Bon Voyage (Jean-Paul Rappeneau, 2003), and Laissez-Passer (Bertrand Tavernier, 2002)

That Bon Voyage is a kind of comedy-thriller says much. A comedy-thriller set during the very week that France fell in 1940 indicates that France has, sixty-plus years later, come to terms with what happened. Imagine an English comedy-thriller set in Coventry during the Blitz. Mike Leigh should try one. Bon Voyage even has a MacGuffin: the carload of heavy water – for French nuclear physics was, as we all know, far in advance of anyone else’s in 1940 – which must be got across the channel (to Cambridge!) before either the Nazis capture it, or Gérard Depardieu, the incipient collaborationist Interior Minister, hides it for use as a bargaining point. Then there’s the distinguished elderly Jewish physicist who must be smuggled out too. Around this MacGuffin swirls the real plot: will Isabelle Adjani, as France’s cine-sweetheart, get off (a) with the young ex-lover whom she sets up to take a murder-rap for her, (b) with Depardieu, or (c) with Peter Coyote, who turns out to be a Nazi? (his German sounds better than his French, so we’re not surprised when he finally comes out with a “Heil Hitler”). Because Grégori Derangère as her young fall-guy is so sexy, we hope he doesn’t get off with her, but with the ingénue (Virginie Ledoyen). He moves so fast all the time, and has such a wonderful expression of manic disbelief on his face throughout, that we want him to win the ingénue – and he does. He also ends up in the resistance.

By the end of the movie, France still hasn’t quite fallen.
Laissez-Passer is different. When it starts, in 1942, France is well-fallen. If there’s an air-raid, you gather the dead fish it throws up from the canal near the film studio where you work, and share them out. Windows without curtains are painted black. Gas is on only for four hours a day. If the Brits bomb, babies in hospitals are at risk. Everyone’s thinner. Even Gérard Depardieu would have been thinner. A cabbage is a gift for which you’re grateful. In the brothels, if Germans are regular guests, you have hot water – if they’re not, you don’t. Germans are overseeing the film industry. Film stock is low, and few takes are possible. If you do too many early in the shoot, you’re short later. Ideally you do one take. Suggest an extension of the shooting schedule, and they suggest you go to Germany to study German production methods. If you set up a scene with food in it, the extras eat the food when your back is turned. In one scene, a rare close-up occurs when the man who would have written the score turns up and says he can’t do it any more. Asked why, he turns back his overcoat to reveal the yellow star he now has to wear.

How to survive in such an environment?

The film industry is the main setting, and the movie has come in for some criticism for the way it treats it. Real people feature, such as Maurice Tourneur and Richard Pottier. Henri-Georges Clouzot works down the corridor, but we never see him. Pierre Fresnay almost appears. In one scene we see Michel Simon (with back to camera) saying that he can’t act with Germans watching him. The Germans leave. There’s a sarcastic reference to Fernandel, but none to Arletty.

One of their few confrontations

The film has two protagonists – both real characters – Jean-Devaivre, an assistant director, and Jean Aurenche, a scriptwriter (later to be an associate of Tavernier). Each is tempted to collaborate. Devaivre, a family man, is already in the resistance; nevertheless he works for the Germans. Aurenche is a coureur de jupons, with at least three complaisant jupons to choose from at any one time, and isn’t in the resistance; but he won’t work for the Germans. There is therefore an interesting potential dialectic, but there isn’t really a narrative, as there is in Bon Voyage: the interest lies in watching each man bear up under pressure. Despite the excellence of the detail, the thing meanders, and by halfway it’s harder to care – or does watching it straight after the skilfully plotted Bon Voyage make us less accommodating? One thinks of Tavernier’s Ça Commence Aujourd’hui, and realises that very little narrative occurs in that either (though the visit of the Ofsted-type inspector still makes my blood boil like nothing in either of the present films). A plot may be a cheap device – but it’s nice to have one nonetheless. Here, Tavernier uses up a lot of film with Devaivre cycling the 220 kilometres from Paris to his in-laws’ farm in the country, and then back again. One
can’t see what it’s supposed to signify other than his athleticism, and by the time he gets back
one’s forgotten the plot, in so far as there was one.

Later, he steals some German military documents from an office down the corridor and
flies with them by night to England, where he’s interrogated by some highly sceptical Brits
headed by Jeremy Child and Tim Piggott-Smith. His go-between is a Vichy civil servant,
who’s also in the resistance. The episode is very funny, and the fact that Devaivre has flu,
parachutes out without ever having jumped before, and has to cycle back, increases our
admiration for his endurance – but again, when he gets back, we’ve forgotten what’s going
on.

If the character under examination had been Clouzot, there might have been a bit more
edge to it all – it would have put *Les Diaboliques* and *Le Salaire de le Peur* into a new light;
but Devaivre never did anything as interesting as Clouzot. He was, as you might say, the
Ralph Thomas of the French forties and fifties. Not even the Roy Baker.