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## Revolution in Paradise: Veiled Representations of Jewish Characters in the Cinema of Occupied France

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## Revolution in Paradise: Veiled Representations of Jewish Characters in the Cinema of Occupied France

### Abstract

This is a book review of Yehuda Moraly, *Revolution in Paradise: Veiled Representations of Jewish Characters in the Cinema of Occupied France* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2019).

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### Author Notes

Thierry J. Alcoloumbre is an Associate Professor at Bar-Ilan Department of Comparative Literature (Israel). His research embraces the interactions between Judaism and Hellenism. He has published in the field of medieval and modern Jewish thought (Maimonides, Maharal of Prague), as well as in the field of French poetry (Mallarmé, Vigée).

Moraly, Yehuda, *Revolution in Paradise: Veiled Representations of Jewish Characters in the Cinema of Occupied France* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2019).

French film creation under the German Occupation during WWII is one of the richest in the History of cinema. Historians of the seventh art have generally viewed the films of this era as indifferent, if not rebellious, to Nazi influence. The present study of Yehuda Moraly challenges this opinion in a significant way. It shows, through the detailed analysis of several major works, that the cinema of this time conveyed, in a veiled way, anti-Semitic stereotypes similar to those of German propaganda. However, French works differ from their German counterparts on two points: firstly, by the poetic sensibility of their creators, nourished by French culture and located in the French landscape; and secondly, by the repugnance of French artists for overt propaganda. This repugnance is well illustrated by André Gide, in his diary from the 40's, where he expresses his disgust after watching the famous German film *Jew Süß*. What scandalizes Gide is not the racist message conveyed by the film, but the overly crude manner in which it is conveyed. A more allusive message, more "classic" in short (Gide was in favor of understatement), would have found his approval. It is precisely this type of allusive messages that we find in the films analyzed here. Moraly's book proves this brilliantly.

The book is divided into two parts: The first part provides a general overview of French cinema under the Occupation. It initially covers openly

collaborationist and propagandist films such as Pierre Ramelot's *Les Corrupteurs* (1941). It then studies films that are apparently more innocent in which, however, an anti-Semitic message is suggested, sometimes very clearly. *Le Camion blanc* (*The White Truck*) by Léo Joannon (1943) tells the story of the rivalry between the Gypsies of the North and the Gypsies of the South dealing with the inheritance of the royal gypsy throne which has become vacant, in a France where they seem to have full powers. The description of these Gypsies and the name of their leader (Shabbas) are more reminiscent of the characteristics of the Jews than those of Gypsies. In Carné's famous film *Les Visiteurs du soir* (*The Devil's Envoy*, 1942), we see the Devil and his servants enter a marvelous white castle, the atmosphere of which they corrupt by sowing hatred and jealousy. Satan fails to overcome the innocent love shared by Anne (the baron's daughter) and Gilles (the minstrel servant of the Devil) but he manages to lead the other characters to their destruction. The character of the Devil, whom some saw as the symbol of the Nazi occupier, corresponds much more to the characteristics of the contemporary representation of the Jew (often embodied by the same actor, Jules Berry): repulsive appearance, hypocritical attitude, a dangerous intelligence, and an ability to incite conflict. The third film analyzed is *L'Éternel retour* (*The Eternal Return*, 1943) by Jean Cocteau and Jean Delannoy. This film, which takes up the plot of *Tristan and Isolde* and adapts it to the contemporary French society, is a sort of homage to Germany, to Wagner and Hitler, for which Cocteau had the greatest admiration. This film does

not show actual Jews, but rather introduces us to a family of intruders, the Fossins, admitted out of charity into the castle where they end up sowing discord and destruction. As in the case of the Devil in *The Devil's Envoy*s, this nefarious role of the evil intruder was systematically linked to the Jews at the time.

The three works analyzed are not works of propaganda and the word "Jewish" is never mentioned. The plot and characters they portray are richly detailed enough that the anti-Semitic components they contain can take a back seat. However, these components play a major role in the infrastructure of the works and in their symbolic construction. They fit into a game of oppositions between "Good" and "Evil," "Pure" and "Unclean," "Innocence" and "Guilt." They suggest that human unhappiness in general (and French unhappiness in particular) results from the occult influence of an evil stranger. In order to find Salvation and Happiness it would suffice to eliminate him. This idea will appear particularly in *Les Enfants du Paradis* (*Children of Paradise*, 1943) by Marcel Carné to which the second part of the book is devoted.

This second part is Moraly's most important and original contribution. Dedicated to the analysis of Marcel Carné's masterpiece, *Children of Paradise*, it successively portrays the theatrical sources of the film, the conditions of its production and its release (postponed until the Liberation in 1945), the character of the Old-clothes Man, and the symbolic message conveyed by the film.

The anti-Semitic nature of the film is expressed in the character of the Old-clothes Man who hinders the love of the two heroes and plays the role of traitor and spy: his name (he has several, which include Joshua and Jericho), his occupations, his repulsive physique have connotations inseparable from the figure of the Jew caricatured at the same time. The actor first chosen to play the character was Robert Le Vigan, deeply involved in the Collaboration and known for his visceral anti-Semitism. It is remarkable that in the original script of the film, the Old-clothes Man was killed by Baptiste, but that this scene was cut out in the final version released at the Liberation.

The title of the book *Revolution in Paradise* refers to *Children of Paradise*. In French, "paradise" designates the highest row (and therefore the cheapest) of the hall in the theatre, the one generally occupied by the common people. But "paradise" is also the Garden of Eden, that original place of innocence and love for which the film is full of nostalgia. As for the term "Revolution" ("Revolution in paradise") it alludes to the "National Revolution" undertaken by Marshal Pétain within the framework of collaboration with Germany. The films studied here are not necessarily Pétainist, but all of them (and in particular the films of Carné) dream of a new order and a kind of regeneration for the French people.

The book is rich in information on the films of the time (some of which are only accessible in the archives or have been destroyed), on the biography and testimonies of the authors and actors, and on the reception of the works. It ends

with a very well informed bibliography, filmography, and index. I was happy to find names like Antonin Artaud, Harry Baur, or Jean-Paul Sartre. In addition to his capital contribution to the history of cinema, it contributes an in-depth reflection on cinema, myth, and culture, which seems to me to be very relevant. We can summarize its findings in a number of key ideas:

1) French cinema reproduces the stereotypes of the Jew inherited from traditional anti-Semitism enriched by the literature and ideologies of the 19th and 20th centuries (pseudo-scientific racism, the Dreyfus affair, the pamphlet *La France juive* [Jewish France] by Drumont, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, and Nazi ideology). This racism inspired the infamous exhibition *The Jew and France* (1941), and the propaganda book *Les Décombres (The Rubble)* by Lucien Rebatet (1942). The Jew appears there as an occult, multifaceted, omnipresent force, a corrupting force that is at the origin of wars and crises from which he takes advantage while calling on *morality* to achieve his purposes. Moraly provides an original analysis on the paradoxical confusion between the Jew and the Aristocrat in the imagination of the time. The Jews are the new "kings" of the time. They succeed, by the power of their money, to penetrate the aristocratic families that they are rotting from within. This theme appears in particular in Renoir's *The Rules of the Game* (1939): the Marquis de la Chesnaye (played by the Jewish actor Dalio) turns out to be from a Jewish family which had allied with French nobles. Of course,

Renoir gives his character a sympathetic allure; however, the guests of his castle appear more like a clan of killers than civilized beings.

Formulated already in the 19th century (notably by Wagner), the idea is spreading that only collective and radical punishment (extermination) will allow the Jewish "question" to be resolved and the world to be purified of the corruption that undermines it. In the films analyzed, German or French, the murder of the Jew or his symbolic equivalent, appears as a purifying gesture, which restores the world to its original innocence.

2) The stereotype of the Jew indeed plays the role of antithesis within a representation of the world opposing "Good" and "Evil," "Life" and "Death." The films studied by Moraly contrast the virtues of the French people (frankness, kindness, courage) to the sly and corrupting influence of *Les Inconnus dans la maison*, "the strangers in the house" (the title of a film by Henri Decoin, based on a novel by Simenon). They agree with the message of National Revolution advocated by Pétain. With Carné, pure and innocent love, the unconstrained sexuality of the young heroes (Anne and Gilles, Baptiste and Garance) oppose the darkness of a diabolical character from which all the evil comes. This theme, already present in his pre-war films, *Le jour se lève* (*Daybreak*) and *Le Quai des brumes* (*Port of Shadows*), takes on particular prominence in *The Devil's Envoys* and *Children of Paradise*, thanks to the discreet contribution of the anti-Semitic theme. The poetic anarchism of Prévert and Carné opposed to the hypocritical



morality of the bourgeoisie agrees here with the Nietzschean refusal of Judeo-Christian morality, recovered and falsified by Nazism.

3) Moraly's book analyzes the techniques with which anti-Semitic themes are conveyed. These are often characteristic details: a Jewish-sounding name, a Star of David, a false nose, the figuration of an actor accustomed to playing Jewish characters (e.g., Harry Baur).

Because these films conveyed their message in a veiled and allusive way, it was easy after the war to hide their content. It then engages, according to Moraly's definition, a veritable "war of memory" during which the directors try to erase the too clearly anti-Semitic components of their works. They change the name of the Jewish character, they cut certain sequences, or destroy their film. The most instructive example is that of *Children of Paradise*. Prepared under the Occupation, the film did not come out until 1945, when anti-Semitic theses, identified with Nazi ideology, were discredited and risked having the film condemned. Carné removes the scene which shows the murder of the Old-Clothes Man. On the other hand he highlights the participation in the film of two Jews: the composer Kosma and the set designer Trauner. This participation, presented as an act of resistance, seems to have been greatly exaggerated by Carné, to whom it served as an alibi. Moraly shows, from multiple documents (versions of the work, trial records) that the contribution of Kosma and Trauner was minimal. This last point, no doubt, remains to be debated.

The camouflage of the films has been made easier by the very nature of the myths they enact. The war of Good and Evil, of Beauty and of the Ugly, of the French people and foreign invaders continues to be celebrated. It just changed its scapegoat. It is no longer the Jews, but the Nazis, whom the cinema claims to dedicate to gemonies. In *The Devil's Envoy*s, the character of the Devil, all dressed in black, was able to evoke the Nazi occupier; but in 1942, the character's connotations (hooked nose, cunning, false morality, etc.) were quite clear to contemporaries and Moraly rightly points out that the film would not have deserved the praise of Lucien Rebatet (notorious Nazi collaborator) and the support of the German authorities if he had not conveyed a message more in conformity with the ideology of the Occupier. This phenomenon of reinterpretation also occurred in the theatre. *La Folle de Chaillot* (*The Madwoman of Chaillot*) by Jean Giraudoux calls for the extermination of a financial gang that has seized Paris. After the war, this appeal was understood to be directed against the German occupier or against the exploiters in general, but when Giraudoux wrote this play, the image of the exploiting financier to be eliminated inevitably evoked the Jewish people.

4) The last idea that seems to me quite worthy of attention concerns the nature of the creative imagination. Several of the films analyzed in this book, and in particular Carné's films, are and remain masterpieces. They are not reduced to the anti-Semitic themes which they use even if they derive some of their strength from them. Their celebration of beauty, love, their dream of innocence and

happiness join a universal aspiration that we still share today. The genius of their authors is to have known how to create an imaginary world where these ideals find their place. Moraly's great merit lies in having been able to avoid Manichaeism. His criticism of the works studied does not prevent him from feeling their beauty and sharing his admiration with us. Jean Paul Sartre said in 1946 that the playwright's task was to "forge myths." This imperative is also valid for the filmmaker. However, there are myths that bring life and myths that kill. Moraly's book teaches us this tragic and terrifying truth that these two categories of myths are often mixed up. The border that separates them is not as easy to draw as one might have hoped.