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Lacombe Lucien: Laughter as Collaboration

by Charles F. Altman

LOUIS MALLE'S RECENT FILM, *Lacombe Lucien*, is a profoundly disturbing evocation of collaboration with the German forces occupying southern France. Alternately engaging and repulsive, Lucien evokes a wide range of responses from any given spectator; in the same manner, the film's grotesque mixture of comic and tragic elements makes it difficult for the audience to find and maintain a comfortable stance. What is this film which makes us laugh dozens of times in the midst of misfortune and death, of hatred and vengeance? Who is this seventeen-year-old little big man who gains power by combining the techniques of Our Gang and Jimmy Cagney? Listen to the audience: through the barrier of silence the energy of laughter suddenly breaks forth, projecting the viewer's private desire into the public world of the theater, then, just as rapidly, the laughter subsides, stifled, unfulfilled, just a trifle embarrassed. The film's dynamics depend on an important homology: just as Lucien's excess energy and moral insensitivity lead him to collaboration, so the viewer's pent-up emotions are indiscriminately released in the form of laughter. The key to this subtly rhetorical film is that moment when the spectator realizes that laughter makes him too a collaborator, that only active resistance can forestall the natural propensity to fulfill one's own desires at the expense of another.

From the very start, Lucien appears to us as a study in pure energy, the epitome of concentrated motion but entirely devoid of direction. In the first sequence he ignores Philippe Henriot's radio broadcast, with its evaluation of Resistance activities, in favor of the chirping of a little bird outside the hospital window. As if by a simple motor response, Lucien moves to a window, checks to see that no one is looking, and reaches into the pouch hanging from his belt. The closeup which Malle chooses to give us at this point provides an apt emblem for all of Lucien's subsequent development: instead of focusing on Lucien's face, the camera reveals his mid-section. We see hands, independent of the head, reaching into a bag located directly over Lucien's genitals; out comes the hard wood of a slingshot, soon transformed into the instrument of a golden bird's destruction. On the threshold of manhood, Lucien overflows with a desire which he only half understands, but which repeatedly exerts itself as a drive for power and speed. The childish slingshot will soon become an adult weapon, both gun and phallus, but the fundamental configuration will remain

unchanged. Raw desire, untempered by his critical faculties, will continue to inform Lucien's behavior.

At the very moment the bird is dying, Malle makes us sense this brute energy by the introduction of Django Reinhardt's driving music, its insistent rhythms soon accompanied by Lucien's frenzied mopping. Once again we are denied a good look at the youth's face; we see instead his buttocks as he leans away from the camera. As the title and credits begin to appear, Lucien has changed activities, but his energy remains. An extended pan follows in long shot as he rides his bike down a long slope. When we finally do see his face it is in such an enormous closeup, with the cyclist's head bobbing rapidly from side to side, that we react as we do to a Futurist motion study: rather than seeing a particular face we sense the presence of concentrated energy. Subsequent scenes prolong this practice. Lucien eating is not a face with eyes and a mouth, but a broad forehead with arms flailing beneath; during the Mass procession his energetic dancing contrasts vividly with the surrounding solemnity; when he tries to catch a chicken we see motion and color, legs and a back, rather than facial features, bearers of distinctively human emotions. Throughout *Lacombe Lucien*, the protagonist will appear to us in pieces. Dominated not by his judgment but by his quasi-sexual drive, his face will serve not as the mirror of his heart or the barometer of his mind, but as the register of his success in quenching his thirst for power.

Lucien first bares his emotions when he returns home to find his house occupied by outsiders. This thinly veiled allegory of the French political situation, the father absent, the mother living with a man named Laborit (suggesting the obvious wordplay on "col-laborat-or"), has a rapid and profound effect on Lucien. Characteristically, his frown leads not to a judgment of right and wrong and the resultant implementation of a program of resistance, but instead to the seizure of the nearest power at hand. Grabbing his father's gun, Lucien waits only as long as nightfall in order to restore his position of domination. That he is poaching makes no difference to the boy behind the gun; that his prey consists of helpless rabbits cannot lessen his pleasure. Once again we see close-ups of Lucien's ecstatic face, laughing at the power provided by the paternal weapon. When he has spent all his ammunition he stretches out contented in the grass, just as he will at the end when another weapon will have captured him a different prey. Lucien the poacher is Lucien triumphant, laughing, controlling his world by exercising his desire.

Yet Lucien the poacher resolves none of life's problems. As the schoolteacher and Maquis commander reminds him the following day, the Resistance is not like poaching, but like the army, disciplined and purposeful. No more than a youth concerned to establish his manhood, Lucien seeks to enter the Maquis only because Laborit praised the other side; now, when the school-master tells him he is too young, Lucien is thoroughly deflated, a state soon objectified by the blow-out of his bike tire. Desire without direction, raw id with no compensating superego, Lucien is that rebel without a cause

characteristic of the modern picaresque. If he denounces the schoolteacher it is only because the collaborators have offered him a drink—treated him like an adult—and thus restored his manhood, reinflated his ego, and provided him with an outlet for his excess energy. Lucien shares with the *pícaro* the characteristics of many other literary poachers: alternately outrageous and cute, illegal and seductive, immoral and attractively naïve, Lucien takes from society in order to feed his own desire, steals from our fund of sympathy in order to legitimate the most unjustifiable aspects of his existence, and ultimately adopts the darts of laughter to turn us temporarily against the rightful proprietors of value.

In an important sense, the measure of Lucien's integration into the collaborationist forces is his acceptance of their sense of humor. Only by collaborating in their laughter does he become an integral part of the group, for laughter and the destructive methods of the "German Police" are equated throughout. When Lucien accompanies Jean-Bernard de Voisins on a mission designed to induce Dr. Vaugeois to reveal his connections with the Maquis, he is overwhelmed by the size and sumptuosity of the Vaugeois mansion. The first shot is a long low-angle pan across the entire façade of the enormous house, subjectively suggesting Lucien's inferior social point of view. Once inside, Lucien is attracted by heirloom china, great-grandmother portraits, overstuffed wing chairs—all things which his previous existence forbade him but which he now dreams of acquiring. Once the collaborators have taken over the house, one of the film's blackest jokes erupts, yet a suggestive one in terms of the overall structure of laughter in *Lacombe Lucien*. The phone rings. The black answers and tells the chief that it's the doctor's brother. "What shall I tell him?" he wants to know. The chief's instructions are followed out to the letter: in a matter-of-fact tone, the black tells the brother that they're going to shoot the doctor (to the accompaniment of general laughter, both on the screen and in the theater). This is Lucien's apprenticeship to collaboration comedy, his short course in the meaning and source of laughter. To laugh is to kill, to maim, to incapacitate. The butt of the joke should be *de préférence* someone who represents the power and luxury which you lack and desire. Lucien learns his lesson well: in the continuation of the same scene he will learn how to torture the doctor's son, under Jean-Bernard's patient tutelage. When Lucien returned home to find his father's house full of intruders he scowled while the squatters smiled triumphantly; now we watch the pained look of the doctor's son while the intruders break his prized ship model, immediately balanced by a big close-up of Lucien's triumphant grin. From here on Lucien's laugh will figure his domination over others, often by the total destruction of all that they hold dearest.

Lucien's initial view of the collaborators defined them as a gay crowd, laughing and singing, masking with nocturnal hilarity the terror of their daytime activities. Again and again throughout the film this sordid bunch reduces its boredom through the parallel activities of torture and laughter.

Just as torture is amusement—the only kind the actress Betty Beaulieu can find—so laughter becomes torture. If the torture of Peyssac evokes laughter, the collaborators' jokes serve to torture family after family. The technique is explained, as it were, in the scene where Lucien guards a prisoner who in his concern for Lucien's youthful degradation makes the mistake of addressing him in the familiar "tu" form. Treating Lucien in the paternal manner of the earlier schoolteacher, the prisoner reminds us that Lucien has been attempting throughout the film to escape this form of address, which he perceives as demeaning. Drinking directly from a bottle of cognac to establish an adult identity, Lucien responds by taping the prisoner's mouth shut. He then proceeds to draw a bright red mouth on the tape. To silence, to turn the other into a clown—such is Lucien's technique.

The many scenes in the Horn apartment effectively demonstrate the peculiar cruelty of this torture by laughter. All three Horns are rapidly objectified by Lucien's insatiable thirst for power. The father becomes "Albert" out of a misplaced and thus comic familiarity; the daughter is immediately labeled "chérie"; the grandmother, certainly the least clownlike of all, is treated throughout with a great deal of levity. Lucien offers her flowers, as if she were sixty years younger; he pours champagne for her, chanting "Allez Mémée! A la vôtre!"; we laugh heartily when he qualifies her as a "Vieille sorcière." Lucien's joking tone contrasts vividly with the original somber mood of his unwilling hosts. To their industry and morality he brings the techniques of collaboration. The tragedy is that his laughter should be infectious, a disease at first feared but then contracted by the entire Horn family. France is the first to respond in kind, for a long-standing desire to break out of the family bonds lowers her resistance to Lucien's tactics. The father, on the other hand, is a man who measures his words and his actions, not the kind to permit sheer energy to dictate his judgments. Yet, in one of the film's key scenes, we watch him too succumb to the temptation of laughter. France asks pertly: "Mais pourquoi vous m'appelez chérie?" to which Lucien innocently responds: "Je ne sais pas." As the two young people break into peals of laughter, we reflect on the aptness of his response, word-for-word the same as his answer to Mlle Chauvelot's earlier question: "Vous voulez travailler dans la police?" The tragedy is that Lucien does not know why he acts as he does. His desire, whether specifically sexual or sublimated, simply erupts whenever the internal pressure reaches the bursting point, eventually reaching his face in the form of a more or less grotesque laughter.

The surprise is not that the two teenagers should break out laughing, but that the camera should cut to a close-up of the father, his judgmental frown turning ever so slowly into a complicitous laugh. Unable to resist the engaging naïveté of this pudgy-cheeked youth, Albert Horn gives way to the natural reaction of a man who discovers that his tormentor is but a helpless child. As Charles Mauron has suggested, "la comédie nous apparaît fondée, dans l'inconscient, sur une fantaisie de triomphe, elle-même née du renversement

d'un rêve d'angoisse" (*Psychocritique du genre comique* [Paris: Corti, 1969], p. 32). For Albert Horn, life as a Jew in occupied France is a nightmare indeed; his brief experiment with comedy and laughter suggests that even he, the most consciously and consistently moral of all the film's characters, must from time to time feed his unconscious desires with a sentiment of superiority. That France too feels the infantile nature of Lucien's actions is witnessed by her next question, inquiring into Lucien's past, his education, the very youth which he seeks to deny. Suddenly Lucien is jolted back into the conscious world; he becomes aware that his laughter is not the Horns' laughter. They are not laughing with him but at him, and Lucien senses the degradation which that laughter implies.

Only seconds later, the same configuration is repeated. The arrival of the Horns' landlord plunges the father back into his nightmare world of secrecy and impotence. When the landlord threatens to evict the family, however, the impending tragedy is transformed into low comedy as Lucien does his Edward G. Robinson act, pulling a gun on the landlord, asking for his papers and nonchalantly throwing them to the floor. "What's this, some kind of joke?" the landlord asks. This time the camera cuts to France, so that we can watch her too, like her father, move from terror to complicity with Lucien's domination, and thus to laughter. Here again, laughter celebrates superiority, the fulfilment of unconscious desire, the escape of pent-up energy. Just as Lucien's denunciation of Peyssac realizes childish fantasies of overthrowing the teacher, just as his repeated thefts enable him to enact his peasant dreams of triumph over the ruling class, so does France's laughter actualize the Horn's unspoken resentment against the landlord and all he represents.

The many enormous close-ups of laughter in *Lacombe Lucien* are important because they define the function of laughter in a quite specific fashion. Even if we have not read Hobbes' definition of laughter as "nothing else but sudden glory arising from sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly" (*Human Nature*, IX, 13), the film itself provides us with a characterization of laughter as domination. Even if we are wholly unfamiliar with Freud's view that jokes serve mainly the function "of liberating pleasure by getting rid of inhibitions" (*Jokes and their Relationship to the Unconscious*, tr. James Strachey [New York: Norton, 1963], p. 134), *Lacombe Lucien* teaches us to consider laughter as an abandonment of judgment in favor of the undamming of desire. We need no Bergson to tell us that in laughter "il y entre l'intention inavouée d'humilier" (*Le Rire*, III, 1), for Malle has demonstrated that fact to us again and again by means of repeated movement from medium-shot to close-up, permitting us to witness the transfer of energy from its source in the mid-section to its concentration on the face in the form of laughter.

The definition thus developed relates laughter directly to two other major themes elaborated throughout *Lacombe Lucien*—poaching and gaming. The poaching motif is a natural one for a country under occupation, but in

Lacombe Lucien it spreads far beyond the German occupying forces. Collaboration is immediately marked as an unlawful usurping of rights belonging to others: Laborit takes M. Lacombe's wife, a peasant family occupies his house, the crowd in the Hôtel des Grottes steal everything they can get their hands on. Lucien, too, is a poacher. As we witness his return home at the beginning of the film we sense the increasing concentration of energy which neither his frenzied eating nor his antics during the Mass march can entirely disperse. Nightfall, however, brings at last an opportunity for Lucien to make use of his surplus energy. Just as he killed the little bird at the start of his day, so at the end he will shoot rabbit after rabbit, not in order to provide food for his family but as a reaffirmation of his superiority. Lucien's nocturnal poaching thus identifies one of the most important components of the poaching motif as it develops throughout the rest of the film. Poaching is a pure product of desire, devoid of direction or judgment, of forethought or conscious moral content. Intent on celebrating his own power, the poacher neglects the rights of those whom his actions involve. When Lucien denounces Peyssac he does so in a spirit not of collaboration but of *braconnage*. He thus becomes assimilated to those countless letter-writers who, in an attempt to recapture their lost power, denounce the moral or legal errors of their countrymen.

The poacher, like Lucien in the Horn apartment, arrives uninvited, remains unwanted, and takes without asking, yet for all of that he retains the attraction of the slave contesting his master, of the downtrodden lower class reclaiming its due from the aristocracy, and with Lucien in particular, the charm of the awkward youth attempting his first entrance into a new world. It is difficult for the viewer to judge Lucien severely, for Lucien's poaching conjures up the memory not of bloodthirsty villains or poker-faced war criminals, but of a long line of young and naïve heroes, disenfranchised by birth but intent, however stumblingly, on remedying their powerless condition. Lucien's practical jokes might be those of Lazarillo, his success with women that of Marivaux' Jacob; his initial awkwardness reminds one of Rastignac, while his peculiar combination of ambition and naïveté might well belong to Julien Sorel. Youth is what captivates us in these characters, with its energy and enthusiasm, with its tendency to start running now and to decide on a direction later ("Où va-t-on?" France asks Lucien as their car rushes away from Figeac; "Je ne sais pas," is all Lucien can muster as an answer). The poaching motif is thus a double-edged one, for it reminds us at the same time of youth's potential and its dangers, its desires and its aimlessness.

If poorly invested energy remains suspect, then the amoral but strongly energy-oriented structure of games must appear even more so. Hinted at throughout the film, the importance of games never becomes manifest until the final sequence during which France, her grandmother, and Lucien share a pastoral life in an abandoned and secluded farm. One sequence in particular deserves commentary. Just before the end of the film, we see the grandmother

indulging in her favorite pastime: playing solitaire. The camera then pans downward and to the right in order to frame Lucien's parallel activity—he is arranging his money in columns and rows, according to denomination, as if he too were playing his own brand of solitaire. The next morning the metaphor is extended to France as a close-up reveals her building a castle out of irregularly-shaped rocks. For the non-French speaker, Malle's visual metaphor unfortunately loses much of its punch, since the English name of the grandmother's game—solitaire—adds nothing to the solipsistic nature of each separate enterprise already evident in the visual presentation. In French, however, Granny's game is *réussite*, an apt label for the game which here serves as metaphor of life itself. From the dour grandmother to the vivacious actress, everyone plays a game with life, each striving for his own success, each treating the others like cards in a deck, bills in a wallet, or inanimate stones destined for the construction of one's own future.

The solitaire metaphor represents each individual as a separate cell. The limitations of this approach are dramatically figured by a close-up of France, holding one of her stones directly over the sleeping Lucien's head, threatening to kill him. One man's game cannot be isolated from the others, but must eventually destroy them. Like the children who rush to pick up the chicken head which Lucien knocks off in an early scene, every man plays with the next man's head. Just as Lucien establishes his mastery over animals by hitting them behind the head, so Jean-Bernard holds Peyssac over the tub by the back of the neck; just as Lucien kills a golden bird in the opening scene, so does he strip France (and *La France*) of her honor and dignity—the very last sequence reveals her entirely naked and then cuts to an enormous close-up of her golden head. Each is caught in the other's trap—another metaphor developed throughout—because all have lost a clear sense of the seriousness of the enterprise in which they are involved. Life has become a game for all: for the children because they know no better, for the young as an escape hatch, for the middle-aged out of boredom, for the old as a defense mechanism. The high seriousness which life so urgently demands (magnificently exemplified by Peyssac, who scrawls "On hasarde de tout perdre" on the blackboard as he warns Lucien that the Maquis is more than just poaching) is persistently undercut by man's inability to avoid the temptation to transform life into a game, a joke, a laugh. The same excess of energy which drives Lucien to poaching causes others to turn life into a game of *réussite*, where only one at a time can play.

Laughter, *braconnage*, games—these three motifs belong together in *Lacombe Lucien*. In all three cases—to the extent that they can be separated at all—an overabundance of energy causes the Self to inflate and thus to make objects of all who are Other; yet the process is not fully conscious, so neither its extreme egotism nor the doubtful morality of its results is ever subjected to full review by the faculty of judgment. If Freud is right—and he is not the only one to suggest that jokes serve to liberate pleasure by removing inhibitions—then

the characteristic structure of *Lacombe Lucien* from beginning to end is that of the joke. Lucien must discover outlets for his desire which will permit him to expand his energy without incurring psychic prohibitions. This he manages by turning everything within the film into laughter: he betrays Peyssac in the midst of a laugh, for a laugh he tears apart Patrick Vaugeois' boat, even courting is disguised by a veil of laughter. By treating killing as poaching and life as a game, Lucien manages to disarm the dangerous side of reality, transferring it through humor from its initial relationship with parental authority to its reduced status as object of Lucien's desire. As Martin Grotjahn has pointed out, summarizing Freud's 1928 paper on humor, "humor is a triumphant joy and represents the victory of the pleasure principle. The ego, usually forced to submit to or modify the pleasure-seeking drives to meet the demands of reality, resolutely turns away from reality and enjoys uninhibited and guilt-free narcissistic existence. This uninhibited narcissism, this triumph over reality, this victory of the seemingly invulnerable ego, gives a feeling of strength. Laughter may occur, but usually a smile suffices" (*Laughter* [New York: McGraw-Hill, 1957], pp. 20–21). The component of play present in all of Lucien's activities, from his poaching to his jokes and games, clearly stems from his need to triumph over the demands of reality, to free his desire from the physical limitations which the opening scenes suggest.

Charles Mauron has suggested that the movement from the tragic to the comic represents a transfer from the world of nightmare to that of play, in short a "renversement des situations angoissantes" (op. cit., p. 30). This is exactly what takes place repeatedly in *Lacombe Lucien.* When Lucien first returns home, he faces the bad dream experienced by all Frenchmen during the war—he has been evicted from his own house. He seems cast in a tragedy, yet not all young men can play the part of Orestes when they come home to find their mother in a stranger's arms. Instead of accepting the apparent generic distinction, instead of accepting his casting in a tragic nightmare, Lucien immediately sets about to transform his dream into a game, his tragedy into a comedy, an impossible situation into one which can be borne. "La tragédie joue de nos angoisses profondes, la comédie, de nos mécanismes de défense contre elles," Mauron suggests (p. 36). The problem, in Lucien's case, is that along with the anguish, the faculty of moral judgment disappears as well. Just as the moral sympathy in a Molière comedy depends on the direction of laughter more than on any other factor, so Lucien's escape from the world of tragedy implies the abandonment of conscious judgment in favor of laughter's release of energy.

In order to understand the particular force which Malle's use of laughter lends to *Lacombe Lucien*, we must now abandon the events portrayed on the screen and descend into the audience. Such a movement, however, is a brusque one. We will do best to begin with one of the many audiences portrayed within the film itself. When Lucien arrives at the door of Peyssac's

classroom, we witness a typical bit of schoolhouse humor: the teacher makes fun of a student who has spelled *orageux* with an *hau* instead of the initial *o*. Delighted by their companion's error, the children roar with glee. Why? Why, when they may soon find themselves in the same situation, do the children belittle one of their own group? Therein, it would seem, lies the answer: they laugh in order to dissipate the tension which potential error has created in them. Their own concentrated effort has created energy, which they now release when they see that someone else has fallen into the trap which they themselves fear. Their laughter expresses superiority, but only because they are unsure of that superiority, just as Lucien's laughter will later mask his fear of failure. Laughter within the film repeatedly represents a thoughtless urge toward domination, replacing the laugher's responsibility to understand and to support.

There are, then, times when laughter is illegitimate. This is the discovery which the audience must make during the course of *Lacombe Lucien*. Lucien's collaboration begins when he assimilates the collaborators' sense of humor. Malle invites the viewer to proceed down that same path, abandoning his judgmental role momentarily to the energy which he brings to the film. Lucien betrays others—and himself—because he is unable to harness his boundless energy. The audience too multiplies its energy as the film progresses, releasing it from time to time by indulging in a little poaching of its own—for the audience's laughter, violating the rights of those on the screen who are the butt of the joke, is no better than poaching. The audience is constantly faced, through dozens of jokes which Malle has spaced throughout the film, with the same problem which regularly confronts Lucien. Lucien, however, remains unconscious of the problem, whereas the spectator has the opportunity to rise above collaboration with Lucien's laughter ethic.

Malle's *coup de maître* is to have forced the audience, through a judicious alternation of tragedy and comedy, into the precise position of the protagonist and of those around him. Instead of simply sitting in judgment over a historical re-creation, we *live* the problematics of collaboration through our response to the film's jokes. Laughter, in *Lacombe Lucien*, represents more than comic relief, more than a mere means for release of tension; it is instead a temptation to abandon the high seriousness which the film demands, a perfidious invitation to deliver up the superego to the pressures of the id, to open the escape hatch which permits the dissipation of nightmare horror into nothing more than dark humor. Only by questioning our laughter, stifling our tendency to indulge in a bit of jocular poaching, and resisting the temptation to mask our emotions behind a meaningless game do we actualize the potential of Malle's film. In this way we discover our own weakness and our own natural tendency to imitate Lucien's collaboration. "Nous retrouvons ainsi le cas de la plaisanterie risquée. Quand elle rate pour avoir outrepassé les limites (toujours relatives) du blasphème, le malaise succède au rire. Le rieur

prend soudain figure d'accusé. Où il goûtait le sel d'un trait d'esprit, la conscience voit un crime" (op. cit., p. 68). In short, the man who wrote to denounce himself is not a lamentable anomaly. He is instead the attentive spectator, led by Malle's masterful handling of laughter to accuse himself of the very tendency toward collaboration which he judges so severely in others.[1]

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[1] This article was written while the author was a Fellow of the Cornell Society for the Humanities.