

"Creating a Reality that Doesn't Exist": An Interview with Louis Malle

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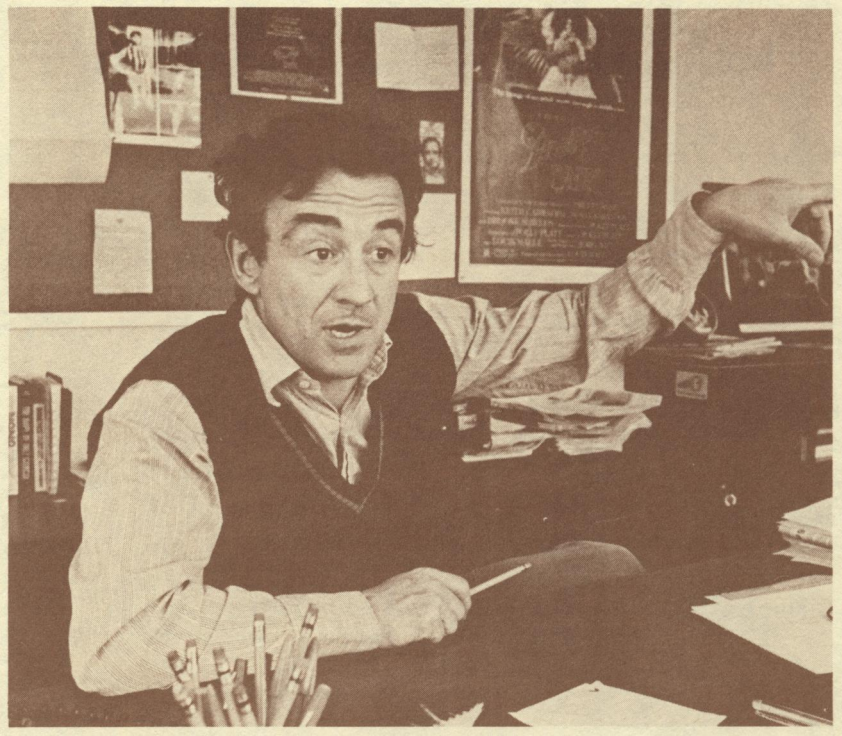
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“Creating a Reality that Doesn’t Exist”: An Interview with Louis Malle

Louis Malle’s *Pretty Baby*, the story of a twelve-year-old prostitute and a withdrawn French photographer in a New Orleans whorehouse in 1917, is the latest film in a distinguished and varied career that began in 1956 when the then very young French director worked with Jacques Cousteau to make *The Silent World*. His films since then include *Ascenseur pour l’échafaud* (*Frantic*, 1957), *The Lovers* (1958), *Zazie dans le Metro* (1960), *Vie privée* (*A Very Private Affair*, 1961), *Le Feu follet* (*The Fire Within*, 1963), *Viva Maria* (1965), *Le Voleur* (*The Thief of Paris*, 1966), *Phantom India* (1967-documentary), *Calcutta* (1969, documentary), *Murmur of the Heart* (1971), *Humain trop humain* (1973, documentary), *Lacombe, Lucien* (1974), *Black Moon* (1975).

The interview took place in Mr. Malle’s office in the Paramount Pictures offices in New York, on April 23rd, 1978. The interviewer was Andrew Horton, Assistant Professor of English at the University of New Orleans, and the photographs of Mr. Malle are by Peter Britton, a freelance writer-photographer based in New York.

HORTON: A number of your films focus on youth: *Zazie dans le Metro*, *Le Souffle au coeur*, *Lacombe*, *Lucien*, *Black Moon*, *Pretty Baby*. Why?

MALLE: I don't know really. Maybe I should do something else now. It's getting a bit obsessive! I'm not doing it on purpose. It is true, however. And even *Black Moon* was a sort of a variation on the theme of the rites of passage. You could even say this about some of my earlier films in the sixties, such as *Le Feu follet* which finally is about a man who commits suicide because he refuses to become an adult.

Probably I was terribly impressed myself at that age with the difficulties and trauma of entering the world of adults. This is sort of the moment of truth. It is *the* one of a lifetime. And I see a lot of children at that age have a moment of total lucidity.



Susan Sarandon and Brooke Shields in Louis Malle's *Pretty Baby* (Courtesy Paramount Pictures.)

But the moment you become part of this world of adults, you are just one of them. You start cheating and lying: there is a vast difference between what we say and what we do. All of this compromise. *Lacombe, Lucien* was very obviously about such corruption.

HORTON: In *Lacombe, Lucien* we see a progression in the young peasant boy's corruption as he moves from killing birds, chickens, and rabbits to killing people as a Nazi collaborator. But in *Pretty Baby*, Violet seems to already be *there*: as one reviewer put it, she has no innocence to lose. Is this correct?

MALLE: I'm not sure about that because innocence is not so easy to explain. One of the things that impressed me about the Al Rose book, *Storeyville*, was that in an interview a woman said that when she was five years old she knew everything there was to know. This is terrifying, but still I don't really believe that innocence is just the lack of information. Violet is a part of the world around her but she is still very much a child. What makes the character so interesting is that she is graduating into corruption at a very early age, but at the same time I have a strong suspicion that she has managed to save a lot of values of what it is to be a child.

It seems the more I get into the things I really care about, and the theme of *Pretty Baby* I really cared about doing for a long time, the more there are contradictions and unanswered questions. But the reason I got interested in the whole situation is because I don't have the answers.

And I certainly don't believe that it is by making a picture that you find answers. The first time I felt very concerned about something, and I felt that the only way to cope with it was to make it into a movie, was when I made *Le Feu follet*. I was worried about the question of suicide since the story more or less happened to a friend of mine. I was very emotional about it and the picture, once it was shot and shown, was more sentimental than the films I make today. It looks like I have been cleaning up my act a little bit concerning this!

But I didn't find the "answers" with *Le Feu follet*. I remember that I did not want it to open because it was a little too personal. There were a lot of very confusing things about the film. And I also made those documentaries of India which were something like seven hours long to prove that I did not understand anything about India!

HORTON: You seem to emphasize, as witnessed by your documentaries for Cousteau and about India, a "documentary" approach to your subjects, yet the result is to uncover the unusual or "fictional." Could you comment on the relationship between documentary and fiction in your work?

MALLE: I don't mean to say that documentary and fiction are the same, but as I have found out more about both aspects of filmmaking I have realized you could, for instance, speak about the fictional aspects of documentary. And I believe strongly that documentary filmmakers who pretend to be objective are just dishonest. It's absolute bullshit. You're much more subjective and personal in documentaries because you are supposedly just filming what you see that you didn't create. But obviously the way you film shapes what you get.

There is more said, for instance, in *Pretty Baby* in the way the picture is filmed than in its content or in the script. Because I think what is disturbing to many people about the film is—and I don't mean to say it is my best film because it is not, but it is advancing in a direction that I am interested in—what is disturbing is that I try to address the *sense*—rather than the intellect. I want, through visuals and sound, to create a world almost *tactile*. I feel this very strongly. In *Pretty Baby* there is something very seductive and corruptive in the way the film is narrated. And it is probably most shocking for people in this country that sin is presented as absolutely exquisite! Which it is!

HORTON: You have worked with Robert Bresson as assistant director on *Un Condamné a mort S'est échappé*. Is he an influence on your work? I am thinking particularly of *Mouchette*.

MALLE: It's interesting that you mention *Mouchette*. I'm still an enormous admirer of Bresson, and I think I'm the only filmmaker that he cares to see, and we've kept up a very good relationship. Bresson is supposed to be a very austere filmmaker, but I feel *Mouchette* is a very *sensual* film. The end of the film where she is rolling down the hill to her death made me cry. I literally cried and I very rarely cry when filmmakers want me to cry. And *Balthazar* was also very much about an experience of the senses. That's what I admire about Bresson: that he has managed to create these sensual moments. When I worked with him on *A Condemned Man Escapes* Bresson was interested in me because I came from documentaries. He asked me to take care of all of the details such as the spoon with which the prisoner was digging—all of these details which had to do with the escape. I was very impressed with all of his close-ups of such details and with his concern to show a sense of touch.

The soundtrack for the film was also remarkable. I saw it again recently and it is extraordinary. He manages to create a world of sensation that he conveys. In that sense I feel very close to him.

HORTON: The same seems true of your work. While one is first struck by your distinct visual style, it seems you have also paid, especially in *Pretty Baby*, close attention

to your soundtrack. There is something always happening—off screen songs, children talking, cars passing—even if nothing is happening on screen.

MALLE: We spent a lot of time on the soundtrack in this picture. The paradox is that we shot in New Orleans, and you don't see anything of New Orleans! We found this incredible house in the city which no set could have done justice to. In a way the house was more important—along with Brooke Shields—than the script! But the soundtrack was meant to suggest the world outside the house since they are like prisoners.

I worked with my editor, Susanne Baron, whom I usually work with, and we felt we should evoke the outside world as if we were in a cell. And there was also a lot of use of the sound as counterpoint—the sound of children, for instance. Sound was very important also to give a distance. One scene in particular I am very proud of because I think it is one of the most interesting things in the film. In one scene Belocq is photographing Hattie in the room during the afternoon and the piano is playing in the background. The music disappears and then comes back. Floyd is supposedly rehearsing a “Jelly Roll” Morton song, “King Porter’s Stomp,” and it stops and goes, and it works incredibly well with the scene. I remember that Jerry Wexler, our musical supervisor, was against this idea, wanting us to play the song straight through. But I said “NO!” it’s much more interesting to have him stop and play. And it gives a distance.

HORTON: Could you comment on the importance of music in your films since each film features some particular kind of music: in *Lacombe, Lucien*, for instance, you have the opening scene set to a bouncy tune by Django Reinhardt.

MALLE: First I must say that I am very shocked by the way music is usually used in films. It’s one of the most efficient ways to manipulate audiences, as you know; a kind of Pavlovian response. And it works so well it is frightening! Myself I am not prejudiced against scores, but in recent years I have been working with *source* music. And so the music is already a part of the scene. But I try to use it more as counterpoint—not to reinforce a situation, but to work against a situation. But basically music is important in my films because music is important in my life.

For instance, the music in *Le Feu follet* came as an absolutely natural thing. I was in that kind of a mood, that kind of a situation, and that was when I was listening to Erik Satie. And so very naturally this music entered the film and became the score. In my first film, which has the ridiculous English title *Frantic*, with Jeanne Moreau, I used Miles Davis. When we were shooting the film we were all crazy about Miles Davis, and I was in the

middle of sound editing without knowing what to use. I was thinking perhaps of using some records. But then I found out that Miles Davis was going to be in Paris to play in a club. Then I spent five or six nights trying to convince him to come and see the picture and to accept to do what he finally did, which was to improvise! We finally ended up in a sound studio for one night where I showed the film to him several times and then he made up a remarkable score. It really made the picture look much better than it was!

That's the way I've always worked, though some of my films, like *The Thief of Paris*, have no music. Recently I used Charlie Parker in *Murmur of the Heart*. Actually the film opens with the boy stealing a record from a record shop: it is a Charlie Parker record!

HORTON: You worked on the screenplay to *Pretty Baby* with Polly Platt. How was your collaboration?

MALLE: It was a real collaboration. I felt she was a good choice because I wanted a woman for a woman's point of view, and I needed to work with someone who was very much a part of the American cinema tradition. And Polly was very helpful because of her connection with Peter Bogdanovich (former husband) and John Ford. She was indispensable. She was very "American," though I don't know what being an American means, but I felt she helped me respond to the culture. So when I met with her I already had an outline that I had had with me for over a year. Then first she did a great job researching the film. With her background in production design, she was very good at that, particularly since it was a period film. We found a number of interesting things, for instance, the unpublished memoirs of a "Madam"!

HORTON: What about Belocq's photographs? Did you find many of them?

MALLE: Yes, but what is interesting is that at the time they were made, people did not even know there was a photographer named Belocq. They had the plates, not the photos, and they did not know who to attribute them to. Then they sort of invented him! But it's much more complicated than that. The book of his portraits is not accurate because even though they put together lots of interviews, it is clear that he was not very well remembered! All they really know is that for the last thirty years of his life he worked as a commercial photographer and also, for a while, at a shipping company. . . They say he was a hydrocephalic and a cripple and that he was like Toulouse-Lautrec. But I don't think this is a very good comparison, because if you look at the photographs and at Lautrec's paintings, you see that they were two different kinds of men. We knew Belocq best through the photographs. Polly and I spent hours and hours looking at the photographs with magnifying glasses. Actually a

friend who works in a museum in Paris once told me that Belocq's pictures are fakes, but if you look carefully you see that this cannot be so because there are too many little stupid details that cannot be faked.

HORTON: Each of your films very successfully evokes an accurate atmosphere and mood of a particular period: turn-of-the-century French Society in *The Thief of Paris*, for instance. And yet one reviewer has said in reference to your work that art has no necessity to be faithful to historical accuracy. Do you feel this remark is correct or do you find it important to try and be faithful to a sense of history?

MALLE: I work very hard to be accurate. What do I do finally? I re-create a world and then once it is properly re-created, I like to forget about the fact that it is a period. In my way of filming I don't emphasize the period. I try to film my pictures as if they are something I have just encountered. Maybe this is the influence of documentaries. But, yes, the period has to be as accurate as possible because then it gives you the freedom not to think about it and to look at the characters just as they are. But this means, of course, that you have a lot of homework to do in order to get to that stage. And I like to do this work. It's interesting and troubling to sort of re-invent the past. It was especially interesting in *Pretty Baby* because those places were so incredible.

HORTON: Your vision of a New Orleans whorehouse in 1917 is spoken of by Vincent Canby as a non-romantic kind of "romanticism." You de-emphasize sexuality and brutality in order to present "sin" as "exquisite," as you say, or simply quite ordinary. What would you say to those critics who complain that you have left out the seedy side of prostitution?

MALLE: I'm not really quite aware of that. People seem to have been totally taken by the photography. By the way, one amusing aspect of the photography is that Sven Nykvist did not actually film all of the scenes. I just read one critic who writes, "Again Nykvist takes over for the filming of the picnic scene," but Sven wasn't there to shoot the picnic scene! That is nice! Sven is such a great artist he does not even have to be near me!

But the photography in this film is not flashy. For instance, Sven practically never used back-lighting in the film. Which is unusual, especially for a period film. And the set is remarkable, but it's not the usual image of a whorehouse. Usually you think of colors such as red and gold, which are richer. But we tried to tone down the colors. I don't know. I don't see that the film is so visually stylized myself. Again I would say that I didn't really mean to do it in such a way. I guess I could have shown more squalor but it just didn't happen that way. There are, however,

one or two moments when you have a feeling of it. But basically I felt that, dealing with that subject and theme, it might be more disturbing if everything looked so easy and so nice. One American friend saw it before it was finished and said she found the film particularly terrible and beautiful and seductive at the same time. That's what I wanted people to feel. I don't think it would have helped to show more rats. I love to show rats because I love rats, but they didn't need to be in this film.

HORTON: Let me ask about Belocq: he is so elusive as a character, and yet his relationship with Violet is touching.

MALLE: I must tell you something about the Belocq-Violet relationship. When I was shooting the picture I suddenly felt the little I knew of Belocq was me. There was a part I could identify with. And I got to identify with him very, very much. Especially as the character was played by Keith Carradine, but of course it goes both ways because I also felt close to Keith. There was something in him I responded to, and I had been considering lots of other actors. We were very much like brothers. We had a kind of intimate communication. And I felt in the middle of shooting, especially during those difficult scenes in Belocq's house where Violet is supposed to come and stay with him—I started asking myself, if I had been Belocq and considering that Belocq was not terribly interested in sex, you could very well imagine the relationship without sex. Which probably would have been my attitude. After all, this child is a child. That would definitely be my interpretation.

If you used your imagination you could imagine a lot of things taking place between them. But obviously this big sexual fantasy, hang-up, of the child molesters who enjoy child prostitution or child pornography has to do with the fantasy of incest and perhaps also the fantasy of rape: there's something violent about it. It's about penetration; it's brutal. And it's repressed. But it seems to be such a strong fantasy that I think that's why it's so big today in this country, for instance. But you can also imagine another kind of relationship between a child and an adult, one like Violet's and Belocq's.

And in this relation I must tell you that I thought a lot about Lewis Carroll. He was a fascinating man who used to photograph nude little girls, pictures that have been published. He was a clergyman but I have no idea what was going through his mind! Yet he never *did* anything. He was just interested in little girls, and so he wrote *Alice in Wonderland*. But his photographs are remarkable.

This fascination with children is something I certainly share. You could say that the human body starts decaying at the age of sixteen. There is nothing more moving or beautiful than the body of a child. It's one of the things I find fascinating with my own children, for instance. I always feel like hugging them and

touching them because they are so But I have so many troubles with such a film because people talk about nudity. For me, nudity is not taboo because it is not obscene. But a lot of people bring in their own fantasies, and that's why they get so emotional and outraged. I see it completely differently.

HORTON: You have two artists in the film. Floyd has his music which is background for the business and life of the house. He's a professional who moves on to Chicago when the house closes, yet he is also human as witnessed by his reactions to Violet's tribulations. Belocq with his photographs intrudes into the house and ultimately, into Violet's life, bringing art and life together in an unusual way. Do these two examples reflect your views of art and reality?

MALLE: The scene where Belocq brings a picture of Hattie which the other girls gather around and admire and notice for the first time how beautiful they can be is a strong comment on my work. That scene was my scene. The girls are surprised: they have to see a photograph in order to understand that Hattie is beautiful. And then at the end of the scene when they ask him, "How did you do that?" and he says, "Magic! It only takes one second!" is a good line. You know I showed the picture to Susan Sontag when she was just finishing her book on photography, and she was fascinated by that line. That scene is essential to an understanding of what art is about: creating a reality that doesn't exist. And that would be my answer to many critics because of course *Pretty Baby* is about a world that doesn't exist. Yet it is very realistic in a way. I think I'm very much of a realist, but there is, on the other hand, a certain interpretation of reality that is somewhat stylized, but I create style in a way that is a little bit "wicked"!

HORTON: Perhaps your term "wicked" embraces your sly sense of humor. You have, after all, been compared to some degree with Louis Bunuel and the way he presents a "realistic" picture that can at any moment become humorous, absurd, surreal.

MALLE: I love Bunuel! I love the filmmaker and the man. But Bunuel is often made into something that he is not. I find his so-called "surrealism" is his least interesting feature. The secret of Bunuel is his childhood, that he came from a middle-class Spanish family. Probably his best film is *Tristana* which is an adaptation of the novel by Galdos, a kind of Spanish Dickens. This film is the real Bunuel into which he puts a lot of humor and self-parody. He is very, very funny. I like his irony and I like his style and I feel very close to him in that way. He's austere and his technique is to have the most outrageous situations in his script and to film them in the most *realistic* way, and it works wonders! It's astonishing! Those who try to imitate Bunuel don't under-

stand that *style* is what the person is about. People make the mistake to think that something is Bunuelian because it is bizarre. But the opposite is true.

I'm often amazed that people will tell you a lot about character and theme and motivation in a film, but they don't realize that it's the way a picture is filmed that is much more important. Perhaps they are unconsciously aware of it. Because if someone else took the script of *Pretty Baby* they could have done an entirely different film.

HORTON: You seem to work quite often with non-professional actors such as Brooke Shields in *Pretty Baby* and Pierre Blaise in *Lacombe, Lucien* and to keep your actors off balance while shooting by changing scenes or tactics at the last moment. Is this an effort to maintain spontaneity and sincerity?

MALLE: It's an effort to fight the essential weakness of film-making which is that it is so slow and technically so heavy. And you lose that innocence very quickly. I try to "re-invent" it. Everything is so slow. And don't forget that a filmmaker has to make a film three or four times: you have to write the script, then shoot it, edit it, and then when it opens there's the fact that you have to talk about it! So to keep a freshness, especially for the actors, you have to find new ways.

HORTON: I'm interested in how much altering or improvising you do in a film. For instance, the effective auctioning scene during which we momentarily see the reaction shots of the men gathered around watching, especially Floyd, with a mixture of sadness and nostalgia. Was that in the script?

MALLE: No. Actually the script was a lot more complicated, and I cut out some during the shooting and even more during the editing. The reaction shots are something I added as a sort of introduction to the scene. And I added the long close-up of Floyd which becomes an important moment. That scene is quite different from the way it appeared in the script. For instance I had Brooke look straight into the camera because I wanted the audience to feel ill at ease. I wanted the audience *involved*, to be a part of the action. I like for the audience to be self-conscious of themselves as *voyeurs* because they are! After all, they have paid to see someone else's dream! That's what cinema is: in the dark, isolated, it becomes a voyeuristic medium. Which is not true in theater where another kind of ritual communication is important. But film leaves you alone in the dark with your own fantasies.

I've always had the theory that the spectator is a very important part of the film. The same film viewed by two different viewers is not the same film. The spectator is a creative part of the process.

HORTON: Was the ending of the film a problem when you were writing/shooting? We see clearly that she is a child as

she tries to get Belocq to come off to St. Louis with her and her “parents,” and yet she is heading from a whorehouse and a child-marriage into a pure bourgeois life.

MALLE: I thought it was very ironic in a way to have what was supposedly, from a moralistic point of view, a “happy ending.” But in fact it is completely heartbreaking. I’ve always had a problem with ending my films because my films are about certain extreme situations in which the characters are more important than the outcome. In *Lacombe, Lucien*, for instance, this totally obscure peasant with no past and no future who for accidental reasons for three months has a life where he is in a position that should not have happened to him—to be a Nazi—but it lasts for three months and what happens to him after is very incidental.

In *Pretty Baby* I was interested in Storeyville and Violet because it is obviously the *end* of something. For most of the characters it’s the end of an era, and for Violet it is a time to become an adult. She might become respectable and bourgeois as in the true story, or she could become a prostitute again. But either way it doesn’t make the characters different.

HORTON: What happened to the “real” Violet?

MALLE: The original story is with a sort of an old housewife with grandchildren in the suburbs of New Orleans, and she told how she was born in a whorehouse on Basin St. and started working at twelve. And then at sixteen or seventeen she married one of her customers and became very respectable.

HORTON: Your attitude toward society, that is, bourgeois society, seems to be similar to that of Bunuel in many ways. On the one hand you point up the shortcomings of that society, yet on the other hand you seem to have a certain affection or at least acceptance of it with all of its faults.

MALLE: There’s a beautiful line in *The Thief of Paris* that says something to the effect that the thief is the moon of the honest man, meaning he is the fantasy or other half of the same person. But, of course, the whole idea of that film was that the thief and the honest man became incorporated when he (Belmondo) became a *successful* thief, so thus he was quite bourgeois!

I feel a lot like that as a filmmaker. I probably started making films out of rebellion, protesting the system of values, but the moment you become successful there are lots of temptations to join the Establishment. It was after *Thief of Paris* that I went to India because I felt the danger of such a situation. I’ve reached a point now where it doesn’t worry me much. I know that we live in a world of compromise, and filmmaking especially has a lot to do with compromise, but I consider myself as one of a very small group of directors who have not been compromising very much. Like Bunuel, like Bresson.

At the same time you know the price you have to pay. Sometimes you have to be polite to people you want to throw out of the window. But that's not terribly important. What's important is what you do with your film. And I don't compromise as far as the films themselves are concerned.

And it's important to be able to drop out at any moment which I might very well do now, for instance. Especially since *Pretty Baby* is doing well. That's my reaction to success!

HORTON: You have been classified by some as part of the French "New Wave," but in earlier interviews you have disowned such a classification. How do you see it now?

MALLE: I never knew exactly what it meant. There was the whole group at *Cahiers du Cinema*, and I was not a part of *that*. In that sense I am not technically part of the group of Truffaut, Godard, Rivette, Chabrol, Rohmer. But we all had something in common for we were a generation that learned everything through seeing films. We were all complete film freaks. But I myself also learned from music and art and other interests. While someone like Truffaut was and has remained a film maniac. Any town he would go to he would check the papers to see what film he could see that night.

HORTON: *Holocaust* has recently been shown on American television. Mixing melodrama and documentary, it covers the Nazi atrocities. In many ways, however, your film *Lacombe, Lucien* was perhaps even more successful than *Holocaust* in helping audiences understand how an individual could become a fascist killer. Do you view your film as a *political* film about the Nazi period?

MALLE: I saw part of *Holocaust* and I was absolutely shocked. It is probably a good idea to show that this horror existed, but the way that it was shown was so heavy and simplified. Exactly the opposite of *Lacombe, Lucien*. Every film can be considered a political film, but there was a certain political idea built into the film that was very controversial because it suggested that collaboration happened so often. You know, because the old attitude was that collaborators were very few and that they were just monsters. But this is not a very serious approach, of course.

Actually I could demonstrate fairly convincingly that *Lacombe, Lucien* is a Marxist film. Because it's Marx's idea that the general proletariat could be an objective support of fascism, and of the ruling class, because they are not politically aware and so they become the tools of others in order to survive. And we see this occurring in every guerilla war. When I was in Algeria I saw a lot of Algerians collaborating with the French. And they were very much from that poor background where they had to do anything to eat.

HORTON: To what degree was *Lacombe* based on your memories of the War?

MALLE: The period was very vivid in my memory. I was eleven years old and went to a religious school and the Gestapo came to the school one morning in January, 1944 looking for children hidden under false names. It was a completely traumatic event. They took the children and the head of the school, all of whom had been turned in by a young servant who was working in the kitchen. He had been caught stealing from the school and they threw him out, and for revenge he went to the Nazis. He was just a kid, a little like *Lacombe*, Lucien. Actually my first story was like the true story, but it was too close to me, too emotional so I changed it to what it became.

But I wanted to use that starting scene where he went to the Gestapo and denounced the boys. There was one in my class whose name was Bonet, which is a very French name, and I remember this little guy from the Gestapo in civilian clothes opening the door and asking for a boy with a name that was very obviously a Jewish name like Silverstein or something. And we saw our friend standing up and he went around the room and shook hands with every one of us. Let me tell you that this is the kind of experience you don't forget.

Yes, to return to the point, I feel that *Lacombe* is very political because it implies that evil is not only committed by monsters. It would make life easier if this were so. But again I have been fascinated with the subject because I have known some of these people. In Algeria I knew a little fellow who was very nice. He's probably married now and living in the suburbs with two cars, and yet in those days he was torturing people. He was what they called an OR, Information Officer. But I spend an evening with him and he seemed so average, so normal. And that's where the danger comes in because you begin to understand that everybody could become a fascist. Maybe that's a pessimistic view, but I believe that 90% of any population could become fascist.

HORTON: How do you feel about cinema today? Has television taken over, leaving film as a kind of aristocratic art form?

MALLE: Well, I would say that the industry seems to be in good shape. But the price they have to pay for this seems to me to be too great! I don't know. I feel that this religion of the blockbuster is very unhealthy.