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2-13-1974

## "Interpretation of the French Resistance"

Michael F. Reardon

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### Recommended Citation

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Michael F. Reardon  
"Interpretation of the French Resistance"  
Portland State University  
February 13, 1974

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Transcribed by Carlos Julian Santizo Salazar, March 26, 2021

Audited by Carolee Harrison, April 2021

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PROFESSOR CHARLES LE GUIN: The showing of the film *The Sorrow and the Pity* will commence next week, and there are forums each day of the week beginning Monday—in K-House rather than here—and there will be a forum on forced internment of Japanese Americans during World War II, and then we will resume in this room on Tuesday next when Professor Wrench will comment on *The Sorrow and the Pity*. Yesterday in the reading of the matter of J. Robert Oppenheimer, certain questions were suggested in the matter of loyalty to friends as opposed loyalty to country, and the question of the proper relationship of science to politics. This play was also an example of documentary theatre, raising the question of the relationship of documentary reporters to dramatic art. Today, my colleague Professor Reardon will examine the Vichy regime in France in ways which will touch upon the historiographical problem of the use and meaning of evidence. In so doing, Professor Reardon will raise questions essential to a critical viewing of the Ophüls documentary, the screening of which does begin next Monday. Professor Reardon.

PROFESSOR MICHAEL F. REARDON: I would like to preface my remarks by mentioning the assumptions on which they are based. These are not profound assumptions, they are utilitarian assumptions. The first of them is that although you might well need a narrative summary of what happened in France between 1940 and 1945, you don't really want to hear that, and

consequently I will not bother to try to outline for you the main events that occurred in France in those years. And my second assumption is that you either have seen or you will see *The Sorrow and the Pity*. And what I would like to consider, then, is this particular film in the light of the interpretations which have been offered of the Vichy period and of the resistance in France, interpretations that can be found in innumerable memoirs that have been written since 1945 by people on all sides of the Vichy resistance question in France. They are interpretations that also can be found in some attempts at scholarly historical monographs, though here I think some information about the state of contemporary historical research into Vichy and the resistance is useful to keep in mind. To date, there has been, out of France, no attempt at a complete synthesis of the history of the French resistance. There is a special committee in France, headed by a historian, Henri Michel, who has overseen the publication of a number of specific historical works; monographs that will tell you everything from what one group of Catholics did in a particular city down to the communists in the French Revolution and that particular approach. But the historians who sit on this committee have decided that it is not time to attempt an actual, complete historical interpretation.

As far as actual works on Vichy are concerned, the situation is somewhat the same. There is this vast amount of literature in the form of memoirs and autobiographies; there has been an increasing number of biographies of figures such as Pétain and Laval, but in fact there are really only two books that attempt some sort of overview of the Vichy period. One of these now is a fairly dated book that appeared in 1953 that is so bland in its treatment of the episode as to be almost completely useless at this point, and the other is a much more recent book by an American historian, Robert Paxton, that I'll be referring to more on Vichy France. Beyond that, there is very little that attempts to really get an overview of this particular period. So when I talk about interpretations of this, keep in mind that it is through these devices; through memoirs, through the historical literature that does exist, and through other events such as French national celebrations of the resistance that themselves are living embodiments of particular views that the French actually hold toward this period.

By considering this, then, as a historiographical problem, I would hope that it could serve as an example of the difference between an historical interpretation and interpretations that are rooted in some psycho-social need of a people to cope with their own past, particularly the more painful moments of that past. As Stanley Kauffman writes in his comments on the movie *The Sorrow and the Pity*, "For Americans who have never experienced sudden, total defeat, and the almost overnight disappearance of their accustomed political elites; who have never lived through foreign occupation; who do not know what Nazi pressure meant; who have never had any apparently legal government..."—this one he might have to alter at this point—"headed by a national hero and claiming total obedience that sinks deeper and deeper into a morass of

impotence, absurdity, and crime; who have never had to worry first and last about food and physical survival; remember that the movie you watch is both a revelation and a weapon in a painful domestic battle on the part of the French with their own past.”

First, then, let me briefly survey the various interpretations which have become part of this battle of the French with their past, and then consider *The Sorrow and the Pity* within the tradition of these interpretations. The interpretation of the Vichyites and of those who have continued to have some favorable view of the Vichy government of Pétain, of the policies of men like Laval during 1940 to '45, continue—and this view has in fact continued to have some sort of appeal, particularly to remnants of the old French right—this interpretation of the Vichyites is actually born in speeches that Pétain himself gave as the end for Vichy was near. It is an interpretation that he repeated at his trial, that Laval repeated at his, and that you will notice in *The Sorrow and the Pity*, the son-in-law of Pierre Laval, the Comte de Chambrun, repeats again in terms of talking about Vichy in 1969. And this interpretation is largely known as the “shield” theory, and it goes thus: in the face of ongoing war and certain defeat, Vichy is a self-sacrificing effort to save what could be saved, to limit France’s material suffering by negotiation, compromise, and accommodation, and that this policy for the most part was correct. The length of the war and the total occupation by Nazi Germany in 1942 of all of France were unforeseeable events in 1940. The resistance, while possibly good-intentioned and courageous in some instances, harmed the nation by dividing the French people among themselves, provoking the Germans into committing brutal reprisals, and harboring unsavory elements that actually preyed on the French people.

Now, on the other side, that is, the side of interpretations that opposed the policies that Vichy followed, there is first of all the the old “plot” theory that France was consciously betrayed by men, Pétain, Laval among them, who before the outbreak of war had actually conspired with Hitler’s government and had already... were prepared to gain power in the chaos of war and turn France over to the Germans. Now this conspiratorial view has produced a great deal of searching for evidence to support it, and almost no evidence is available that supports it in any way whatsoever, and for the most part, I think one can set aside any significance to this on the grounds that again, there simply is no reason to believe that there was a conspiracy on the part of groups in the French right already in contact with the German government only awaiting their opportunity to lead France some way into a complete union with German policies and German activities.

Then, in addition to this “plot” theory, which has been largely discredited, there is what must be considered the official versions of Vichy in the resistance. And these official versions really break down into two forms. There is the Communist version, which largely you will see

represented in the film by Jacques Duclos, who himself was a member of the Communist resistance and has continued to be a leader in the Communist Party, and the official Communist version of this is, of course, to say that Vichy was a collaborating, treasonous government and that France actually was saved in terms of its dignity, its courage, and its values by the tremendous swelling-up of the people, led by the working class and largely represented by the Communist resistance as its vanguard. And like most official versions, whether they are Communist or Gaullist, there is an element of truth, and one in fact could cite diverse writers who are by no means sympathetic with Communists, such as François Mauriac, saying that in fact the real heroes of France in 1940 to 1945 were the French people, and so on. But it is also an official version that forgets many of the problems about what the Communists actually did, particularly in the early years of Vichy; one thing of which was to seek accommodation immediately from the German occupiers in order to publish *L'Humanité* under an occupation government. The particular member of the Communist Party who did this was almost completely expunged from any collective memory of Communists under the Vichy regime at all, but it's this sort of problem that you have in terms of almost any of these versions.

But by far the most dominant of the official versions is the one that we can find represented by the Gaullist tradition. The Gaullist governments have supported it, and patriotic national ceremonies have sanctified it, and it is undoubtedly the one that is most comforting to the largest majority of French people. And this official version goes basically in this way: the French, with the exception of a handful of collaborationists and a small clique of reactionaries, were massively enrolled or at least standing behind the resistance, which alone preserved the dignity of France in these years. France was a victorious power in 1945, although temporarily defeated in an early battle, that is, the fall of France in 1940, faithful throughout to her cause and to her allies, and thanks to the resistance in the free French, fully engaged in her own liberation and in the defeat of Germany. The Vichy regime, whose existence so sharply differentiated France's case from that of other occupied countries, whose governments had moved into exile in London, is dismissed by the official version as illegal and illegitimate from its inception—a point, incidentally, which De Gaulle maintained to the end of his life: that the actual establishment of Pétain's government was never done on the basis of any legal or constitutional grounds. The French law courts had more difficulty with that, but the political tradition was quite certain about it.

Well, where then does Ophüls' film fit? To deal with this question, some consideration of the reaction to *The Sorrow and the Pity* when it appeared in France is rather useful. The movie, as you will see, does clearly have a point of view; it is generally on the side of the resistance, in that it gives no support to the interpretations that are favorable to Vichy, but it is not in agreement with the official version of Vichy and the resistance. It unhesitatingly shows Vichy

complicity with Nazi policies, and at the same time it reveals a widespread mediocrity and passivity of the mass of the French population on the other... in the same instance.

Now this film, which was originally made for Swiss and West German television companies, met hostile reception from the state-owned television network in France, and to this day it has never been shown on French television at all, though it was opened up and has been shown in movie theatres in France. And the official hostility and refusal to place this particular account of France's past in this period on French television is really rooted in a twofold situation. First of all, it does go against the official Gaullist version of the whole episode. It rejects that official version which is defended by its adherence on the grounds that the important thing for France since 1945 was to overcome her weaknesses, to play a vital role to regain rank and esteem. And that this could be done not by explicitly denying the real shame or sorrow as by explicitly emphasizing the real heroism. The argument runs: if one wants a people to win victories over their worst flaws, one must appeal to what is noble in them. If one wants to bring out the best, it is the best that you must celebrate. As De Gaulle told Malraux, in this conversation that they had in 1972 shortly before De Gaulle died: "Man was not made," De Gaulle said, "to be guilty. Sin is not interesting. The only ethics are those which lead man towards the greater things he carries in himself." Thus, if the official version had a self-serving function, in that it legitimized the postwar political leadership in France, it had even a more therapeutic mission.

But there is another reason, beyond the fact that *The Sorrow and the Pity* attacks this official version, for the hostility against it when it appeared in the first instance as a completed work for television. And this reason is not rooted in any interpretation of the Vichy period, the official version versus attempts to debunk it; this is rooted in a much more immediate experience in French history: the events that occurred in France in May of 1968, when you had the student strikes and various activities on the part of at least some groups of the French workers, because one of the groups that immediately supported the student strikes in France were some of the people who at that time were employed in high positions within national French television. One of these men was Marcel Ophüls, who is the man who puts together *The Sorrow and the Pity*, and he and an associate of his were immediately dismissed by the government for their support of the student strike. Consequently, when the film was finished, there was a definite suspicion on the part of Gaullist politicians that *The Sorrow and the Pity* was not simply an attempt to reveal the true experiences of France in 1940 to 1945, but that lurking in the film itself, through the processes of editing and organization, was a contemporary statement being made against Gaullist governments and De Gaulle's own political leadership. One must realize the great relish that the people who made *The Sorrow and the Pity* undoubtedly felt when one of their real heroes, the old French peasant Louis Grave, in commenting on Pétain, says at one point: "80-year-old political leaders should be thrown to the pigs." Well, it didn't take a great deal to see

how this was going to irritate a government that was still largely sympathetic to the Gaullist position, De Gaulle having himself advanced beyond 80 in 1969.

So, the suspicion, then, is a reason also for the hostility that the film has received in official circles. And, what I'd like you to consider for a moment, in terms of then looking at various aspects of what *The Sorrow and the Pity* presents as an interpretation, is that it in fact *is* one of various interpretations, and that, like these other interpretations, I do not think that by any means it is totally free from either its own ideological assumptions—and consequently it is not an attempt to simply reveal a historical period as it was, to liberate from the myths that they had about it, but that it also continues something that is common to all of the other interpretations of Vichy and the resistance period. It is trying to represent a particular ideological—using that word very generally—point of view about this historical crisis. Speaking, I think more *dramatically* than any other way, to how such a historical episode can continue to have a vitality in the development of a society such as contemporary France today.

Now, I think also it is these sorts of interpretations, many of which have elements of truth in them—and undoubtedly there is much truth in the view that is presented in *The Sorrow and the Pity*—but that it is, quote: “These sorts of historical interpretations that provoked Paul Valéry, in 1931, to issue this lambast against history,” and let me take his statement as a starting point for this problem of interpretations versus historical interpretations: “History,” Valéry wrote, “is the most dangerous product that has evolved from the chemistry of the intellect. Its properties are well-known. It causes dreams, it intoxicates whole peoples, gives them false memories, quickens their reflexes, keeps their old wounds open, torments them in their repose, and leads them into delusions either of grandeur or persecution, and it makes nations bitter, arrogant, insufferable, and vain. History will justify anything. It teaches precisely nothing, for it contains everything and it furnishes examples of everything.”

Now, lest you think that this quotation is to be followed by my own personal disavowal of the significance of historical interpretation, let me set your mind at ease. I rather would like to point out that Valéry's outburst refers more to what I have earlier referred to as interpretations that are rooted in some psycho-social need—and here it would probably be well to add the ideological requirements—that seems to exist with people in attempting to cope with elements of their past, such as the French coping with the Vichy and the resistance period. And what I would rather consider to be historical interpretations are correctives to this other form of interpretation, not that they will necessarily yield the same sort of moral lesson and impact that a somewhat creative and dramatic documentation like *The Sorrow and the Pity* might add, but that the historical interpretation *captures* something and *corrects* something that even such a

compelling performance as this is really fails to understand about this particular period, in this instance, in the history of the French people.

And I would like to try to deal now, specifically, with some of the things that I think it fails to present and possibly some of the reasons why it fails to present them. First of all, let's consider the first half of the film, which is divided into the section on the collapse of France. Here is where you get much of the portrayal of the Vichy regime and what it was like. And for the most part, I think there is very little to quarrel with in the way that the film presents this particular experience. But where it fails, is that if anything, it is really too *easy* on the Vichy government. It reveals it as weak, it reveals people as seeking some sort of security in any form of government and authority, and so on. But what it misses is the *real nature* of collaboration as the Vichy government engaged in it. And here, let me just try to summarize what the form of collaboration was that historical accounts make much more real and immediate than the presentation you have in certainly the official versions or even in *The Sorrow and the Pity*. Collaboration was *not* a German demand to which Frenchmen, that is, the leaders of the Vichy government particularly, acceded to through either sympathy with the Germans or through guile as a means of trying to stave off the worst effects of German occupation, but collaboration was a *French* proposal, particularly between 1940 and 1942, that Hitler ultimately rejected. Put so baldly, the statement needs some qualifications. Hitler was obviously not passive in the face of this; he wanted a docile and amenable France. But undeniably, it was from the Pétain regime—the Marshal himself and primarily his two major ministers, Laval and Darlan—it was primarily from this regime that a stream of overtures came for a genuine working together between France and Nazi Germany. For a broad Franco-German settlement, going beyond the armistice to hopefully an actual peace treaty between the two countries, for voluntary association as a neutral, with Hitler's efforts to keep the Allies out of Europe, and above all, to protect the French empire and prepare it as an integral part of some new European order dominated by Hitler's Germany. And eventually, many of them hoped, for full partnership in this new European order.

So the first point I would like to make about the first part of the movie is, I think, here it is much too mild when it deals with the experience of collaboration. That in fact, the Vichy government was not simply passive or playing a duplicitous game with the Germans. It was not simply trying to shield its own citizens; it was actively seeking a collaboration that would, above all, benefit France in terms of her overseas territories. And then there is another aspect to this collaboration that, again, is something I think that you miss in this particular form of documentary presentation: that the French quest for a settlement with Germany was only one side of collaboration; collaboration is not seen as a whole without its domestic dimensions. Externally, the Vichy position rested upon a certainty of German victory, and a preference for



peace and stability over a last-ditch resistance. But internally, the armistice and the Vichy regime offered a historic opportunity for change such as France had not seen throughout most of the 19th century. Conservatives who had been denied power on the basis of the activity of universal suffrage since 1924, now had power. Technicians, who had had power denied them by the politicians of the Third Republic, now had power, and that this combination of forces: the conservatives who came in to take over the political machinery, and the technical experts who emerged with a role in French society that they had never really enjoyed before, set about enthusiastically to actually restructure French society. Now, under normal circumstances, one would not be surprised if technicians and conservatives started to restructure a society, but compared to any other occupied European country, France undertook, in the midst of this situation, to actually try to change its domestic and internal social and political organization. And not simply did so, but did so with a great deal of relish and enthusiasm.

So the other point that I would like you to see as you look at *The Sorrow and the Pity* is one of the things that is *not* captured there as it deals with the problem of collaboration and so on, is that Vichy was not simply an aberration, it was not a moment discontinuous with any of the other developments of French history. Vichy was an *experience* rooted in what France had been before 1940: a country in which real antagonisms existed in which the parliamentary regime was seen as an obstacle to modernization and the change of French society, and which offered certain groups the opportunity to do that. But even more importantly, that the continuity in Vichy was the other way too. It carries into what France has been *since* the war, when ironically, the Vichy technocrats, very few of whom suffered any severe consequences from the liberation courts while novelists and playwrights and intellectuals who went around spouting Vichy propaganda were severely punished, the technical bureaucracy of Vichy rather nicely melded into the postwar governments of the Fourth and Fifth Republic, working quite handily with resistance fighters who were equally determined to permit the technical expert to take control of French society. And that this continuity is something that you also miss. That in this sense, then, collaboration was a form of an ongoing policy that existed in France both before and after the period of 1940 to 1945.

Now, what I think this reveals about the Vichy thing is far more frightening than the experiences that you will see in terms of *The Sorrow and the Pity*. It is, of course, unpleasant to look at a film like this, which most of us immediately assume we would be on the side of the resistance anyway, and see these people simply collaborating, giving in, actually accepting this with some enthusiasm, but what you *don't* see is how tremendously lasting what they did in the Vichy period has been to the sort of government and society that France today. And here, I think, the message of the historical interpretation is far more important for Americans trying to

understand such problems as the development of the technological society in the modern state since the Second World War.

Now, if this is one source of interpretation that I think the historical corrective offers, that is, it calls you to go *beyond* what you see, to realize that there is more there in some ways of greater significance than you may realize. There is another problem with *The Sorrow and the Pity* that I would have to say I would approach from the negative criticisms of it, and this has to do with the way that, in the second part of the film that is called "The Choice," the experiences of the French resistance are actually treated. Now as I told you, I think, clearly the film is on the side of the resistance, and the nobility, the courage of some members of the resistance is clearly portrayed. But I think also, in treating the resistance, you have the greatest failures of the film. And why these failures are there, I think, goes back to the whole question that this is still an interpretation rooted in these ideological processes that the French have engaged in.

But let me illustrate this by making some specific points about the question of interpreting the resistance. While the overall view is that indeed the resistance was a good thing, that it was dignified; some of the people who represent the resistance in the film are really rather silly. First of all, consider this: the movie takes place and concentrates on Clermont-Ferrand, which is an industrial town within the area of Vichy France. It is also a city that has, as its major industries, such things as the Michelin Tire Company. All right, this is the device. But then when you see what happens in terms of resistance people appearing, I think you can begin to appreciate that the official version does have some validity in objecting to this. For example, you have these two lycée teachers who become increasingly comical figures as they are interviewed, to the point that the interviewer asked them at one stage: "Well, didn't some of your students suffer in terms of the occupation of resistance?" and so on, "Didn't this bother you at the time?" and the one says, "Well, I don't remember any of them suffering," and he said, "What about the names on the plaque behind you commemorating those students from this lycée who died in the course of the Second World War?" and he said, "Oh, is that from *that* war? I thought it was from the First World War." Well, this of course leaves you with a certain *impression*, undeniably valid in the case of that particular lycée professor. But then what is not pointed out in the film is that the University of Strasbourg, which was *moved* from Strasbourg to Clermont-Ferrand when the Germans invaded and occupied, was a very major center, both in its student body and in its faculty, of resistance to the Germans, and in fact it was the resistance that the University of Strasbourg in residence in Clermont-Ferrand that brought some of the harshest Nazi reprisals in that particular area. And yet there is actually no mention whatsoever of this particular situation. Or, take another view of this: you have the pharmacist, who is to represent basically the bourgeois attitude, and he is the one who says, "It was a time of sorrow and pity, of shame and pity, for us, and the only thing that we really felt we could do,

like when there was the removal of Jews from the Vichy zone and so on, was to go in our cellars and lock the doors and cry.” And he again presents a certain impression, but at the same time no mention is mentioned of the fact that the Michelin family in Clermont-Ferrand, Madame Michelin herself, was jailed for resistance activities. I mean, here is a French industrial family, clearly one of the representatives of French bourgeois society, who was not the sort represented by the pharmacist who goes into his cellar. Or take another situation: you have this strange French army officer, Colonel Jonchay, who is a member of the right wing, who was in the resistance, and when he is interviewed he also becomes sillier and sillier to the point that he finally says things like: “Well, I suppose I resisted because basically I’m a monarchist, and I would have preferred a monarchy to the Pétain regime, and when I was given orders to cooperate with the Communist resistance, I did not do so because I am a Catholic and I don’t like Communists.” And here, a whole other segment of the life of the resistance is portrayed, but what is not mentioned is again, even in this very area, you had priests and Communists working together in resistance activities, you had the activity of the group known as the *Témoignage chrétien*, largely made up of Catholic priests, that spent much of their time rescuing Jewish children and hiding them in homes of French citizens.

And then, a final illustration of this that I would like to point out to you is in these two other areas. Duclos speaks for the Communist resistance, and there is a question as to why he should, he has nothing whatsoever to do with Clermont-Ferrand, but *he* is brought in, whereas the treatment of De Gaulle, whatever one may think of him, is remarkably silly in this film; it shows De Gaulle reading his statement, in terms of the BBC, and then its consideration of him is so brief as to absolutely reduce De Gaulle and the Free French to total insignificance. There is an element of truth to this, that within France De Gaulle’s movement was not immediately important, but what it fails to point out is that as the resistance went on, as organizations developed, as interplay between the resistance groups both in occupied France and then later in Vichy were organized, *then* the Free French activities became more important. The establishment of the National Committee of Resistance, when Jean Moulin was sent to France, is almost never cited. The fact that Georges Bidault was the next leader of the organization of resistance forces is not pointed out, and I think here it fails to capture the way in which the resistance was *more* than this very subjective and personal attitude that you frequently see presented by the people who are interviewed. It *was* an increasingly organized activity, not only within but going outside of France to what was going on in London as well.

Now, one final illustration of this, which is so subtle that you tend to almost completely lose it: the real hero of this, in many ways, is the old French peasants, the Grave brothers, who are eminently likeable and there is no way that you cannot identify with these “good men of the soil,” and so on. But what you miss is that they didn’t work for the French resistance, they

worked for British intelligence. And here you have to place yourself for a moment, then, within the position of the Frenchman looking at something like this. There were also good solid peasant types who were in French resistance units, who didn't have to gain their dignity and courage working—not that this was debilitating to them—but representing British intelligence activities.

So in some very subtle and I think understandably irritating ways, there is still the ideological content being presented in *The Sorrow and the Pity*. And while I don't think you can answer this sort of question absolutely, I think the question that Stanley Kauffman raises in his historical introduction to the scenario of the film in English is an important one: "If this movie were made in 1967, before the May strikes in 1968, before what happened to the people who made the film in relationship to the Gaullist regime, would it have been the same film?" And whether that can ever be decided or not, I think it is an important question to remember, because if anything, it reemphasizes what I hope you will see running through this as another sort of consideration. That this sort of interpretation, while important because it unveils the myths and reveals the truths that have been hidden, is still rooted in that same sort of coping with the past that is not free from whatever psychological or sociological or ideological needs are there, and that the corrective of, if you will, an historical interpretation is not only valuable because it can point out these sorts of problems, but I think also because it again calls us back to this reality that is still hidden here: that both the Vichy government and the resistance, however you wish to view that particular form, are more realistically seen as part of this ongoing continuity in the development of a modern technical, political society. And the questions that should probably be raised about the dangers of *that* development, most of these ways of coping with the past that the French have used in talking about Vichy and the resistance really fail to speak to. And basically, this is sort of thing I would like you to consider, and hopefully that some of these specific things will make you aware that you do have to watch for certain of the ideological elements that are being presented to you in this, what I hope finally you will see if you do see it, overwhelming documentary portrayal. And if you have any questions, I would be more than happy to answer some of them, or attempt to... Yeah?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: [in background and partly inaudible] Yes, why is there no mention of the... [...] nationalism...

REARDON: You mean "Why, in terms of..."

AUDIENCE MEMBER: [indistinct] ...or did he, in cinema graphics...

REARDON: Well, I don't know that... I mean, well, what I'd say is that maybe they thought... that may not simply be what he wants to characterize, and I think that's valid enough, that he may not want to characterize that. That his interest is in something else. But what I think is interesting is when you put these two questions and interpretation together; what, for example, Paxton does when he writes on Vichy and the resistance, is to raise whether or not if you... look, if you want to get anything out of it in terms of "does it speak to us," one thing I hope I've absolutely avoided for you is that there are no analogies between Vichy France and the United States. That's a dangerous game and really rather meaningless. But in the sense that this is part of the development of a modern political, technological society, there are things that are important for us to realize. And in that sense, *The Sorrow and the Pity* simply doesn't deal with that dimension of the historical reality. And I think possibly this, you know, in terms of its... its failure as a documentary is the thing that I would point to.

Its greatness, of course, is it is a terribly compelling and personal sort of experience, though let me mention one thing: on the cover of this English version there's a remarkable statement: "The film persuades one of the truth of Karl Marx's aphorism, 'History walks on two feet.' In other words, that it is enacted by ordinary as well as extraordinary men and women." Well, it's this sort of thing that I'm rather bothered by. First of all, that's not what Marx meant by history walking on two feet, but that being aside, it is the sort of thing that you find being presented when you get the argument, "This is really much more *real* than what I might understand about looking at this experience through dealing with an attempt on the part of somebody to present it as a historical act of scholarship." And the point I'm raising is that I really find that objectionable. It has a *reality*, undoubtedly, but it also lacks the kind of reality that the attempt to *see* this experience, in a way that none of the people in the film themselves probably even today see it. That is, there are obviously people here today who know something about the ongoing history of France and so on, Mendès' France we would say undoubtedly be one of these. But there are also people who still see these experiences in very personal and subjective terms, and official interpretations, and I think even his interpretation, continues to play on that, as opposed to trying to look at it in a way that the other approach might result in. Yeah, Andries... ?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Well, as far as the documentation, aren't they only attempting to be somewhat objective in the... or should be, on the condition that aren't documentaries somewhat objective in that they are offering information and not characterizing one ideology [...] and not the other?

REARDON: Well, let me... for one thing, I don't wish to... I'm not criticizing it in terms of either being a documentary or what he's doing, and I hope that I didn't do that, but...

AUDIENCE MEMBER: [mid-sentence] ...the question is shouldn't a documentary be...

REARDON: "Should they be"... Well, maybe, Andries, you... [laughs]

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I completely agree with your criticism. I think it ought to be understood that while the Vichy period was going on, Ophüls was a student in, of all places, a Hollywood high school. My question is, should [...] be goading the filmmakers to make more films like this? It's been tried and it's been disastrous in the past. In other words, what do we do if we want to make the kind of films that you'd really learn from the past from?

REARDON: No I... it seems to me that I would say that exactly. That it isn't gonna work. Now I'm not going to venture into the field of film or in terms of understanding the problems in film, but I think... it seems to me one reason that there is a problem here is that the sort of understanding... I mean when you say that history walks on two feet and it means that it's enacted by ordinary men and women, well yes, of course that's true, but history is also an understanding of something that transcends what individual men and women may have done and thought they were doing. And I suppose the problem, then, in terms of the technique of the documentary film, is since it still uses that device of the individual remembering and reflecting, it isn't really able to escape to that other level, which is a very impersonal one. You know, and I'm not sure really that that could be done in terms of the sort of approach he's taken, I'm not sure at all... do you think that?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: No.

REARDON: You think it could be.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: [asks question in background]

REARDON: Yeah, I mean you can, of course, you don't want to... you recognize the same objection is made against every work of historical scholarship, that you also are selecting the material. And I think while the problem of selectivity is a very real one here, it operates in somewhat different ways, I think. The problem of the historian selecting his material is one that I think we can clearly recognize in terms of whether he really tries to exhaust the information and how he much tries to liberate himself from bringing preconceptions to it, but I wonder that if in terms of the approach that you have in the documentary, the very evidence itself, in the sense of individual people remembering and thinking back and then being shown that it really wasn't the way they remember it, isn't a very different sort problem of selectivity. I mean that

it seems to me so completely caught up in that very personal and subjective view of it. Well, for example, one thing that I think came across as I watched this thing: of course, if you take that approach, you end up thinking that the resistance is a very disorganized, highly individualistic activity, for example. Because it's only when it's all over and when the vast amount of material can be put together that the sort of organization and unity that it had could ever become possible... you could ever become aware of it. And these people were approaching it not knowing that sort of material, but only again remembering it in terms of their own experiences.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Did the resistance have a material effect in... in driving the Nazis out?

REARDON: This is... I think this is really hard to say. I think at this point, given the work that has been done on the resistance, the answer probably is of course "No." That it had... it did not have an effect in the sense of being an absolutely critical factor in it, in terms of driving the Germans out of France or anything else. And I think here, something, again, of the thing that Ophüls is trying to do is a very valuable contribution. This should not, then, diminish the resistance, because then it has to be thought of having a value other than the one that the official version of all of this has actually given it. Which, historically, is very questionable. Because it is the official version that it *did* have, undeniably, a *very* important role to play. And the evidence there, from the perspective of historical evidence, is rather on the other side I think.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: So was the resistance [...] a few people or a few isolated people, or was it actually rooted in a general context in the manner of [...]

REARDON: OK. Certainly, that analogy is not one to go to, it's nothing like that; but I think here the difficulty arises in this sense: that what the film portrays for you is, I think, *not* accurate in the sense that the resistance is seen as this highly individualistic thing, and most of the French are seen going on after 1942 right to the end really behaving in the way they had behaved all along. Now, that is very questionable, because, you know, collaborationist movie stars are a very special group, and to use those as a means of symbolizing that the French never really got around to considering that this was a bad situation is, I think, to distort what the situation was. On the other hand, this does not mean that of course, every Frenchman, as the official version tries to indicate, was solidly behind the resistance, hiding resistance fighters, giving them moral support, and everything else. Quite the opposite. This was a very confused, very confused activity all along. There was constantly *danger* from the resistance, particularly the maquis, and French farmers sometimes decided to defend themselves against the resistance, which was looting and getting food and everything else. But there obviously is no national... complete national support for it, but neither is there the completely ongoing national indifference of the

mass of the population toward it. It probably couldn't have lasted at all if the French population was as indifferent as this film really portrays them. That is, it should have been a lot easier for Vichy and the Germans to get rid of the French resistance if there was such a complete separation between the resistance fighter and his group, and the mass of the population.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: [asks question in background]

REARDON: Yeah. Certainly, I think after '42, and in '43 and '44. It is a far different situation than it was in 1940 to 1942. And this is why I find it somewhat bothersome, because I don't think he brings this out at all. I think he maintains that notion of sort of an unchanged attitude on the part of the mass of the population. And I think clearly you can say that there are changes, and that there was an increasing, at least tacit support of resistance activity by '43 and '44.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Looking at the historical significance itself of [...], is this an attempt to [...] De Gaulle or [...] De Gaulle's movements that are going on within France? That are having to express themselves outside of the confines of the French... the state, in order to have... expression or possibly the impact that would be necessary to have to offer another opinion on...

REARDON: Well, certainly I think...

AUDIENCE MEMBER: [continues in background]

REARDON: I don't think that there's any doubt that the film is anti-Gaullist.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: [responds in background]

REARDON: You mean ongoing since 1968?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Or before.

REARDON: I don't think that you'll find that this particular approach existed much before '68. I suppose what you're... what really is in evidence here and something in evidence in the May '68 situation, and it's probably the sort of common experience in terms of generational development. The students in May of '68, as they have been interviewed, educated in France since the war, don't know anything about Vichy and the resistance period. The accounts of it in terms of French education are minimal. And what is known is that which is presented in terms of the official sort of national celebration of it. And one of the things that obviously, here, I



think, places what the film is doing, is that here is a presentation to a generation that is enthusiastic about seeing this sort of national myth set aside, and doesn't find the problems when it sees it that you will find... and I'll give you a personal experience, I mean I've talked to people who *were* members of French resistance groups, who are people in their fifties, who for the most part are anti-Gaullist leftists, and their reaction to the film is very much the same hostility frequently in these, at least, these few examples I could think of, as you find on the part of the head of the ORTF and the French television and in the Gaullist politician. And in this sense, I suppose that here you see this as a cultural reality then. The young French are able to deal with it because they don't feel they have anything to... it doesn't have anything to do with them, really. The people who lived through it in some way are the ones still obviously very bothered by it. Even when they themselves may not be in sympathy with the Gaullist version and the official notion of what it was supposed to have been about at all.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Then the old versus the new [...] has a personal, historical relationship to the event and the other seems to be lacking that historical dimension that is...

REARDON: Well, let's say this: that I think that the difference is that the older reaction certainly does lack any attempt to place this in terms of a historical experience of a problem of continuity, and any attempt to view it otherwise, which is what the *The Sorrow and the Pity* is attempting to do, either has to be what he does do, or it requires that you then try to go to the sort of historical scholarship that really only is beginning to appear. I would say that until a book like Paxton's book on Vichy France, it would be almost impossible to really find out the sort of, you know, more complete picture of the Vichy experience, and this is something that's just occurring—and incidentally, the reasons for things like this—Paxton is the first historian to deal with Vichy who has ever gone to *German* sources, which the French have consistently not done. And what he finds in going to German sources is that collaboration, as I tried to outline it for you, was much more the initiative on the part of Vichy than it ever was something being demanded from the side of the German government. And, you know, how comfortable then would the French be with this sort of information goes back to that sort of division. Supposedly, you know, if you didn't see this as intricately part of your experiences, then that sort of information wouldn't be as bothersome to you. [pauses for further questions or comments] Very well.

[applause; some background noise; tape runs silent about 8 seconds; program ends]