a suicidal alcoholic. In those early years of the French New Wave, Malle didn't achieve the same celebrity status as Truffaut, Godard, or Resnais, but his films were praised for their poignant and often explicit look at human relationships and established his reputation as a versatile director.

After subsequent efforts such as *Viva Maria!* (1965, starring Jeanne Moreau and Brigitte Bardot) and *Le Voleur* (*The Thief of Paris*, 1966) with Jean-Paul Belmondo, Malle returned to documentary filmmaking in 1967 with two very powerful portraits of poverty in India—*Calcutta* (1969) and *Phantom India* (1972). In the early Seventies he produced several of his most accomplished French films, including *Le Souffle au coeur* (*Murmur of the Heart*, 1971) and *Lacombe, Lucien* (1974), a provocative character study of a young French collaborator with the Gestapo.

In 1977, Malle moved to the U.S. where he worked in opera and theater and directed his first American film, *Pretty Baby*, starring Susan Sarandon and Brooke Shields as mother and daughter in a New Orleans brothel, followed by the critically acclaimed *Atlantic City* and two insightful documentary portraits of America's heartland, *God's Country* (1985) and *And the Pursuit of Happiness* (1986). When Malle's work conformed to no particular genre, he made one up, such as his surprise hit, *My Dinner With Andre* (1981), a feature-length dinner table conversation between theatre director Andre Gregory and playwright Wallace Shawn.

Although Malle has found success on both sides of the Atlantic, when we meet for this interview, he explains how strange he feels to be back in Los Angeles. This time, however, it is not business, but a personal visit to see his wife, actress Candice Bergen, who is starring in a hit TV show, *Murphy Brown*. "Paris, New York, Los Angeles," he sighs, "long distance marriages are very difficult." Just then, Malle breaks into a smile as he reaches into his satchel and pulls out an old black and white photo of a younger version of himself (bearded) with Jean-Luc Godard and Francois Truffaut. "This was at Cannes in 1968," he says, "shortly after the Cinematheque incident and the general strikes." The photo shows Malle and Truffaut sitting in folding chairs, nonchalantly looking up at the ceiling, while Godard, gesticulating wildly, shouts into their ears. "It was a very crazy time," he says, chuckling. It is then that Malle explains that his latest film is an indirect portrait of that turbulent period in French history.

**Cineaste:** How autobiographical is *May Fools*?

**Louis Malle:** It's certainly not as autobiographical as *Au revoir les enfants*, but it's still inspired by family and childhood memories. *May Fools* is not really about the May '68 events in Paris because it takes place in a house in the country in a very remote part of France. The matriarch of the family has just died and, when the various family members arrive for the funeral, they find themselves stuck in the family home where they all have a lot of childhood memories. So what's then going on in Paris is like a distant echo for them. In fact, they only hear of the events in Paris on the radio.

For two weeks, while the country was on strike, there was no electricity, no mail, and no public transportation of any kind. In those remote parts of France, the telephone was still manually operated, you had to go through a switchboard in a neighboring town, so there was no telephone service either. In that sense, *May Fools* is about the end of an era. It's not that 1968 was by itself a turning point. During the Sixties, cities like Paris were already into a completely new approach, almost like a new culture, but in the outer provinces of France you could still



Three Jewish students and Father Jean are led away by a German soldier in *Au revoir les enfants*

find people living the way their grandparents had lived in the nineteenth century. That very traditional way of life was all turned around in the Seventies.

In many ways, the film is also really about my life during that period. Shortly before the May '68 strikes, I had been making a documentary in India. I had been there for a long time and coming back to Paris was very disorienting. Suddenly, everything just exploded in Paris, at the university, and at the Cinematheque with the Langlois affair. The utopian experience of May '68 was not so much about ideology or politics but rather about a different way of looking at things. It didn't go very far, of course, and it wasn't long before people took their holidays and everything was back to the way it was before. But there was a sort of dream that lasted for about six weeks.

**Cineaste:** *The mother's funeral appears to function as a metaphor for the end of an era. Do you consciously try to incorporate such metaphors for their narrative resonance, or do you prefer to leave that to the critics?*

**Malle:** Oh, I definitely prefer to leave that to the critics—sometimes they find them, but sometimes they find something else. These kinds of ideas don't usually occur to you in advance—and I think they're dangerous if they do—but sometimes they're brought to your attention by someone who reads the script. Most of the time my themes are visualized. For *May Fools* I dreamed for months about a house I knew many years ago and I saw a series of images of people stuck there and cut off from the rest of the world.

**Cineaste:** *Childhood memories also provided the basis for *Au revoir les enfants*.*

**Malle:** You know, it's interesting that a lot of filmmakers—the best known example, of course, is Truffaut—based their first films on childhood or adolescent memories. But in recent years a number of major filmmakers have made films about their childhoods rather late in their careers—

Ingmar Bergman's *Fanny and Alexander*, Woody Allen's *Radio Days*, John Boorman's *Hope and Glory*, and a few others. I was discussing this with Boorman and he said he'd been thinking about doing that film for years but it was only recently that he remembered exactly the way he felt as a child.

I've always wanted to deal with the story behind *Au revoir les enfants*. In my case, it's a story that's particularly traumatic and I really wanted at some point to pass it on. For some strange reason I almost felt like I should buy more time, that I should really wait and save it. Then at a certain point my memories came back with a vengeance. While I was shooting *Alamo Bay* in those little towns on the Texas coast, where you're really far away in a different world, my memories came flooding back and they became obsessive. That's when I really started to think of a structure for *Au revoir les enfants*. In the little spare time I had, on Sundays, I would try to put together some ideas for the screenplay.

I carried those memories for many years without being sure I could get a screenplay out of them. I didn't know how to approach them. But at a certain point it seems natural, it's almost a Proustian way of dealing with memory by allowing things to open up. Suddenly little remembrances float to the surface from the deep, they sort of appear on the surface of your conscience, and you realize it is material you can use, whereas before you felt uncomfortable dealing with it. I repressed a lot of my childhood memories, including the story of Bonnet in 1944, for many years, until I was past thirty. I didn't want to deal with it. I didn't even talk to anyone about it.

**Cineaste:** *Do you think French viewers are more willing now than they have been in the past to accept films about French collaboration during WWII?*

**Malle:** Yes. I don't think *Au revoir les enfants* offended the French the way *Lacombe, Lucien* did. *Lacombe,*





Wallace Shawn (left) and Andre Gregory in *My Dinner With Andre*

Lucien was a fairly negative view about France during that period whereas *Au revoir les enfants* is just my own memory of the time. There was a sort of split between people like those priests behaving heroically and those who succumbed to the Nazis and turned in their friends. A lot of ugly things happened under the Vichy government which was overzealous about obeying German orders to track down Jews. But several thousand Jewish children were hidden and saved. There are children of my generation, for example, working in the film industry in France today, who were hidden in schools and elsewhere and who were saved. Very often their parents were taken away and killed.

**Cineaste:** Was making the film cathartic for you?

**Malle:** I felt immense relief because suddenly I was working in my own past, on my own ground, in my own language. It was a lot easier. I felt like I was in control one hundred percent, whereas in Hollywood I was at best eighty percent in control.

As you get older, memory becomes almost omnipresent. That's why I'm so happy living in Paris these days because that's where all my memories are. I can turn a corner while walking and something comes back to me which took place in 1964. I remember the corner and somebody who lived in an apartment near there. I'll walk some more and on the next block I'll see a café where I remember something else from my past. It's sort of the geography of memory because I spent most of my adolescent and adult life in Paris, and it's like walking into my past. That's why lately I've enjoyed making films that deal with my memories.

**Cineaste:** As a director, it must also be easier for you to work from your own script rather than the words and ideas of someone else.

**Malle:** It's a lot easier because I don't have any problems in changing the dialog. Or if someone else comes up with

a better line, I'm delighted. That's the main reason I prefer to write my own screenplays. I learned from working in Hollywood that I don't want to write in English because I'm not good enough. When it's your own script, with your own dialog, in your own language, I always think—being a director more than a writer—of how I'm going to shoot it. Compared to my American films, making *Au revoir les enfants* was like shooting a documentary in the sense that it's my own material.

In the case of someone else's screenplay, even if I'm involved from the very beginning and work very closely on it right up to the production date, trying to adjust to the way I want to shoot it, you usually don't find out until you're on the set that a scene doesn't work for you. Then you're in trouble, because you either have to fix it by having the writer on the set or you have to do it by yourself with the actors. Neither is very good because it's done sort of hastily and sometimes you don't have the distance. When I work from my own screenplay, it's easy for me to adjust and to make changes because I know it so well.

In *Au revoir les enfants*, as opposed to some films I shot in English, I almost never had to say, "Wait, there's something wrong with this scene!" I think it happened only once in a scene that was eventually cut. I find the location months before we start shooting, and the shooting script is always adapted to the location, so I can make all the changes needed to make it flow more naturally. The simple problem of being in the middle of a scene and thinking, "This doesn't work"—which any director who is candid will admit happens in every movie—wasn't a problem for me in *Au revoir les enfants*.

**Cineaste:** Did you have a lot of rehearsals with the children, who were all nonprofessional actors?

**Malle:** Once we had the cast set, about a month before shooting, we started to meet regularly to read the script, discuss the scenes, and allow them to get used to each

**"F**ilm is a very manipulative medium. It is so easy to manipulate audiences with music, with a close-up, or with editing. It's a Pavlovian medium in the sense that you can almost mathematically get any reaction you want. I try to avoid that kind of cheap manipulation and try to impress the audience on a higher level, not to force them but trust them to make their own choices. **"**

other. Then we rehearsed five days in the key location, which was the classroom with all the children, and then we did some more rehearsals in the courtyard and got them used to the camera. We acted as if we were shooting, except I was watching them. The cameraman was watching them. They were watching us. We were sort of getting used to each other, and they were getting used to the strange process of filmmaking.

It was very slow, very repetitious, and, frankly, for children, very boring. It's even boring for adults, so the big problem when you work with children is to keep them interested or amused in order to keep up their stamina. Usually what happens is that they're great in the morning, after lunch they give you one or two hours, and then they collapse, which is perfectly normal because filmmaking takes so much concentration that it's unusually demanding for children.

**Cineaste:** Did you schedule the more demanding scenes in the early stages of the production?

**Malle:** That's not always possible. In *Au revoir les enfants* the most important scene is when the Gestapo officer comes into the classroom and Julien seems to betray his friend by a look. That was shot during the first week because we had to deal with that particular classroom during the first week of shooting. That was fine with me because we'd rehearsed, but I find that you're better off doing your most difficult scenes right in the middle because that's when they're really at their peak. Also, by the end sometimes they have become actors. They tend to know too much, they get used to the camera and they start becoming too precocious. It's best when everybody, especially children, has a pretty loose relationship with you, but at the same time really stay concentrated. At the end it's much more difficult because they're too familiar with the crew and it starts becoming like a game. The last week of shooting was a nightmare for me because there were all those ongoing, inside jokes and it was very difficult keeping it together.

**Cineaste:** You've explained that stylistically you tried to achieve an objective approach because you were afraid of the film becoming too sentimental.

**Malle:** I was terrified of that because the story was so easy to play sentimental. I had to almost fight myself. I don't think my films are sentimental, but, in this case, because it was so close to me, I really had to hold back.

**Cineaste:** Is that why you waited thirty years to make the film?

**Malle:** That had to do with the choice of the film's voice. You know, I could have picked children with a lot more sweetness and charm, and I had to be careful during the shooting and the editing. Film is a very manipulative medium, as we know well, especially in this town. It is so easy, if you know a little bit about this medium, to manipulate audiences with music, with a close-up, or with editing by two more seconds on a close-up. It's a Pavlovian medium in the sense that you can almost mathe-

matically get any reaction you want. I try to avoid that kind of cheap manipulation and try to impress the audience on a higher level, not to force them but trust them to make their own choices.

I think the strength of *Au revoir les enfants* came from its being so restrained. That's why everyone seems to find the ending so devastating, because it's all been very restrained, but it's also been building up, and it all comes out as we reach the moment when Bonnet is taken away and Julien knows he's never going to see him again. There's a moment there which is pure emotion and it's stayed with me for more than forty years. I wanted things to slowly mount to that moment, and to stay away from anything before then that would allow people to let go with their emotions.

**Cineaste:** Do you think the success of a performance derives from the casting?

**Malle:** Yes, it often happens that way. *Au revoir les enfants* was the best casting I've had as a group, because we did it very carefully and most of them were not professional actors. Even half of the adults in the film were not professional actors.

I've worked with wonderful actors many times, and I've often written parts for certain actors, like Michel Piccoli, who I like to work with, but as a director my greatest experience of watching someone work in front of a camera was with the 17-year-old boy in *Lacombe, Lucien*. Before the film, he had worked in the woods as a woodcutter and had never seen a movie in his life. He didn't know anything about the medium and was really sort of a creature from the wild. But he came up with the most interesting performance I have ever seen. He was very close to the character I had written but he also brought a lot to the character which I was incapable of conceiving, and I kept being amazed by that.

**Cineaste:** Do you think it was his lack of experience that added an extra dimension?

**Malle:** I wouldn't even say lack of experience because that was overcome in three days. He knew his marks so well. We had some very complicated shots where he had to take six to seven different marks. He would sort of rehearse it and his feet would come naturally into position. He had an extraordinary sense of rhythm, and film acting is a lot about rhythm. He acquired the technique of film acting in just three days. What no actor could have given me was his personal experience, his intimate knowledge of the character, because he had the same background as the character. He was wild, he had family problems, he had been socially humiliated, he had a really tough childhood, so he intimately knew this character. He was not only playing the part, he was also a technical consultant for the part, and helping to conceive the character. That doesn't happen very often.

**Cineaste:** Is working with actors easier than working with nonprofessionals?

**Malle:** It's very different, and how to handle actors is



Pierre Blaise as Lacombe, Lucien

something you have to learn. My biggest problem at the beginning of my filmmaking career was with handling actors. After working with Cousteau for four years, I directed my first feature film. Technically I could deal with any problem and I knew enough to discuss them with the sound man, the editor, and the cameraman. When I was working for Cousteau, I was practically a one-man crew. At the age of 23 or 24, I had a real technical knowledge of my craft, but I knew very little about actors. I remember my terror, during the first two or three features I did, in dealing with actors, because at that point I was really only experienced in directing fishes! [laughs]

It's not always easy working with actors because you often have to deal with their egomania or their insecurity. You sometimes have situations where you have to direct three actors in a scene and each of them has to be directed differently because their personalities are different, sometimes almost opposite. Some actors you have to make nervous because they're too confident. You have to terrorize other actors because that's what they need most. Most actors need to be fathered and sort of patted on the back and helped. You have to hold them to the camera.

**Cineaste:** Is that more true in America?

**Malle:** I think it's true everywhere. My problem with American actors is The Method. Not so much the ones who actually worked with Lee Strasberg, but all the actors who have this sort of inferiority complex and try to use The Method without really knowing too much about it. They're building the 'character arc' and they're using this—what do they call it?—'sense memory,' which sometimes borders on the ridiculous and can actually be counterproductive.

In the case of *My Dinner With Andre*, I was constantly having to loop the loop because the film was more or less about Andre and Wally themselves. The whole thing started from a series of encounters between them after having not seen each other for several years. They had done theater together before and then they went their own ways. Andre began travelling and Wally stayed in

New York and started having his plays produced. When Andre returned, they decided to work together again. Originally they wanted to do something on stage from their conversations, so they began taping them. I think they had twenty-five hours of tape. Wally worked on them for two years and came up with a screenplay about these two characters who were Andre and Wally, but not quite Andre and Wally, somehow transposed. Andre and Wally were set to play these characters, but not quite as themselves. I read the script and I said, "Yes, I'll do it." I thought it was interesting and really challenging. I knew both of them quite well at the time. Wally even had a small part in *Atlantic City*. When we had our first meeting, I said, "You know, it doesn't have to be you playing those parts." I said we could conceive of Robert Redford and Dustin Hoffman.

**Cineaste:** What did they say to that?

**Malle:** They were shocked. You see, from the beginning, I wanted to make clear to them that they would have to approach acting the parts, and not just say, "It's me, I'm just playing myself." I wanted them to become professional actors being asked to play a part. It became very confusing and it took a long time to sort of get the necessary distance. I realized very quickly that I needed to keep breaking this confusion between the character and the actor or I was not going to make any progress. I would be stuck in this messy confusion about who they are, and I really needed for them to have this distance so they could look clearly at their characters and their weaknesses.

I wanted Andre to be almost completely ridiculous in the first twenty minutes. I think that was my input into the screenplay. I knew that if this film was going to work, we must get laughs or we will be buried. The first time I read it, I laughed a number of times, but of course they took it very seriously, especially Andre. Wally was much more into the humor of Andre's sometimes being so solemn. I got Andre to understand that his character had to be pompous and then open up. I needed that distance because otherwise the film would have been neither documentary nor fiction, but a mess.

**Cineaste:** What is your approach to editing?

**Malle:** I have always been tremendously interested in editing. It is a tool that gives you immense possibilities. Speaking as a documentary filmmaker, editing is always about 'after.' You don't write a screenplay for a documentary, you just go out there and shoot it. It's all improvised and then the cutting room becomes purgatory because you spend months trying to put it together. It's not so much trying to make sense of it, because there is no sense. The way you've shot it has a meaning. You just have to find it, order it, and clarify it. It takes forever because you now have to do all the homework you didn't do before. I've spent a lot of time in cutting rooms. I spent almost a whole year in a cutting room when I made my India documentaries.

I believe editing should not show. You spend a long time and you find out it's a question of two frames, more or less, of matching cuts, and that can take forever, but it's not meant to show. On *Au revoir les enfants*, I kept telling my editors, "If you ever win an award for editing, I won't work with you anymore. That means your editing shows."

I had a terrible time editing *My Dinner With Andre* because Andre and Wally, as good as they are, are not professional actors. Andre had the longest speaking part in the history of the cinema. I don't think anyone's ever had so many lines to say in a movie. There were ups and downs in there, we had many takes, and I used a lot of reaction shots, especially in the first half hour. My big worry about the first half hour was people leaving the theater because it includes this endless monologue of An-



dre's which is very important. I wanted to keep a distance from what Andre was saying and the perfect way to do it was to use Wally's reaction shots, which were great. They would get a laugh, and give us the distance from this very pompous aspect of Andre's character before he mellows and becomes a little different.

I think we succeeded in a way that is almost unnoticed by the audience because when people watch *My Dinner With Andre* they think they see a continuum but they don't really. It's a heavily edited film. You have no idea how many cuts there are. It's basically two angles, except that sometimes it's here, sometimes it's there. It varies only minimally. *My Dinner With Andre* may appear to be a very simple approach — just putting a camera on one person and another camera on the other and then rolling the cameras when they start talking — when actually it was all very studied, very rehearsed. The whole point was to give the sense that it was completely improvised, almost like *cinéma-vérité*, and a lot of that came from the editing.

**Cineaste:** Creatively, are you more restricted working in the U.S. than in France?

**Malle:** I don't think it has anything to do with the system or the economy. It has to do with the fact that I'm more comfortable working in my own language.

**Cineaste:** Do the studios ever prevail on you to make changes?

**Malle:** Not really. I have made all my American films in complete freedom. I don't blame the system for being oppressive or destructive, I just blame myself for not being comfortable with the system and for not being able to adjust. When I was shooting *Crackers* there were 110 people on the crew and I didn't know what to do with them. I just don't understand Hollywood stages. I like to work with the minimum number of people. I'm not saying you can eliminate key jobs on the set, but there's nothing more pleasurable for me than to go out with my documentary crew, just myself and two other people.

**Cineaste:** Do you ever see yourself coming back to Hollywood to work?

**Malle:** If I did it would only be to make a documentary about Hollywood. It's funny, you know, because I've made a film about Calcutta, which is a city of physical and economic despair. And I've often thought of making a film about Los Angeles, another city of despair—obviously not economic or material despair, but rather a spiritual and ethical despair which stems from lifestyles saturated by popular culture. Los Angeles has its own mini-culture that has grown to serve as the rhetoric for the rest of the industrial world.

American popular culture really comes from here. A little bit comes from New York, on a subtler, more sophisticated level, but the real popular culture—movies, television, commercials, music—comes from Los Angeles. Not only popular culture, but a whole way of life—this obsession with health, for example—all that stuff comes from here. I think people in this town are mutants. They're a different species.

So I might like to come back to make this documentary, but working in fiction here is totally uninteresting to me because you fall into all the traps. I did it once on *Crackers* and I'll never go that route again! I made all the mistakes, one by one, just like in a catalog. I suppose everybody has to do it once. Everyone was very nice—a nice writer, a nice producer, a nice studio, wonderful actors. That's what kept me from quitting actually. I had a great group of actors—Donald Sutherland, Sean Penn, Jack Warden. They were a nice cast. What I'm saying is that it doesn't make very much sense for me to become another Hollywood director. ■



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