

“Le Lucien Lacombe de 1944 est un jeune homme d’aujourd’hui”:

The Collaboration as Anti-Tragedy

by

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Louis Malle’s critically acclaimed 1974 film *Lacombe, Lucien*¹, while ostensibly “about” collaboration during the German occupation of France during World War II, challenges us to rethink the oversimplified dichotomy between *résistance* and *collaboration* endorsed by de Gaulle at the end of the war, neatly separating those who were for the Germans from those who were against them, branding the former with a moral stigma and bestowing eternal glory on the latter. Thus, after the war, “Frenchmen of the Liberation charged Vichy Frenchmen with having wanted or even helped a German victory in order to further their reactionary schemes” just as Vichy Frenchmen, in 1940, had charged that the Popular Front, this “monstrous alliance of Muscovite Communism, Masonic radicalism, and Jewish finance” had “precipitated France into an ideological war, after having weakened her” (Paxton 4).

The truth is more banal: the French did not want to fight in 1940... at least not to the last Frenchman (Paxton 8). With the memory of the slaughter in World War I still fresh in its collective unconscious,² France not only was prepared to go to great lengths to avoid war, but was determined to avoid a final showdown with Germany once the war had begun. A majority of the nation therefore welcomed Vichy. As the American historian Robert O. Paxton showed in his groundbreaking study *Vichy France: Old Guard, New Order*, first published in 1972, the new regime in France “enjoyed mass support and elite participation” (Paxton 5) and continued to do so until the ultimate outcome of the war no longer was in any doubt and ordinary people’s

allegiances suddenly switched 180 degrees. Virtually overnight, millions of Frenchmen became *résistants* and naturally were quick to buy into the myth of resistance created after the war.

Until the Allied invasion of Normandy in June 1944, which functioned much like a sign from the heavens, confirming what everyone had expected but had not been able to count on until it actually began, French attitudes toward Germany and Vichy were profoundly ambivalent, making it difficult to divide all but a small minority neatly between the ranks of *collaborateurs* and *résistants*. We now know, and fully acknowledge, that everyday life under the Occupation was not always black and white, morally speaking, and often put ordinary people in awkward positions, forcing them to make sometimes difficult choices. The *fonctionnaire* who continued to work (effectively running Vichy), the teacher who continued to teach (all but the touchiest subjects), the baker who continued to bake bread and sell it to the public (including the German occupier), the policeman who continued to police (and, from time to time, round up Jews, as happened in the ignominious *rafle du vel d'hiv'* in July 1942), the lawyer or magistrate who enforced Vichy's persecution of Jews by applying a seemingly liberal law, the S.n.c.f. employee who worked to make the trains run on time (trains that were used to deport approximately 80,000 French and foreign-born Jews who had sought refuge in France)--at what point did all these individuals cross the invisible line of eternal damnation, of absolute right and wrong, and become active collaborators? Moreover, people's motives frequently were less than noble; opportunism was everywhere, as were coercion, greed, and immaturity. It is not hard to understand what people did and why; their reasons are all too obvious, all too human. But how do they explain that to their children and grandchildren who suddenly one day become curious about what daddy did during the war? By 1995, when Jacques Chirac took office as the fifth president of the French Republic, the Gaullist myth of a "predominantly resistant France"

(Hoffman), lay in ruins and the new president acknowledged as much on the anniversary of the *vel d'Hiv'* razzia.

Germany today is once again facing the same kind of moral quandary, as it struggles to become reconciled with and assimilate the evils of the former German Democratic Republic (DDR) with its super-efficient but infinitely softer (at least compared to the Gestapo or the KGB) STASI East German security services. How could more than one third of the population serve as informants at one time or another and still keep on going, day after day? The recent box-office success, *The Lives of Others*, which tells the story of a STASI surveillance operation carried out against an East German artist in the waning days of the DDR in the 1980s, shows how what happened in France during the Occupation could happen--and has happened, with a tragic frequency--everywhere. Not to worry, Germany will digest the STASI just like it did the Nazis and the Holocaust, and still come out looking good. At least Germans are the first to acknowledge the evils of the past, unlike the French, the Japanese, or the Russians, or even the Americans for that matter.

I am the last person to minimize the evils of the collaboration; sadly, there was no shortage of clear-cut cases of active collaboration, of Frenchmen who, for one reason or another, chose to support the evil designs of the Nazi occupier. The seventeen-year-old country boy Lucien Lacombe falls into that category if for no other reason that he did what he did because he wanted to, out of his own free will (though it is not clear that he fully understood the full implications of his choice--in all likelihood he did not, since he is portrayed as an uneducated adolescent with an evil streak, apparently oblivious to what is going on around him). Lucien rather reminds us of the kitchen boy Joseph in Louis Malle's 1987 box-office success *Au revoir les enfants*, who becomes

a collaborator after being fired, out of spite but also because he has no where else to turn for friendship and moral support.

As Jean-Paul Sartre saw it--and his categorical “either/or” type of morality, a.k.a. existentialism (neatly distinguishing between the *authentic person* and the *salaud* [bastard]), became all the rage after the war--a man is the sum total of his acts. In a similar vein Sartre also declared that Frenchmen had never been as free as they were during the Occupation (sic), by which he presumably meant that everyone was free to choose sides and act accordingly, which of course is easier said than done (including in Sartre’s case) and helps explain why there are so few heroes anywhere. But when all is said and done, Lucien Lacombe is the quintessential *salaud* who did more evil than good, despite mitigating circumstances and the occasional *geste moral*, such as trying to save his Jewish girlfriend France. No doubt he deserved the firing squad at Liberation, but then so too did the René Bousquets and Maurice Papon and other bigwigs of the Vichy regime who not only were not punished after the war but even prospered for many years until they either died of natural causes or finally were brought to justice.

As we know now, the resistance was far from a paragon of virtue. Thousands of real and purported collaborators (an estimated 10-15,000) were purged, i.e., summarily tried and executed, in the summer of 1944 before de Gaulle could establish a new government with full authority over the entire country (Rousso). Tens of thousands of women who had engaged in so-called “horizontal collaboration” had their heads shaved and were paraded around half-naked in the streets to the merriment of the brave locals, who, for the most part, had done nothing at all to abet the resistance. As Alain Resnais’s cinematographic masterpiece *Hiroshima mon amour* or the television documentary *Sleeping with the Enemy*, underscore, it is clear that far from all

“collaborators” deserved the severe punishment they received at the hands of kangaroo courts as World War II was winding down in France during the summer and fall of 1944.

In this respect, the French were not any different from other peoples in occupied Europe, or from people anywhere really caught in the middle of an all-out war. Human nature being what it is, it is no surprise that people are capable of the greatest good and the most abject evil. Although such an attitude toward history might be considered by some as an accommodation or compromise of sorts, as moral relativism or even nihilism, it could also be argued that real people living in actual time never have 20/20 vision and, for the most part, do not have the moral character to become heroes when challenged by extreme adversity. Life is ambiguous and never more so than in time of war. There was usually a reason why people did what they did; however, upon reflection, it was seldom a very uplifting or morally edifying one. And it is a fact that we tend to forget, or at least overlook, the ugly moments in the past which continue to haunt us until they one day they rear their ugly heads. In his recent memoir the German Nobel laureate Günther Grass finally confessed that he had served in the Waffen-SS during the war; his hypocrisy is cruelly ironic because he had spent the better part of his career denouncing other Germans who, like him, had covered up their collusion with the Nazi regime. How sweet it is--in former German chancellor Helmut Kohl's words--to enjoy the “mercy of a late birth” and not have to worry about what you did or did not do in the past!

Curiously, in Malle's film we see little evidence of the more common forms of collaboration except maybe for the occasional announcement on Vichy radio of the invasion being halted by courageous German soldiers prepared to die in order to stop the onslaught of Bolshevism. One reason the film attracted such ire upon its release is precisely that it was received as a slap in the face by the French nation, as nothing less than an onslaught on common decency. Resistance

fighters, especially those who had heeded General de Gaulle's call for resistance, his famous *appel du 18 juin* early on, naturally condemned the film. "Ordinary" collaborators, too, I mean *collaborateurs malgré eux*--the baker, the teacher, the policeman, the *petit fonctionnaire*--had long since convinced themselves that there had been nothing they could have done to change the situation one iota and that they had still needed to put food on the table. Resistance had simply not been an option for them. Besides, had not the new head of government, the venerable marshal Pétain, declared an end to hostilities and asked for an armistice?

Lucien Lacombe and his band of outlaw collaborators are an entirely different story: there is not one among them with any kind of redeeming moral value; they are derelicts and outcasts whom an average audience cannot identify with and who therefore invite no sympathy but only outright hostility. We can safely assume that Malle's intention is to provoke and to call into question accepted notions of collaboration by creating what for all practical purposes is a farfetched scenario. Although bits and pieces of the plot are historical (including many characters such as Tonin, the bicycle champion turned collaborator), the sum total, as it were, begs viewers to suspend disbelief.

Lucien's story nevertheless speaks to us today because of its moral ambiguity, which is obvious to anyone who has seen it and which has been much remarked upon by critics inside and outside academe ever since the film was released. Why does Lucien do what he does? Viewers are repulsed, to be sure, but still want answers. Lucien illustrates a moral vacuum or "black hole" in human nature: by his actions he not only is immoral; he is downright amoral. Lucien did not just fraternize with the German military, maybe giving directions or sharing a toast in a local café: he worked with the Gestapo and its French colleagues in the *milice*. He is portrayed not only as a bad Frenchman but as the devil in disguise. However, this is not to say that he is

without a longing for a moral conscience to guide him and to help him discern right from wrong; what transforms this film from a sensitive but pathetic case study focusing on the psychopathology of one pitiful collaborator into something greater than its main protagonist, into what I would venture to call an anti-tragedy, is precisely the anti-hero Lucien's struggle to find a moral compass in the chaos of the final months of the war, during the summer of 1944. To his credit, when he realizes that all is lost, he attempts to save his Jewish girlfriend France, redeeming himself somewhat in the eyes of the viewer, who must concur with what France's father, Albert Horn, says, at one point, to Lucien, rather matter-of-factly, "C'est curieux, mais je n'arrive pas à vous détester complètement." As such, Lucien epitomizes an average person with an underdeveloped morality coupled with poor judgment, caught up in a situation that quickly spins out of control.

But perhaps the idea that Lucien is a moral being is an illusion. The observant viewer will recall that Lucien went to France's home accompanied by a German soldier with the express idea of arresting and eventually deporting her. And in line with what we know of his amoral character Lucien kills the German soldier, thus precipitating the quixotic fugue with France and her grandmother that follows (her father had already chosen deportation in an act of suicide, as a futile gesture of protest against the unlikely goings-on in his own household), not because he has planned all along to elope with France but because the German, meticulous and honest as the German occupiers often were in their everyday dealings with the French civilian population, caught him stealing a watch belonging to Albert Horn and forced him to return it, or, rather, to include it with the family items confiscated by the *Wehrmacht*. Lucien, who, as we have seen time and again, rejects any form of disrespect ("je n'aime pas qu'on me tutoie," he says repeatedly), naturally has a motive (of course his motive is a superficial one; I mean, only a

primitive human being kills another human being because he feels that he has been insulted) for killing him, which he does without giving a second thought to what will happen next. A moment later, Lucien, mistress, and grand-mother speed off in a sinister black *traction* (a four-door Citroën), the kind favored by the Gestapo, and for a while stay out of sight in the rugged countryside of southwestern France until Lucien inevitably is arrested by the Resistance.

Young Lucien is a curious case of a *collaborateur malgré lui*, thus justifying director Louis Malle's frequently quoted but just as frequently misunderstood 1994 characterization of Lucien Lacombe as "un jeune homme d'aujourd'hui" ("a young man of today") [my trans]. The complete quote reads: "Par son immoralité candide et son appétit de vivre en ignorant toute idéologie, le Lacombe Lucien de 1944 est un jeune homme d'aujourd'hui" (Singerman 1062); this sentence puts the general character of the first quote into perspective, essentially underscoring Lucien's egotistic, self-indulgent search for the easy life. The moral ambiguity surrounding him makes the thrust of this historical film "allegorical" rather than "realistic" (Singerman 1062). As Malle stated emphatically: "Je regarde vivre mes personnages et m'interdis de les juger ou de les défendre" (Singerman 1060). It is as though the director were just following along for the ride, unable or unwilling to interfere.

To be sure, the film is more than faithful to the historical facts with regard to the characters portrayed and the set¹ but, as I have suggested, is mainly concerned with Lucien's initiation into the collaboration and *apprentissage* as a *collaborateur*. Lucien literally falls into the collaboration by accident. If his bicycle had not had a punctured tire, he would not have been out late at night and run into the militia. Or, to put it differently, if he had been out alone at night and fallen upon a resistance patrol, he is just as likely, morally speaking, to have joined the resistance. In fact, after learning that his mother's lover's son had joined the *maquis*, he

approached his schoolteacher, who was known to be in the resistance but was rejected by him, thus fueling his resentment and inciting a desire for revenge. The problem with Lucien, as with so many young people in any time period, is that he does not understand why he does the things he does. Thus, it is not by conviction that he collaborates; he does so out of convenience, more than anything else, and for kicks, to get away from the drudgery of working at a Catholic hospice.

Personally, I still find his naiveté troubling and even incomprehensible. To collaborate in 1940 is one thing; to do so in the summer of 1944, after D-Day, as the war is winding down, is quite another. How can anyone be so daft as Lucien not to see which way the wind is blowing? Moreover, by then, after four years of occupation, there can no longer be any doubt about the evil nature of the Nazi regime, even in this remote corner of southwestern France. Granted, Lucien is a poor country boy with little or no education and no moral support from family or friends, but he has eyes and ears and must be aware that there is a war going on. Now suddenly, when confronted with the choice of a lifetime--to collaborate or not--it is as though he does not care one iota about what happened to him, and so he lives only for the day! Other critics have remarked that the head of the *miliciens*, Tonin, becomes a father figure to Lucien (Tonin, the same man who is accustomed to calling his secretary/lover “maman”--perhaps he was a fan of J.-J. Rousseau!); it would also be correct to point out that this ghoulish figure bears an uncanny resemblance to Mephistopheles in the Faust legend, initiating the innocent Lucien into the evil ways of the collaboration. Lucien sells his soul to the devil; in exchange for a short power trip he is condemned to eternal damnation (and before that to a firing squad).

The problem with such a reading, focusing on moral ambiguity, is that it downplays the fact that Lucien assumes his role as collaborator with considerable ease, clearly enjoying the sense of

power it gives him. He has never been shown much respect by anyone (not that he has done anything to deserve it, either); then suddenly he is given a license to do as he pleases. Lucien emerges as both a sadist and a masochist. He certainly does not provide the audience with much of a basis for sympathizing with him. Despite his moral yearnings later on in the film, Lucien Lacombe is cast as a sadistic character from the very outset; within minutes viewers see him killing a small bird with a slingshot for no apparent reason other than the satisfaction of killing and maybe stealing away from the drudgery of his work at the local hospice for a minute or two. He actually smiles—a smug smile, to be sure—but still a smile, which is a rare treat in this raggedly realistic film. On another occasion, a resistance fighter taken prisoner offers to help Lucien in exchange for his freedom, but Lucien won't listen and covers the man's mouth with duct tape.

Perhaps the fact that the war ended more than sixty years ago makes a sympathetic reading of Lucien's rise and fall more plausible and more palatable, too, than when the film was first released. In 1974, when the film appeared amid much publicity, there was a moral outcry in France, just like upon the release of Marcel Ophuls' film *Le Chagrin et la pitié*, which offered up a scathing indictment of the wartime behavior of the French. (For political reasons the film was not shown to the wider public until 1971, two years after its completion.) A disappointed Malle later left France for the U.S. and did not return home for many years. How does one explain the public's reaction, other than to say that the war was still too close for there to be room for much moral equivocation; besides, veterans of the Occupation--resistance fighters, collaborators, and everyone in between--were too numerous and still professionally active. Let's not forget that de Gaulle had issued a *de facto* moral amnesia, so that a moral healing could take place after the end of the war and make reconstruction possible. After a few of the worst offenders had been shot, it

had been back to business as usual. It took another generation for France to begin to come to grips with its Vichy past. Today, there are two or even three shelves of books on Vichy in any reputable bookstore: Vichy is even entitled to its own category! As Henri Rousso has stated, the Occupation had become a national obsession by the early 1980s. In other terms, Malle's film attacked, head-on, a cultural ambiance supported by a paradigm that was falling apart from within under the scrutiny of historians such as Paxton, who published his bestseller about Vichy, titled *Vichy France: Old Guard, New Order*, just before Malle's film appeared.

The many full shots of Lucien throughout the film show an inscrutable face with no visible sign of emotion. Lucien is a riddle, true; by his actions he is also a pathological outcast and derelict, but we take an interest in his unfathomable personality because in our culture we are fascinated by the motive inspiring a criminal act as much as we are by the crime itself. However, in the grand scheme of things Lucien is small fry and unworthy of undue attention, given the enormous suffering of the millions of victims of the war. Why does he do what he does? Because as Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl writes in his memoir: "there are two races of men in this world, but only these two--the 'race' of the decent man and the 'race' of the indecent man" (Frankl 86). *Lacombe, Lucien*: this title, inverting the order of family name and first name, suggests that the film can also be considered an implacable, relentless pseudo-documentary of sorts, exploring the psychopathology of a small-time criminal and traitor, not in the celebrated *cinéma vérité* tradition but, rather, in the poetic and humanistic style unique to Louis Malle.

Notes

¹ *Lacombe, Lucien* is director Louis Malle's ninth feature-length film and received the prestigious Prix Méliès and was nominated for an Oscar in the U.S. (Singerman 1058).

² French casualties included more than 1.2 million dead and millions of wounded. After the war, although France had regained the two provinces of Alsace and Lorraine, its population actually shrank from 39.6 in 1911 to 39.2 million in 1921 (Trotignon 77-78, 119).

³ As Alan Singerman points out, many collaborators in the film are modeled on actual historical figures--from the celebrated *bande à Bonny* to Vichy politicians--and great attention is spent on the set throughout, especially to clothes, cars, and music.

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