



Revolution in Paradise

Veiled Representations of
Jewish Characters in the
Cinema of Occupied France



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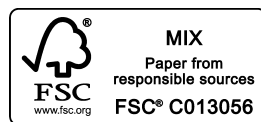
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Introduction

Les Enfants du Paradis (Children of Paradise, 1943) is considered the greatest masterpiece of French cinema; Jacques Prévert's most poetic screenplay and director Marcel Carné's most powerful work. Proclaimed "best French film of all time" in 1993, this unforgettable love story is unanimously popular – an internationally-acclaimed symbol of poetry. Profoundly moved by the film, Stalin gave Carné a doll that resembled the main character, Baptiste. This doll was displayed for years in a Boston museum dedicated to Carné's work. UNESCO awarded *Les Enfants du Paradis* a "worldwide heritage" status. A copy of the film is kept in an underground shelter to preserve it in case of nuclear catastrophe. The film perfectly expresses the inimitable quality of the French spirit – an exquisite chef d'oeuvre of poetry.

The work seems to have been created in heroic times. The film premiered on March 9, 1945, at a gala organized for the benefit of soldiers wounded in World War Two. The film's credits include the names of two Jewish artists, set designer Alexandre Trauner and composer Joseph Kosma, and emphasize that they worked on the film surreptitiously through an explicit statement: "collaboration in clandestinity." Carné and Prévert valiantly refused to renounce their Jewish collaborators during the Occupation and, at the risk of death, worked with them covertly.

Paradoxically, the four years of German occupation in France (1940–44) were a flourishing period for the Arts. Sartre wrote *L'Être et le Néant* (Being and Nothingness, 1943) and Camus published *L'Étranger* (The Stranger, 1942). Plays that were written or produced during this period have become classics: *La Reine morte* (The Dead Queen, Henri de Montherlant, 1942), *Les Mouches* (The Flies, Jean-Paul Sartre, 1943), *Antigone* (Jean Anouilh, 1944), *Huis clos* (No Exit, Jean-Paul Sartre, 1944), *La Folle de Chaillot* (The Madwoman of Chaillot, Jean Giraudoux, 1942).¹ As for cinema, it was a dazzling golden age. Two hundred and twenty-two feature films – unquestionably among the finest in French cinema – and four hundred short films bear witness to the vitality of the industry in a country that had been conquered, humiliated, and deprived of everything. The films made

during these years of unparalleled artistic production focus primarily on love in its various forms, on history, and on fantasy; the slightest allusions to the events of the period were carefully expunged from their scripts for obvious reasons. The films were therefore based on pure fancy – historical dramas far removed from reality. Such escapism, in part, explains the enduring fascination with them to this day.

A significant number of books have been written about the cinema of occupied France – among them those of Paul L  glise, Roger R  gent, Raymond Chirat, Georges Sadoul, Jean-Pierre Bertin-Maghit, Jacques Siclier, Fran  ois Gar  on, Evelyn Ehrlich, Jean-Pierre Jeancolas, Edward Baron Turk, and Pierre Darmon. These authors praise the French film industry for refraining from promulgating propaganda; moreover, they whitewash – *blanchissent* – (a term widely-used at the time of the Liberation) the fictional cinema of the time, which had taken refuge in history, comedy, and love stories in order to avoid any mention of a painful present. In his book *Histoire de la politique du cin  ma fran  ais des ann  es 1940–1944* (History of the French Cinema’s Politics 1940–1944), Paul L  glise writes:

We must be grateful to Louis-  mile Galey (Chairman of the Organizing Committee on the Cinematographic Industry from 1941 to 1944) for not diverting part of the French film industry towards the spread of propaganda, despite the fact that his department and his superiors answered to the Ministry of Information, which was, at the time, highly appreciative of this kind of action.²

Jean-Pierre Bertin-Maghit, in his monumental *Le Cin  ma Fran  ais sous l’Occupation*, develops this thesis:

Feature films were not used to distribute propaganda. Contrary to radio and the press, Vichy was not interested in fiction films. [...] This freedom, which allowed the dynamism of cinematographic creation for four years, was not thwarted by a German order which was not interested in making propaganda films. [...]

For these reasons, the filmmakers avoided ideological indoctrination. At a time when French cinema could have fallen into an extreme-right aestheticism, the filmmakers were content, in perfect consensus, to express the wait-and-see policy of a public which was little inclined to shocking ideologies and which manifested its disapproval at screenings of current events and short films with propaganda tendencies. It was not shocking, thus, if these filmmakers emerged from these dark years with tranquil consciences.³

Jacques Siclier evokes memories of his youth to assert that “the content of the films was scarcely influenced by Pétainist ideology.”⁴ Evelyn Ehrlich, an American researcher, notes that only one anti-Semitic film, *Les Corrupteurs* (The Corrupters, 1941), was shot in France; it was made by Nova Films, a production company that was controlled and financed by the Germans.⁵ In *Le monde du cinéma sous l'Occupation* (The World of Cinema under Occupation), Pierre Darmon refers to numerous documents which give considerable food for thought, yet the end of his work echoes his predecessors:

From 1940 till 1944, the spirit of Vichy tried hard to infiltrate French cinema. But while it did succeed in penetrating institutions, it never managed to contaminate artistic films.⁶

The fact that these films were created during the Occupation lends them a heroic aura. In contrast to so many French artists such as Céline,⁷ Drieu la Rochelle,⁸ Charonne,⁹ Jouhandeau,¹⁰ Brasillach,¹¹ Rebatet,¹² Laubreaux,¹³ Léautaud,¹⁴ Montherlant,¹⁵ Morand,¹⁶ Séché,¹⁷ Maurras,¹⁸ Béraud,¹⁹ and Suarez²⁰ (a few out of many), who were allegedly involved in Collaboration – sometimes opportunistically, but most often ideologically – these films symbolize how the French Resistance and French Poetry refused to be crushed under the German boot. *Les Enfants du Paradis* is therefore considered to be a glorious revenge of the French over the German oppressor.

Two additional films that I analyze in this study, *Les Visiteurs du soir* (The Devil's Envoys), also by Carné and Prévert, and *Le Camion blanc* (The White Truck) by Léo Joannon, can also be perceived as heroic feats. The customary analysis of *Les Visiteurs du soir* considers the Devil to be an allusion to Hitler, while Anne and Gilles's “resistance” becomes the symbol of the French Resistance.

Marcel Carné and Jacques Prévert defied Nazi censorship with this deceptively simple medieval romance.²¹ . . . Remarkably, this celebration of fidelity and resistance was made under the Nazi occupation of France.²²

Their heartbeats, which can be heard at the end of the film from inside the stone statues they have become, are those of France in 1942: bruised and humiliated by the German occupier, but still alive and in love despite it all. Likewise, in a special issue of *La Mémoire du Cinéma* published after the death of François Périer, there is a tribute to the latter's participation, in 1943, in *Le Camion blanc*, a film that included a positive portrayal of Gypsies at a time when the Nazis were

sending them to concentration camps. The tribute exalts Périér's courage and patriotism, along with Léo Joannon's, in participating in such a dangerous endeavor.

And yet, a few small details seem to contradict this official and entrenched impression of a heroic French cinema consisting of deceptively naïve films secretly resisting the Nazi oppressor. Firstly, the strongest admirer of *Les Visiteurs du soir* was François Vinneuil, the man responsible for the film being awarded the Grand Prix du Cinéma Français. Vinneuil was an ultra-fascist film critic for *Je suis partout* (I Am Everywhere), the premier anti-Semitic magazine of this period. His real name was Lucien Rebatet, under which he published the best-selling pamphlet of the Occupation period, *Les Décombres* (The Ruins), in 1942, where he called for the extermination of the Jews. Rebatet was also the author of *Tribus du cinéma et du théâtre* (The Tribes of Film and Stage, Nouvelles Éditions françaises, 1941), in which he published a list of Jewish actors and producers that he believed should be eliminated. Secondly, a private screening of the *Les Visiteurs du soir* was organized for Marshal Pétain himself in Vichy. Finally, and especially noteworthy, the film was sent, with the approval of the German administrators, to French embassies throughout the world in order to reinforce French propaganda. Most likely, the initiative to distribute these films throughout the world would have been unfeasible if the link between Hitler and the Devil had been obvious.

The films were not as apolitical as many assume. For instance, the main character in *Le Camion blanc* is named Shabbas and he is portrayed by the same Jules Berry who played the Devil in *Les Visiteurs du soir*. His physical features strongly evoke stereotypical Jewish characteristics as they were described at the time in anti-Semitic propaganda, broadcast on the radio, and presented at *Le Juif et la France* (The Jew and France) exhibition. As for *Les Enfants du Paradis*, several of the participants in this film – considered to be the soul of the Resistance – played very ambiguous roles during the Occupation, both on screen and in reality. Arletty, whose character Garance is central in the film, was a devoted friend and passionate admirer of the extremely Anti-Semitic writer Céline. A leading figure in the Franco-German collaboration, she was a close friend of Laval and was prominent in official German circles. It is interesting to note that several additions to the film's soundtrack were recorded by her after she had been placed under arrest following the Liberation. Auguste Bovério, who played the character of the first author in *L'Auberge des Adrets* (The Inn of the Adrets), performed in *Forces occultes* (Occult Forces) and in the French version of *Jud Süß* (Jew Süß), two anti-Semitic propaganda films. The role of the Old-Clothes

Man was originally written for Céline's best friend, Robert Le Vigan, an actor so compromised by his collaborationist and anti-Semitic comments that when the American troops neared Paris on August 15, 1944, he fled to join his friend Céline in Sigmaringen, Germany, where he continued to broadcast on French collaborationist radio.

Given that *Les Enfants du Paradis* was conceived in 1942 and shot in 1943, at the peak of anti-Semitic propaganda, the Old-Clothes Man's role is particularly intriguing. Upon watching it a second time, and even more so after reading the original screenplay (which was published in 1999 by Editions de Monza and in 2012 by Gallimard) the character of the Old-Clothes Man, a repulsive informer with many names, among them Jewish oriented names like Joshua and Jericho, might lead one to consider another veiled meaning, political this time, behind the story of passionate love that unfolds in this great masterpiece of cinema.

So much has been written about these four years during which French cinema, deprived of its freedom, experienced a paradoxical apogee, that it may appear impossible to undertake a fresh analysis of these fairy tales produced during the war, these cinematic poems that are the pride of the French film industry. One wonders what more can be added to the incisive studies published by Raymond Chirat, Bernard Chardère, Alain Weber and Jean-Pierre Bertin-Maghit, to name only a few. Nevertheless, I would like to show here that these romances often include a character who is not explicitly designated as Jewish, but whose characteristics (an affinity for intrusion, ugliness, treachery, repulsive obsequiousness) trigger an association with the "darling" of the French press of the period: the Jew – mercilessly demonized, source of war and of all of France's misfortunes – at a time when he was persecuted, arrested, tortured and sent to his death.

Therefore, these fantasies may have been speaking in a veiled way of the burning realities of the time. They may indeed be political allegories but, contrary to what has been written so far, not ones that heroically sing the praises of the Resistance. In the films that will be analyzed here, which were made when Jews were being exterminated throughout Europe, the subject may well be, albeit carefully disguised, the evil Jews. In *Le Camion blanc*, a white truck journeys across France on the orders of the evil Shabbas. In *Les Visiteurs du soir*, the immaculate whiteness of Baron Hugues' castle and Anne's room within it is striking. The castle is new, shining with whiteness: a room with white curtains, a white bed, decorated with white flowers, later destroyed at the end of the film by the dark Devil, who shares similar features to the monster shown on the poster of the *Le Juif et la France* exhibition. Likewise, in *Les Enfants du Paradis*,

Old-Clothes Man Joshua's blackness clashes with the whiteness of Baptiste's Pierrot.

The study which follows is divided into two parts. Part One analyzes examples of metaphorically veiled Jewish characters in French works that were produced during the German occupation. This analysis has two preliminary chapters. The first is devoted to the direct anti-Semitic propaganda which was raging in occupied France and the second approaches the problem of cuts and changes which were made in the copies of films shot during the Occupation. Cuts, which may have modified the essence of the work, are invaluable indicators because they reveal meanings that the director and producer may have preferred to obscure. Part Two is devoted entirely to the main film shot during the Occupation: a cult film, a mammoth Franco-Italian production which had a budget equal to that of twenty average films of the period. In *Les Enfants du Paradis*, which has become the epitome of French cinema, and of Western Culture at large, I shall attempt to show the existence of an implicit Jewish character and to explain why it is imperative that the positive heroes eliminate him.