

Malle's histories

Lacombe Lucien has polarised critical opinion and sharply divided audiences in their views of Louis Malle. On the release of the film in 1974 critics on the left-wing of the political spectrum saw the work as a pernicious attack on the heritage of the resistance and the social struggle more generally. Malle's film had to be unmasked for what it was: a bourgeois manipulation of the historical record that normalised the banality of fascism and concealed the heroism and complexity of the class struggle (Foucault 1974; Daney 1974). However, for fellow director Joseph Losey, Malle's work was a masterpiece of the cinematic arts equal to Fellini's *8½*, John Huston's *Asphalt Jungle* and his own *Mr Klein* (see Caute 1994: 316).

In this chapter I do not want to be drawn further into the many controversial sub-debates that surround the political or artistic merits of *Lacombe Lucien*. Instead, I prefer to analyse how *Lacombe Lucien* works as a film, to discuss its core rhetorical devices and what they mean today. Here important comparisons will also be made with the equivalently ambiguous rhetorical strategies deployed by Malle in *Pretty Baby*. That film is important because it throws a powerful sidelight on the nature of Malle's better-known picture.

By way of an extended conclusion to this chapter my attention will turn to Malle's second American film, *Atlantic City USA*. Rather than marking a sharp break with Malle's preoccupation with history in work like *Lacombe Lucien* or *Pretty Baby*, it is a film that subtly reinforces Malle's status as a memorial activist. It confirms and expands on his deserved reputation as a film-maker who repeatedly engaged with the meaning of the past.

'I can't bring myself to loathe you completely': the strategy of ambiguity in *Lacombe Lucien*

In the first instance, it is important to recall key details of the relatively straightforward plot of *Lacombe Lucien*. Lucien (Pierre Blaise) is an unpredictable, apolitical, violent and abusive youth. He is an arrogant and insecure teenager whom Malle shows lending his muscle to a band of small-town fascists in the final sultry days before the liberation. As Malle's film develops he shows us Lucien denouncing members of the resistance and tormenting a Jewish family that is hiding from the regime. Soon, Lucien is obsessed with the Jewish woman, France (Aurore Clément). His relationship with France is first pursued with naive charm. However, as France resists Lucien's advances he employs violence to dominate her. Thus, Malle's film is an intimate portrait of a single, provincial collaborator. Ultimately, in the final sequences of the work, Malle's camera follows Lucien, France and her elderly grandmother to the countryside where they wait for the conclusion of the war. The trio live happily together in a strange rustic playground that resembles a cross between a nostalgic eden and a science fiction utopia. Finally, with the sun shining brilliantly across Lucien's face, Malle informs his audience through a subtitle that Lucien was tried and executed by the resistance in the post-war purge.

Malle uses the opening scenes from *Lacombe Lucien* to introduce important and dominant aesthetic patterns that shape the rest of this work. As the film begins, Malle displays a text of white lettering on a black screen. The text reads: 'Juin 1944, dans une petite préfecture du sud-ouest de la France'.¹ Seconds later, the screen fades to a Catholic nursing ward, it is complete with two sisters clothed in white and grey wimples and walls elaborately decorated with crucifixes and other religious icons. Subsequently, Malle turns his camera to a boy who is cleaning the floor between the beds, the patients and their elderly visitors. The viewer's attention is next drawn back to a second figure that is positioned in the foreground of the shot. Here is another very similar adolescent who we see is busily engaged in his chores. He empties bedpans and mops the dull-coloured floor. To the far left of the screen, above one of the beds, Malle reveals a photograph of a military figure. Almost casually, Malle also shows the cleaner dusting

¹ 'June 1944, in a small *Préfecture* in south-western France.'

another photograph of the same face that is prominently placed on a small bedside cupboard. The portrait is a famous propaganda shot of Marshal Philippe Pétain, the head of the Vichy regime, the First World War hero, the Victor of Verdun. Malle allows his audience to notice that a rosary is casually draped around the frame of the picture.

Approximately two minutes into *Lacombe Lucien*, one of the nuns glances at her watch. She reaches up towards a prominently positioned radio that shares a shelf with a statue of the Virgin Mary. A voice from the radio declares that we are to hear a speech from Philippe Henriot,² entitled 'La revanche de l'histoire' ('The revenge of history'). The sisters listen attentively as the programme begins but Malle's field of vision returns to the second cleaning boy. He has been distracted from his chores, seemingly not by Henriot's radio broadcast, but by a pretty yellow songbird that is perched on a branch outside the window. The adolescent takes aim with his sling shot. The bird is shot down. It falls to the ground, dead. In the background all the time the audience can still hear the voice of Henriot, who is now explaining that the resistance movement's propaganda is an insult to common sense. The camera lingers on the face of the adolescent assassin. He is a happy-go-lucky fellow, with wavy hair and a cheeky smile. Apparently oblivious to the radio broadcast, he turns away from the window and begins to mop the floor. Malle's camera records his movements from above and behind. Simultaneously, on the sound track we hear strains of a jazz tune. The overall effect is to establish sympathy with the young worker. The overhead camera angle and the combination of sunlight and the youthful movement of the mopping briefly implies an upbeat, cheerful and carefree tone. The sense of freedom that Malle now evokes contrasts with the conservatism of the hospital ward, the picture of Pétain and the monotonous droning of the lecture on the radio. Almost before we have time to map together these different images Malle takes his audience outside the building. We are swiftly transported into the countryside. The sun is still shining and one sees the cleaner-boy cycling through an idyllic rural landscape. He is free-wheeling down a beautiful hillside road. The jazz music that was hinted at seconds earlier is now far more prominent and it continues to play throughout this sequence without

2 Philippe Henriot, Vichy Minister of Propaganda, assassinated by the resistance in late 1944.

any further interruption. The Django Reinhardt and Stéphane Grappelli, 'Hot Club de France', music sounds wonderfully vibrant. A set of new white title lettering is placed against the shape of the cycling figure. This is 'Lacombe Lucien'. It is a 'Film de Louis Malle', with a 'Scénario de Louis Malle et Patrick Modiano'.

In the introduction to Malle's masterpiece several critical elements are displayed. Let us look at the first aspects of Malle's construction of his anti-hero in greater detail. In just three minutes of screen time Malle establishes a series of visual references that make Lucien exceptionally difficult for the viewer to place, to judge or to understand. At first Lucien potentially attracts audience sympathy. He is portrayed as a modest youth, working hard in unpleasant circumstances. It is almost by accident that he is drawn to our attention, after all he is the second young male figure that Malle shows his audience. Generally speaking, in these opening shots of *Lacombe Lucien* he is clearly presented as being far more attractive than the conservative institution in which he works. Moreover, Malle also implies that he is out of sympathy with his times, ignoring Henriot's broadcast that the sisters so attentively listen to. So, at first glance, Lucien looks very much like a victim of the Vichy regime, trapped in the hospital ward, where he is forced to dust the Catholic and Pétainist icons and to pour away the urine-filled bedpans that await his collection. However, Malle very quickly presents another far less attractive side to the teenager. It is for this reason that Lucien's bizarre attack on the songbird is important. Lucien's motiveless killing of an innocent bird¹ disturbs our potential identification with him. However, almost as soon as it is presented, this negative depiction is suddenly withdrawn. Any sense of distaste towards Lucien evoked by the shooting of the bird is destabilised by the implicitly positive images of his rhythmic mopping of the floor and the first sounds of jazz music.

The first highly controlled pattern of representation that Malle imposes on Lucien becomes the central trope through which he is portrayed throughout the work. Malle resolves none of the contradictions through which he engulfed Lucien in the introductory sequence. Let us now discuss some further examples of the strategy to show its recurrence and deep resonance in the work. Indeed, it is by repetition of the initial framing motif that a dense pattern of ambiguity is created around the character of Lucien.

One of the most visually powerful scenes from *Lacombe Lucien*, I

think, is when Malle shows Lucien's first morning in the employ of the pro-Nazi police. Here, one of the collaborationist policemen presents Lucien with a pistol and they engage in target practice. Lucien and his new colleague shoot their pistols at a poster of Pétain. Ironically, under the Marshal's wizened face the text of the poster reads: 'Etes-vous plus Français que lui?' ('Are you more French than him?'). The visual contradictions that are repeatedly associated with Lucien throughout the film are brilliantly displayed in this highly symbolic scene. On the one hand, Malle elicits audience sympathy through the powerful male bonding that is taking place between Lucien and his new mentor. Conversely, Malle has already let viewers know that Lucien's turn to collaborationism has resulted in the torture and death of a resistance fighter. Here, Malle makes us wonder which Lucien we should identify with: the former or the latter? Should audiences be repulsed by the malicious but bungling enemy of the resistance? Or, conversely, should they sympathise with the energetic young crack shot who is undergoing a classic cinematic rite of passage? The fact that Lucien fires his revolver at an image of leadership, conservatism and paternalism, Pétain, simply adds to the moral and political confusion that is rigorously constructed by Malle and his team. Visually and literally speaking, Malle films a symbolic act of resistance, but one that is nevertheless conducted by two characters employed in the service of the Nazi occupiers.

The point Malle is making in these scenes and many others is that one cannot bring fair judgement to bear on Lucien. Malle constructs Lucien as the embodiment of ambiguity and thereby as a site of prolonged visual fascination. The rhetorical structure of Malle's film does not allow plausible moral judgement of the character to be made. Instead, Malle constructs *Lacombe Lucien* around the repetition of contradictory presentations of its lead protagonist, and these are so densely woven that any balanced judgement is inherently problematic and unsustainable in the light of the permanently oscillating content of the film. Overtly signalling the underlying strategy again, several scenes later, the father of France, Monsieur Horn comments to Lucien: 'C'est curieux, je n'arrive pas à vous détester tout à fait' (Malle and Modiano 1974: 104).³ Here, Malle places his vision of Lucien in the softly spoken words of Horn. Furthermore, due to the meticulous

3 'It's strange, somehow I can't bring myself to loathe you completely.'

consistency of Malle's characterisation of Lucien the statement is the only plausible one that can be made on the young collaborator. Malle does not let audiences completely hate Lucien. Just as importantly, he will not allow them to love him either. This, I think, is the central point of Malle's first film devoted to the period of the occupation. Following a line of argument appositely adopted by Richard Golsan, one can persuasively conclude that Malle frames *Lacombe Lucien* around a constant repetition of contradictions around how we are to read Lucien's behaviour (2000: 67–8; see also Higgins 1992: 204). As the British playwright Alan Bennett reminds us, such a consistent denial of moral judgement in characterisation and narrative is a rarity in cinema history. Bennett underlines Malle's achievement with the words: 'To have quite unobtrusively resisted the tug of conventional tale-telling and the lure of resolution seemed to me honest in a way few films even attempt' (2002: 16).

In fact, Malle hinted at the strategy I am discussing in the introduction to a collection of edited press reviews devoted to *Lacombe Lucien*. He offered the following explanation of his film:

Il me semble qu'une des qualités du film est d'oublier les schémas et de présenter des personnages qui, par suite de situations elles-mêmes fort ambiguës, se voient amenés à exposer des contradictoires qui les font osciller sans cesse. C'est cette opacité même des personnages qui à permis tant d'interprétations contradictoires au nom de théories préconçues. (Malle cited in Raskin 1986: 3–4)⁴

As Malle admitted here, the core strategy of *Lacombe Lucien* is to prohibit the viewer from resolving the contradictions of the central protagonist. Any firm resolutions on Lucien are permanently deferred by the quality of his portrayal in the film. Malle and the brilliant performance from Pierre Blaise leave Lucien a polysemic figure. Provocatively, the strategy adopted in this work also chimes with one of Malle's more general, visceral comments on the nature of cinema per se: 'The spectator, alone in the world is a voyeur. He looks at the images, he adds his own fantasy, his mood of the moment, and makes

4 'It seems to me that one of the qualities of the film is its ability to forget schematic perspectives and to present the characters, who through the course of situations that are themselves highly ambiguous, are being exposed to contradictions that constantly oscillate. It is this very opacity of the characters that allows all sorts of contradictory interpretations to be placed on them, developed in the name of preconceived theoretical positions.'

them his own,' (BFI/Malle 1996). Through the strategy of ambiguity Malle forces us to make of Lucien what we can, to resolve his ambiguity by imposing our own fantasies.

Understandably, and correctly, much of the critical attention devoted to *Lacombe Lucien* has focused on its 'anti-hero'. However, an equally ambiguous treatment of French history is also at play. Malle's more general strategy on the representation of history is visible and already at work in the opening sequences of the film that have been described above. This passage from the film is illustrative of the meticulous handling of the occupation period that runs throughout *Lacombe Lucien*. Following the initial indication of time and place, Malle shows his audience an immediately provocative artefact from the period: the photograph of Pétain, wrapped in rosary beads on the bedside table. In this single (about one second of film time) image Malle hints at the troubling link between the Catholic Church and the authoritarian Vichy regime. Through setting and detailed prop selection, Malle almost subliminally makes his opening statement on the history of the 1940s. The photograph of Pétain is in fact just the first of numerous other pointed background references in the film that represent the Nazi occupation. In *Lacombe Lucien* Malle works almost constantly to establish a disturbing series of snapshots of images of life under the Vichy regime. For example, among the many unexpected images of the period Malle shows in the film there are: a black French colonial helping the collaborators; Lucien's neighbour's brutal intimidations of his mother with gifts of toy coffins; and similarly, the disturbingly authentic anti-Semitic rhetoric that is placed in the mouth of Lucien's boss, the police chief. Malle introduces each of these nuanced details almost *en passant* during the course of his film. However, when taken cumulatively, they combine to disturb any safe or stable interpretation of the period. On the one hand, some of the details Malle included achieve calculated political insights, such as the highlighting of the complicity of the Church in the opening scene. Other examples work to generate an overall effect: the shock of the old. However, in this rich cloth of realist detail Malle rejects a single political thesis that might unify the meaning of his historical drama. Instead, a more fragmented puzzle is constructed by the director. In the course of his film Malle creates a new type of historical interpretation different from any of the more formal Pétainist, Gaullist, socialist or Communist accounts of the occupation that worked with

more standardised, partisan stereotypes. The impact of the web of visually reconstructed historical details is to create a fictional film replete with subtle and implicit comments on the 1940s that confound audience expectations. Malle's representation of history is a profoundly revisionist ploy. The film is genuinely revisionist because Malle's mesh of contradictory references to the Vichy regime cast doubt on any of the more stable, ideologically consistent accounts of the period.

The very fabric of Malle's film disrupts any fixed interpretation of Lucien or the meaning of the historical backdrop in which his story is played out. The former aspect is yet another example of the strategy of ambiguity that frames much of the film. The 'revenge of history', to borrow the warning words from Henriot's radio speech that opened the film, that Malle wrought in *Lacombe Lucien* will therefore last for as long as viewers wish to puzzle over the moral status of the title character or to locate a political coherence in a historical backdrop that denies any simplistic interpretation. Thus, *Lacombe Lucien* also stands as a metaphor for Malle's own challenging and complex wider oeuvre that likewise consistently resists straightforward classifications. Lucien personifies Malle's repeatedly ambivalent positions, his contradictory relationship with the New Wave, his ambivalent intersection with the 'Hussards' novelists or his attraction to pessimism.

Having discussed the central filmic strategies at play in *Lacombe Lucien*, it is legitimate to ask what meaning can one ascribe to their use? Arguably, in the light of my reading of the politics of *Le Souffle au cœur*, Malle's strategy of ambiguity in the 1970s was open and libertarian in its motivation. His rhetorical stance implies a powerful and disturbing humanitarian gesture towards fascism that wishes to show that this movement was not exclusively composed of evil and insane monsters but included far more normal, ordinary individuals as well: men and women who were as politically unclassifiable as the likes of one peasant boy, Lucien. In short, Malle's position in *Lacombe Lucien* is most radical, stating: beware, under the correct conditions, anyone, but anyone, can become a fascist. This is a frightening but historically plausible position on the development of fascism in Europe. Drawing on the work of Kriss Ravetto (2001), it is also possible to see Malle's blurring of moral categories in the figure of Lucien as a means of undermining simplistic bourgeois notions of good and evil. Ravetto argues that this was the discourse at play in the

comparable films of the 1970s by directors like Pier Paolo Pasolini (*Salò*) and Liliana Cavani (*The Night Porter*):

the hyperbolic images of *Salò* – sadistic bourgeois fathers and aging femmes fatales made to look like drag queens – *The Night Porter* – repressed homosexual ballet dancers and former Nazis with monocles and SS uniforms hidden away in their closets ... cripple attempts to reemploy representations, monuments, and historical emblems in order to make a new subjectivity. Instead they compel the images of *einen Mann* (one man) and *richtigen Mann* (right man), as well as what Saul Friedländer calls 'Everyman' ... to appear ridiculous. As a result, they disavow collective subjectivities that rise out of the ashes of the traditional subjective communities predicated on moral values and national heroes, since these communities reinstate xenophobic passions – that is hierarchies, segregations, racism and the erosion of singularities. (2001: 231–2)

Malle's strategy of visual ambiguity in *Lacombe Lucien* corresponds closely to the model Ravetto discerns in the films of Pasolini and Cavani. Malle's film's regime of ambiguity certainly denies all political certainties and frustrates their potential replication. Lucien's oscillations between heroism and villainy break down the veracity of either of these conservative categories. In this context, Malle's work is especially impressive for its subtlety. Unlike either Pasolini or Cavani's films, Malle achieves a comparable project without excessive screen violence or brutality. While some critics of Malle might see this aspect of his work as a weakness, as a residual bourgeois reliance on modesty, it is equally a unique signature that marks him apart from the Italian directors.

Nevertheless, the structure of ambiguity one finds in *Lacombe Lucien* comes at a high price. To measure fully the cost of Malle's ambiguity it is instructive to turn briefly to Malle's third period film from the 1970s, *Pretty Baby* (1978). *Pretty Baby* shares a similar sense of ever-shifting viewpoints as that found in the more successful *Lacombe Lucien*. In this, his first American film, Malle presents his viewers with a perplexing set of discourses regarding child prostitution–sexuality. On the one hand, Malle consistently implies that Violet's (Brooke Shields) life as a prostitute in turn-of-the-century New Orleans is a painful and disturbing experience. For example, in probably the most powerful scene from the film, when Violet's virginity is auctioned to the highest bidder in the brothel, Malle's

cinematography strongly suggests that we are witnessing a brutal bourgeois hypocrisy. Here, the Mallean cinematic eye shows his audience the rich, well-dressed town-fathers of New Orleans salaciously looking at the victimised child. As Malle's camera slowly moves from male face to male face an implicit condemnation is offered. There is a genuine sense of indignation here. Conversely, in a typically ambiguous flourish, Malle does not pursue the above approach with any consistency. Instead, Malle establishes a counter-discourse that is quickly juxtaposed with the former perspective. Now, Malle implies that in Violet and Bellocq's 'marriage' a kind of brief moment of libertarian happiness is achieved. This tone is especially dominant in an important sequence towards the end of the film. Bellocq and Violet have been married and together with their friends from the brothel they drive to the banks of the Mississippi to celebrate. The sun shines, a jazz tune is played over the sequence, and Malle suggests that a kind of idyllic interlude is at hand. Furthermore, to underline the mellow mood Malle injects a passage of humour to the scene. A boat full of workmen sails past Bellocq and the prostitutes on the riverbank, and suddenly the men from the boat swim across the river to meet them. The group is shown to be laughing together and one of the workers exclaims to Bellocq: 'You are the luckiest guy in the world'.

The oscillating perspectives that I describe in *Pretty Baby* are highly reminiscent of the approach identified in *Lacombe Lucien*. Indeed, in balancing off 'bourgeois hypocrisy' with the utopian Bellocq-Violet relationship (albeit at times nuanced and moderated), Malle was offering a most dangerous and provocative discourse to the wider cinema-going public. Notwithstanding nuance or other visual caveats that are introduced, scenes like those on the riverbank tend to glorify a criminally abusive relationship. Here, Malle's constant desire to avoid conventional moral judgement ran the risk of lapsing into a different kind of unforgivable judgement by default. This tendency, the ambiguity, the balancing of judgements, is surely misplaced in the light of the genuine experience of the victims of abuse, an experience that is never fully explained by Malle's excessively neutral and repetitive photography of Violet's bittersweet eyes. Nor for that matter is it addressed in his retrospective justifications of this film. Commenting at the time of the film's British release Malle explained: 'I've been accused of exploiting her, but that's

not true.' 'She used me.' (cited in *Now* magazine 1979: 118). This is one Mallean inversion that stretches credibility to breaking-point.⁵

What are the lessons of *Pretty Baby* for our understanding of *Lacombe Lucien*? Importantly, the former film shows the social and political dangers that are at play in the Mallean strategy of ambiguity. The introduction of a discourse of ambiguity in the context of fascism and collaboration is no less perplexing than its use regarding childhood sexuality. Just as in *Pretty Baby* there is an implicit reluctance to think about the victims of abuse, so here there is, generally speaking, a piecemeal denial of the victims of fascism. While of course under the ambiguous discursive style there is a condemnation of Lucien's activities in Malle's work, there remain those other scenes in which his life is partially glamourised. Marie Chaix's reaction to one such scene of this type, captures the problem. She asserted: 'Quand *Lacombe Lucien* mâchonne un brin d'herbe dans une douce clairière, l'œil glissant sur le beau corps de la 'petite juive' ... j'ai envie de vomir' (Chaix cited in Friedländer 1982: 131).⁶ In presenting the innocent, ordinary side to fascism, or the charming side of paedophilia, Malle inevitably mitigates the suffering of the victims of these phenomena. Therefore, what Malle's films leave the audience with are questions of redemption. Who are we to redeem? Lucien? Bellocq? Or, ultimately, also Malle for constructing these ambivalent fictional characters in the first place? No number of viewings of either of the Malle films will bring an answer to these questions, they are just too ambiguous, so the point really is that viewers are invited by the strategy to make their own judgements.

Finally, there is a further caveat regarding the rhetoric of ambiguity found in *Lacombe Lucien* and *Pretty Baby*. Paradoxically, while the strategy implies that a viewer has free rein over how to interpret the balance of content in the films there is also a more

5 This is not the only sexist and dated remark Malle made at the time of *Pretty Baby*. Malle's otherwise very informative interview with *Literature/Film Quarterly* (1979) contains especially honest and uncomfortable comments on E. J. Bellocq's photography and Lewis Carroll's relationship with children (93-4). Readers are invited to read the original source and make of it what they will. Of course, like the filming of *Lacombe Lucien* Malle's statements on *Pretty Baby* were often calculatingly ambiguous and thus do not easily permit critical condemnation.

6 'When *Lacombe Lucien* chews on a blade of grass in a soft forest glade, his eye slipping on to the pretty body of the little Jewish girl ... I want to vomit.'

hegemonic side to the rhetorical stance. The impact of Malle's technique of implicitly saying everything (condemning and forgiving; presenting two mutually exclusive political theses simultaneously in one film) is a position of great power and authority. It is a hegemonic ploy because through its usage Malle controls the complete visual/rhetorical content that is offered in his films. In that sense Malle only invites viewers to make up their own minds on the basis of the illusion that he has presented all the options, which inevitably he has not. This tension is unavoidable and inherent in the discourse Malle enjoyed using by the mid-1970s. Malle probably appreciated the intractable dilemma of his own rhetorical position, just as one senses that he identified with the predicaments of his all his major protagonists from Tavernier in *Ascenseur pour l'échafaud* to Uncle Vanya in *Vanya on 42nd Street*.

Spiralling ambiguity: *Lacombe Lucien* and the *mode rétro*

The aesthetic patterns we have discussed in *Lacombe Lucien* fall squarely into the wider *mode rétro* fashion in literature, art and cinema that developed in western Europe at around the end of the 1960s. This term refers to those many west European films that challenged previously conventional ways of depicting the Third Reich and the Second World War (see Friedländer 1982). Everything about the subject matter and plot of *Lacombe Lucien* confirms the piece as a central *mode rétro* film. In this work Malle codifies fascism through the fashionable 1970s themes of sexual violence and fantasy. Specifically, the trope of a fascist–Jewish sexual relationship, playing with political and sexual power games, also looks typical of that era's wider cinematic handling of similar material. In making *Lacombe Lucien* Malle was partially tapping into the new international trend for all things related to sex, fascism, Nazism and the 1930s. Or, as Susan Sontag memorably explained at the time: 'Now there is a master scenario open to everyone. The colour is black, the material is leather, the seduction is beauty, the justification is honesty, the aim is ecstasy, the fantasy is death' ([1974] 1996: 105).⁷

7 Even Malle's soundman, Jean-Claude Laureux, was not immune to the wider mood. His directorial contribution in this period was *Les Bijoux de famille* (1975). Although an 'erotic' film, later released on video in Britain under the title *French*

As my brief summary suggests, films like *The Night Porter* (Cavani 1974) or *The Damned* (Visconti 1968) were replete with visual and political ambiguities. However, perhaps the most hidden and fascinating paradox of the cultural movement, and Malle's contribution to it, is more subtle. *Lacombe Lucien* and the *mode rétro* offered a new discourse on fascism, collaboration and the 1930s. However, at the same time, deeper cultural paradigms were also being restaged. As I will now explain one cannot simply argue that the new mood for filming fascism in the 1970s style was utterly original. In fact, a blurring of innovation and tradition is at play. Certainly, in the case of *Lacombe Lucien* longstanding and influential antecedents are evoked.

As Roderick Kedward notes, Malle had been close to cultural contexts in which collaboration had already been widely treated long before 1974 (Kedward 2000: 234). For example, the anti-resistance novels of Malle's friend Roger Nimier frequently looked at the politics of the 1940s with a sarcastic, violent and wry tone. Figures such as Sanders from his *Hussard bleu* offer early sketches of ambiguous collaborators who unlike Lucien reinvented themselves as war heroes. A further key intertextual precedent is the Jean-Louis Curtis' novel, *Les Forêts de la nuit* (1948). As Kedward explains: 'set in a small town in the south-west of France, [it] features the drift into collaboration by the sexy young Philippe Arréguy, and his seduction of the refined and resistance-minded daughter of the nobility, Hélène ... Philippe must have been at least an unconscious model for Lucien' (2000: 234).

Other important portrayals of collaborationism from the French literary canon similarly paved the way for Malle's later film. Distinctive forerunners to the film are to be found in Jean Genet's *Journal d'un voleur* (1947) and *Pompes Funèbres* (1953). In particular the latter book offers a dazzling portrayal of homoeroticism and collaborationism among German and French youth at the time of the

Blue, Vichy still hovers in the background. A poster of Pétain apparently looks down on the more central sexual gymnastics on display. I have not had the opportunity to watch Laureux's work. The descriptive details I owe to a brief review from *Positif*, no. 169 (1975): 65 and *Video Business* 5.10 (May 1985): 38. Coincidentally, the film was produced by Vincent Malle with Films Français de Court Métrage. To date, research does not suggest that Louis Malle was involved in his colleague's controversial debut. Vincent Malle also produced the better-known spectacular, *La Grande Bouffe*, Robert Bresson's *Lancelot du lac*, as well as several of his brother's films.

liberation. There is also a relatively famous short story by Jean Cau that was published in Sartre's review, *Les Temps modernes* (1952). Entitled 'La Vie d'un SS Français' it was in fact, according to Edmund White, a free adaptation on the life of one of Genet's lovers, "Java" (White 1994: 358). Quoting Java, White underlines the fact that he never regretted his service in the SS. Java stating in the 1980s: 'I am only sorry we lost' (cited in White: 359). In the light of the above intertextual reference points, one is not surprised to discover that Malle had initially thought of involving Genet in the writing of the *Lacombe Lucien* script (see Billard 2003: 337–8).

Apart from literary intertexts that anticipated Malle's film, the cinema also foreshadowed the breaking of taboos surrounding the portrayal of collaboration. As Henry Rousso and Jean-Pierre Jeancolas have uncovered, a previous picture from the early 1960s had already presented a similar narrative to *Lacombe Lucien*. The film in question was Kerchbron's *Vacances en enfer* (1961) and rather like Malle's later work it too focused on the misadventures of a young collaborator on the run (Rousso 1990: 264; Jeancolas 1979: 213). Less directly related to *Lacombe Lucien*, other works from the late 1950s and 1960s also anticipated the spirit of the film from the early 1970s. As I explained in the previous chapter, there is a haunting presence of right-wing anti-heroes in New Wave cinema and Fourth Republic film more generally. Typical examples are to be found in Claude Chabrol and Paul Gégau's *Les Cousins*, as well as in Jean-Luc Godard's, *A Bout de souffle* and *Le Petit soldat*. Malle's own portrayals of Tavernier and Alain in *Ascenseur pour l'échafaud* and *Le Feu follet* are not such distant relations from the later Lucien. These films and their male anti-heroes, arguably, also contributed to the construction of a socio-cultural framework out of which *Lacombe Lucien* would later emerge. Moreover, Malle (1989: 157), Pierre Billard (2003) and Maud Cognacq (2002) relate *Lacombe Lucien* directly to the war of decolonisation in Algeria. They see prototypes for Lucien in the young officers forced to fight in North Africa. Similarly, Malle had also spoken of a desire to work on the subject of police gangs operating in contemporary Mexico City which influenced his thinking on the film (Malle and French 1993: 90–1). In fact, Malle was sometimes keen to list almost every reactionary group from the post-war period as having been part of his vision for Lucien: 'I became more and more intrigued by these insignificant, banal fascists ... My project had its roots in the wars

successively, in Algeria, Latin America, and Vietnam' (Malle 1989: 157). Elsewhere Malle has also suggested that his film was loosely inspired by his own terrible childhood experiences of the Second World War (Malle and French 1993: 98). However, as we know, he did not offer a directly autobiographical representation of that period until some fifteen years later in *Au revoir les enfants*.

One must also recall a more direct influence on *Lacombe Lucien*, the NEF-produced film by Robert Bresson, *Un condamné à mort s'est échappé* (1956). After *Le Monde du Silence*, Malle had briefly worked as an assistant director to Bresson on this film and it is here that one finds the most graphic antecedent to *Lacombe Lucien*. During a question and answer session on a visit to the National Film Theatre, London, Malle explained that Robert Bresson had telephoned him after watching *Lacombe Lucien* (1974). The fellow director wanted to know if Malle's 'Lucien' was indeed the same character that had appeared in his own film, the figure of 'Jost'. In *Un condamné* he is a young deserter from the German army who is thrown into the same prison cell as the lead protagonist, the resistance fighter, Fontaine. Suddenly, Fontaine's detailed plans for escape are placed in jeopardy. In Bresson's film we gradually see that this schoolboy collaborator will assist in the resistance fighter's flight from prison. Visually speaking, 'Jost' looks very much like 'Lucien' and they are of about the same age and stature. Both boys are also shown to have drifted towards Nazism. Speaking on this coincidence in London, Malle accepted that his memory of 'Jost' must have subconsciously influenced his casting of Pierre Blaise in his film. The Bresson scholar Keith Reader explains: 'Fontaine's doubts about Jost's reliability – concretized by his turning up in the cell wearing a mixture of French and German uniforms – certainly suggests a possible resemblance between the two characters that goes beyond the merely physiognomic' (Reader 2000: 47). The diametrically opposite behaviour of Bresson's 'Jost' and Malle's 'Lucien' confirm Reader's suspicion regarding the similarity between the protagonists. In Bresson's film the haphazard apolitical former collaborator is redeemed by his assistance in the resistance escape plan. Here, Jost loses his initial political ambiguity and very clearly chooses sides. In counterpoint, in a famous scene from *Lacombe Lucien*, Lucien is presented with a similar opportunity to redeem himself, to become a 'résistant', and to escape his tragic fate. As one would expect on the basis of Malle's strategy of ambiguity

Lucien flatly rejects the 'Jost option' of unambiguous redemption. Far more wilful and complex than Jost, Lucien is shown by Malle to be simply irritated by the resistance fighter and his mistaken use of the 'tu' form of address in their conversation. Instead of redeeming himself, Lucien silences the man by placing a sticking plaster over his mouth and the Mallean strategy of ambiguity is allowed to continue. Thus, Malle's scene inverts the Bresson intertext and the inversion suggests that a deeply symbiotic relationship is at play between the two films. Provocatively, one might ask if Malle was suffering from what Harold Bloom has called the 'anxiety of influence'? Malle was a great admirer of Bresson, and the scene implies that he was simultaneously paying homage to a father figure while attempting to break free from his influence. In the light of this evidence the originality of *Lacombe Lucien* is further nuanced.

Two more contemporary reference points from the 1970s must also be highlighted: the films of Bernardo Bertolucci and the fiction of Malle's script-writer, Patrick Modiano. It seems to me that *Lacombe Lucien* owes a special debt of thanks to the cinema of Bernardo Bertolucci, in particular *The Spider's Strategem* (1970) and *The Conformist* (1970). Both works strongly foreshadow the key feature of Malle's film and remind us that his work was not simply emerging out of a uniquely French cultural context. Four years before *Lacombe Lucien*, in *The Spider's Strategem*, Bertolucci problematised standard political-historical (socialist, liberal or conservative) interpretations of the 1930s and 1940s. In so doing Bertolucci presented an utterly ambiguous character: an Italian resistance hero who paradoxically had also been a traitor to the cause. Furthermore, later in the same year, Bertolucci's *The Conformist* provides a second key intertextual reference point to Malle's film. Starring Jean-Louis Trintignant, it is one of the first films to focus entirely on a figure with quasi-fascist political affiliations. Like Malle, Bertolucci made audiences watch the often violent and repugnant behaviour of a confused young fascist for the length of an entire feature film.

The immediate forerunners to *Lacombe Lucien* provided by Bertolucci in 1970 are important because they established a contemporary cultural space to which Malle would also contribute. In this respect Malle and other French film critics have been wrong to overlook the influence of the Italian director in favour of the role played by the documentary *Le Chagrin et la pitié* (directed by Marcel

Ophuls in 1972 and distributed by Malle's NEF group). Of course, that documentary on the Nazi occupation of Clermont Ferrand is also an important work in preparing the way for Lucien's arrival on the screen. However, it can only be a matter of French cultural jingoism to ignore the comparable influence of Bertolucci. For what it is worth, critical discussions of Bertolucci's cinema tend equally to repress the figure of Malle (see Tonetti 1995). I suppose this mimetic negation is to be expected with each director and their critical supporters denying the other the critical space that they merit.

The script-writer, Patrick Modiano, is the final key protagonist in the conception of *Lacombe Lucien*. Like Bertolucci his contribution to the development of Malle's film is critical for several reasons. First, it is evident that *Lacombe Lucien* transposes significant elements of the novelist's contemporary fiction to the screen. In particular, the band of collaborators that Lucien joins are comparable figures to the burlesque characters that populate Modiano's early fiction (see for example, Modiano, 1968; 1972). Similarly, there is something equally Modianoesque about two characters from *Lacombe Lucien*: M. Horn and his daughter, France. The fact that these hidden Jews have links to the local French Nazi police echoes passages from the disturbing world of Modiano's writing in which national, political and religious and cultural identities are terribly blurred. Thus, collaboration with Malle offered Modiano an opportunity to show off his already controversial literary vision to a wider audience.

Once more in the study of Mallean film, a paradoxical picture emerges. Certainly, films like *Lacombe Lucien* and much of the rest of the *mode rétro*, marked a sea change in the public representation of Vichy, Nazism and the 1930s to 1940s. However, *Lacombe Lucien* evidently also emerged out of several, deeper literary and filmic reference points that pre-dated the 1970s. *Lacombe Lucien* did not appear from a cultural vacuum. Instead, a cultural tradition, running from Nimier to Genet, and onto Malle and Modiano, via Italy and the work of Bertolucci, found a greater space within the cultural mainstream than ever before. (In *Lacombe Lucien* Malle brought a previously relatively marginal set of cultural and political discourses together in a new synthesis that found access to a wider public than had previously been possible.

Reviewing the cultural context also helps identify more clearly what was original about Malle's *Lucien*. First and foremost there is

the 'pure' Frenchness of the character, his rural roots, and all the local colour that is offered in the film. That is very distinct from, say, Bertolucci's *The Conformist*, a film that is broadly set in Rome and only partially in Paris. Generally speaking, the setting used in *Lacombe Lucien* stands out from all of the cultural antecedents I have discussed. Susan Sontag's *mode rétro* 1970s master narrative of black leather and sado-masochism is essentially an urban kind of kitsch. Malle did not indulge in that aspect of the scenario and *Lacombe Lucien* gains in originality for that. Similarly, while films like Bertolucci's *The Spider's Strategem* anticipate Malleian rhetorical postures, Malle's film remains distinctive. In particular, Malle's broadly realist presentation of an ambiguous teenager is some distance from the more overtly playful *nouveau roman* narrative adopted by Bertolucci. In *The Spider's Strategem*, the ambiguity of history is presented through an elaborate non-linear narrative structure of flashbacks and flashforwards. Malle's work achieves a similar visual frisson but predominantly via the rhetorical presentation of the character of Lucien. Malle's strategy is in some ways a stronger cinematic approach because it wears its colours more lightly and so is less likely to be subject to cultural fashion effects. Likewise, Malle's creation of an absolutely ambiguous anti-hero moves his work closer to Modiano's oeuvre and slightly away from the world of Roger Nimier's earlier fiction. This is the last ambiguity that I want to conclude with regard to *Lacombe Lucien*. Just as with *Le Souffle au cœur*, *Lacombe Lucien* represents as much a break with the Hussard tradition as it does a silent debt of thanks.

New Malleian history: *Atlantic City USA*

After *Lacombe Lucien* and *Pretty Baby* the past continues to feature in Malle's work even when it is least expected. Despite the fact that *Atlantic City USA* is set in the present (the early 1980s) it underlines how Malle was a director who was utterly at home questioning the legacies of history. This film is especially important because it highlights a movement in Malle's work away from the direct historical reconstructions found in *Lacombe Lucien* and *Pretty Baby* towards a more overtly psychologically informed questioning.

Atlantic City USA is a crime story involving a drugs theft and the mob's attempt to recover its illicit property. The film is set in 1979 and

on the surface at least there is little to do with history in the material. This is only part of the story. Ghosts from the city's past are repeatedly evoked by Malle in a film that becomes a delicate study of nostalgia. The character of the ageing gangster Lou (Burt Lancaster) personifies the theme. His conversations with the young hippie-thief, Dave (Robert Joy), and lady friend, Sally (Susan Sarandon) are filled with a love of the past. For example, he muses on the 'good old days' of the 1930s and 1940s when the city was booming and its criminal underworld had its own code of ethics and role to play in the casinos. Talking to his young companion David, Lou recalls: 'It's all shit now. Now it's all so God-damn legal ... It used to be beautiful, the Atlantic Ocean was something then. You should have seen it then. You should have seen the Ocean in those days'. These phrases capture the tone of bitter-sweet nostalgia that recurs throughout *Atlantic City USA*.

Critics publishing in *Cahiers du cinéma* did not see much depth to Malle's new North American work. Rather dogmatically it seemed to them that the *rétro* director of *Lacombe Lucien* fame was up to his old bourgeois tricks again. Sarcastically summing up in a short review that was part of 'Notes sur d'autres films', one reads: 'Une photo dans le style Hamilton accentue le côté rétro et sucreries d'*Atlantic City*. Cela se regarde avec la même nonchalance qu'on feuillette un magazine de tourisme dans un drugstore' (Lardeau 1980: 53).⁸ However, a fresh viewing of *Atlantic City USA* suggests that Malle's film has far greater depth than the 'glossy magazine' *rétro mode* perceived by the *Cahiers du cinéma* critic. Malle is not simply offering a conservative take on nostalgia. In point of fact, there is something far more complex at stake in this work. Importantly, as the film develops it quickly becomes apparent that Lou's nostalgia for 'old time' Atlantic City life conceals a far darker presence of the past in the film. Much of the narrative tension of *Atlantic City USA* hinges on Lou's psychological relationship with a repressed episode from his history. Gradually, as the plot develops, we learn that Lou is haunted by the fact that in his youth he failed to rescue one of his friends during a shoot-out and that as a consequence of his (in)actions a tragic

8 'Notes on Other Films'; 'Photography in the Hamilton style accentuates the sugary *rétro* side to *Atlantic City*. It looks at itself with the same nonchalance of flipping through a tourist guide in a drugstore.' It is remarkable to note that as late as the 1980s the *Cahiers* critics indirectly still describe Malle's privileged childhood through the use of the adjective 'sugary'.

death occurred. Malle portrays Lou as being haunted by his failure to assume the role of a hero. His gangster clothes and muscular tough guy postures belie a deep sense of personal failure. Malle's film is therefore essentially about Lou's attempts to rewrite his tragic origins. The work is therefore not an exercise in the superficial *rétro* key. Instead, *Atlantic City USA* is a meticulous and thoughtful study of its central protagonist's psychological obsession with history. Thus, in the concluding scenes of Malle's work audiences witness Lou gradually reconstructing the dynamics of his earlier tragedy. For example, when his lover (Susan Sarandon) is threatened by a hood wielding a gun, Lou intervenes and in shooting down the aggressor he revises his moment of historical shame. A small personal victory seems to have been wrought. For the almost constantly pessimistic Malle this is perhaps the best one can expect from life, an opportunity for a second chance.

Atlantic City USA stands out then from the earlier 'history' films from the 1970s. To an extent the ambivalence and ambiguity of the earlier work is now replaced by the more familiar meta-narrative of trauma, repression and re-enactment that anticipates themes raised more explicitly in *Au revoir les enfants*. When compared to *Lacombe Lucien* or *Pretty Baby* Malle's engagement with history here has moved to the ethically and politically more reassuring ground of psychoanalysis. The core of Lou's story and Louis Malle's film is the working through of a repressed trauma. Nonetheless, shadows of the earlier ambivalent discourse found in *Lacombe Lucien* linger on in the characterisation of Lou. For example, while Malle implies that Lou's second chance to act, to shoot the mobster dead, releases him from his shame it is equally evident that Lou's act of psycho-historical reconstruction is still tied to the past. Malle shows us that Lou feels that he is now a real hero, but his redemption is utterly entwined with his original sin. If *Lucien* were the personification of good and evil in the body of one country boy from the south-west of France, then here Malle celebrates and pities Lou's murderous intervention in equal measure.

Notwithstanding the retention of these ambiguities, *Atlantic City USA* reverses the underlying narrative conceits employed to frame *Lacombe Lucien* and *Pretty Baby*. In those films Malle dramatised two troubled childhoods, exploring the dynamics of the traumatic experiences of a young peasant and a 12-year-old girl. Malle's treatment

of Lou is a simple inversion of this perspective. In *Atlantic City USA* he enters the world of the adult and takes up the question of the legacy of a traumatic history. Here we are not concerned with the facts of Lou's original youthful indiscretion but rather its longer-term psychological implications. For the scholar of Mallean film this change in direction is an important and original shift of gear. It means that *Atlantic City USA* is a film that more closely anticipates later work of a similar key, films like *Damage* (1992), than it replicates the angle adopted in the four previous films from the 1970s.

The handling of the psychological legacies of history in *Atlantic City USA* anticipates many of the discussions of Mallean cinema that are thrown into greater relief in the light of *Au revoir les enfants* (1987), Malle's later account of his own traumatic history from the Nazi occupation of France. That film and the wider subject of trauma in Mallean cinema will be dealt with in detail in the next chapter. For now, it is sufficient to underline the fact that Malle did not abandon his thematic interest in history after the completion of *Pretty Baby*. If anything *Atlantic City USA* provided a different but equally rich canvas through which to explore the relationship between history, character and psychology.

Conclusion: the film-maker as a memorial activist

The political historian and barrister Serge Klarsfeld uses the term 'militants de mémoire' (memorial activists) to describe those groups in contemporary France who actively campaign for recognition of historical wrongs conducted by the French state under Vichy and in subsequent conflicts (Klarsfeld and Bocharberg 1997: 9). Used with a different emphasis, the same expression encapsulates the spirit of Malle's engagements with history as displayed in *Lacombe Lucien*, *Atlantic City USA* and elsewhere. Malle made films that he knew would disturb audience assumptions about history, the most notable example being *Lacombe Lucien*. He also produced work that reflected on the more complex problems of historical change, the personal experience of psychological trauma. These films show the hallmarks of a director whose passion was to investigate and to explore; to offer ideas and questions; to provoke thought. The epithet 'memorial activist' is also appropriate to Malle for a further reason. Not only did

his films aim to overturn conventional ways of interpreting episodes from history but they also represented the past through innovative cinematic forms. Films like *Atlantic City USA* stand out as examples of how cinema can bring a new purchase to the genre of history by exploring the psychological meaning of the past without redress to the sumptuous but hollow reconstruction work of a period drama. It is a mark of Malle's ingenuity that films like those we have been discussing conform exactly to Robert Rosenstone's definition of post-modern historical cinema (reflexivity; contradiction; open-endedness; multiplicity of viewpoints) (1995: 206–7) without betraying the dominant aesthetic modes I discussed in Chapter 2 of this book.

Lest we should be in any doubt about Malle's versatile fascination with the historical, let us briefly consider the final scene from *My Dinner with André* (1981). The film is a bravura of experimental filmmaking. It is also a thoughtful philosophical exercise and satirical commentary on the banality of intellectual pomposity (see King 1997: III–24). However, Malle's film, and Shawn and Gregory's original stageplay, conclude on a moment of great poignancy. The less practical but clearly wealthier protagonist, André, pays for the sumptuous dinner and this means that Wally can now afford a cab journey home to his partner Debby. Strangely elated after so much intellectual activity in one evening Wally stares out from the window of his cab. As the grim city lights flash by we hear his thoughts:

I rode home through the city streets. There wasn't a street – there wasn't a building that wasn't connected to some memory in my mind. There, I was buying a suit with my father. There I was having an ice cream soda after school. When I finally came in, Debby was home from work, and I told her everything about my dinner with André. (Shawn and Gregory 1981: 45)

In this final, quietly emotional scene Malle resolutely asserts a powerful defence of the importance of the past. In sharp contrast to the figure of Lou in *Atlantic City USA*, Wally finds great solace in the streets he knows, the experiences he remembers. In the light of Malle's earlier engagements with historical material that I have been discussing I think that this scene is a beautiful touch. In it I like to think that Malle is suggesting that despite the troubling qualities of his earlier 'history films' the past is still not necessarily a place to be afraid of. After the controversies of his work on collaborationism, his

uneasy treatment of paedophilia, Malle offered glimpses of the therapeutic power of recollection. For once in Mallean cinema here is a past that heals. The passage does not paper over the edginess of the previous films. In its distinctive difference of emphasis it throws them into greater relief.

Notwithstanding my enjoyment of the last moments of *My Dinner with André* a final issue must now be discussed. In this chapter I have implicitly argued that while *Lacombe Lucien* generated controversy its content is perhaps easier to come to terms with today than the discourse on children, prostitution and sexuality Malle offered in *Pretty Baby*. That film and some of the comments that Malle bandied at the time of its release are at the very least dated and at worse an elaborate apology for male fascination with younger teenagers. Until now this part of Malle's career has been glossed over. The popular critical literature on Malle does not discuss this matter in any detail (Malle and French 1993; Billard 2003). Furthermore, few film critics or theorists ever discuss any of Malle's work from America, let alone the troubling history of *Pretty Baby*. Occasional references are made to Susan Sarandon's participation in the film, but no one recalls the historically more significant 'Brooke Shield's phenomenon', the mass-media frenzy that surrounded the sexualised 'girl-star' in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the *Vogue* covers, the Calvin Klein advertisements or other perplexing controversies. One major reason for this lack of critical uptake is that *Pretty Baby* is certainly a difficult film for mainstream audiences to come to terms with. By Malle's standards it was also a relatively weak work. Moreover, since the late 1980s, Malle's popular reputation has become so closely related to *Au revoir les enfants* that it seems almost incongruous to debate *Pretty Baby* at all. It is in this way that one of Malle's most troubling works has been lost.

So, there is an important consistency across Mallean cinema. The filmography has a strange propensity to rewrite its own meaning. First, the right-wing politics of the 1950s are reinvented through the comic retrospective, *Le Souffle au cœur*. Subsequently, the implicit dangers of 1970s libertarianism are likewise skirted around. Just a handful of informed feminist scholars have started to pick over the handling of women in the oeuvre. Subsequently there is the case of the forgetting of *Pretty Baby* that I have outlined above. In that way Malle's filmography displays a recurrent but unnerving talent for reinvention and self-repression, with film after film neutralising the

provocations of its predecessor. That is a further feature of this director's legacy. Mallean film almost constantly sweeps aside its last contribution in favour of creating a new controversy in which the earlier material is repressed. It is in the next and final chapter of this study that I analyse the wider question of repression in Mallean film. Much of his work displays a repressive tendency and this is an issue that is best understood in the light of *Au revoir les enfants*.

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