Malle e/on mai: Louis Malle’s Takes on May 68

Roxanne Panchasi

When the twenty-first Cannes Film Festival came to an abrupt and dramatic end days ahead of schedule, Louis Malle was 35 years old.¹ Highly successful at an early stage of his career, the filmmaker had already won an Academy Award and the festival’s own Palme d’Or by the age of 24.² Reflecting on the moment years later, Malle would remember that he ‘was getting impatient in Cannes, where the festival was proceeding as if nothing was going on elsewhere’. A member of the 1968 jury, Malle was ‘definitely on the side of the students’ and had ‘encourage[d] the jury to resign’. After a majority of its members decided to do just that, Malle made the announcement at the Palais du Festival to the sound of boos and applause from the audience. ‘Of course, I got the blame’, Malle would recall, ‘I was persona non grata in Cannes. The shopkeepers were furious. Word had spread that I was responsible, that I had single-handedly stopped the festival’.³ In fact, filmmakers François Truffaut and Jean-Luc Godard had been very outspoken and Malle was not (as some would assume) the president of the jury that year.⁴

The episode would not be the only source of confusion regarding Malle’s political activities in France in 1968. Film critic Hugo Frey and biographer Pierre Billard agree that, after Cannes, Malle returned to Paris and attended the turbulent meetings of the États Généraux du Cinéma at the École du Cinéma et de la Photographie. Where they diverge, however, is on the issue of his engagement prior to the festival. According to Frey, ‘Malle signed petitions in support of . . . [Henri] Langlois and participated in the patronage committee of the campaign for [his] reinstatement’ in 1968.⁵ Billard, however, points out...
that Malle was not actually in France in February 1968 when the controversy erupted over the government’s attempt to dismiss the director of the Cinémathèque Française. Billard claims that Malle was aware of the protests in France, but ‘did not seem particularly troubled by the events, the development of which he could not really follow’.6 The affair had come to a close in April 1968 and Malle had not returned to France until early May.

Two decades later, Malle went on to make Milou en mai, a fictional film that takes place during les événements.7 At the time of the film’s release in 1990, screenwriter Jean-Claude Carrière recalled that in May 1968 ‘Louis . . . had just come back from a long journey with a series of beautiful films and a remarkable beard’.8 Billard remarks that Malle’s ‘visibility’, the perception of him as a political ‘leader’ in 1968, owed something to this beard. Many of the people Billard interviewed for his biography seem to have believed (mistakenly) that the director had ‘let the beard grow for May 68’.9 In fact, while Malle participated in the happenings in Cannes and Paris in 1968, he was thousands of miles away from both La Croisette and the streets of the French capital only days before the festival began on 10 May (the famous ‘Night of the Barricades’). The beard, as well as the films Carrière mentioned, had been made in India.

In the fall of 1967, the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs had invited Malle to join a delegation scheduled to tour India with several French films. These included Malle’s own Le Feu follet (The Fire Within) (1963). A trip that was supposed to last two weeks turned into two months. During that time, Malle travelled with the delegation to New Delhi, Bombay, Calcutta and Madras. He encountered French embassy officials, Indian government representatives, intellectuals and filmmakers, including the Bengali director Satyajit Ray.10 Struck by the landscapes and people of the subcontinent, Malle determined during this government-sponsored visit that his next project would be a film on India. After returning briefly to Paris to secure funding and assemble a small film crew, Malle landed in New Delhi with sound engineer Jean-Claude Laureux and cameraman Étienne Becker in January 1968.

From January to May, the trio travelled throughout the Indian subcontinent. Along the way, Malle recorded his notes/observations in a carnet de voyage.11 Originally titled ‘Inde 68’ and later ‘Mother India’, the project resulted in approximately 37 hours of footage. Eventually,