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Author(s): Leah D. Hewitt

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Salubrious Scandals/Effective Provocations: Identity Politics Surrounding *Lacombe Lucien*

Leah D. Hewitt
Amherst College

I. France as Gypsy

Louis Malle's 1974 film, *Lacombe Lucien*, shocked and incensed many of its critics in the 1970s and continues to do so now for some. Such strong reactions are emblematic of the profound identity crisis France has experienced in coming to terms with the relationship between the Vichy government and the French population's actions during World War II. As recently as 1992, Stanley Hoffmann accused the film of making its own false myth of the Occupation (with French collaborationism too prominently portrayed).¹ Taking another tack I would like to propose that the supposed "faults" that render *Lacombe Lucien* "more provocative than thought provoking" (to use Henry Roussio's critical evaluation)² are the mark of artistic strategies that challenge accepted notions of national, personal, and ethnic identities in France, both during the Occupation (an initial historical content) and in its subsequent return as artistic memory (re)activating identity crises. The choice of Django Reinhardt's wonderful music for the film subtly illustrates the point. The score is remembered as a distinctly *French* music of the thirties and forties—France's jazz—but performed and written by a Frenchman whose origins do not fit the mold of the "authentic" Frenchman. In the Larousse *Dictionnaire des noms propres* (*Dictionary of Proper Names*) Reinhardt is referred to as French, although he was born in Belgium of gypsy origins. With no formal education in his early days—he could barely write—Reinhardt performed his guitar music while wandering through France with a gypsy caravan. Having lost the use of two fingers on his left hand as a result of a burn, Reinhardt developed a highly original, virtuoso style of play to compensate for the handicap. This "French" style, paradoxically the result of his handicap, is the only one to have influenced American jazz artists.

Now it is certainly not uncommon for artists to be recognized as representatives of one country when they were born in another, but in the exploration of identity crises during the Occupation, Reinhardt's mixed origins become crucial to rethinking what it

means to be French. With his Romany background, Reinhardt represented one of the numerous targets of Nazi ideology, given that 500,000 gypsies died in concentration camps during the war. The lilting music of the film thus carries with it the reminder of the lethal dangers to its French composer. As a performer, Reinhardt also represents the many ambiguities of Occupation politics, with French, Germans, resisters, and collaborators all having been members of his night-club public.³ In this sense, his life is “typical,” because his esthetic offering could not avoid being caught up in political struggles of the time, despite his desires.⁴ Alternately suspected of being a resister and a collaborator, Reinhardt did not really fit either category very well.

This is not, of course, the kind of reflection most spectators might entertain while listening to the film’s background music. But in the context of the “mode *rétro*” during the seventies, when critics were quick to attack Malle’s depiction of the Occupation as one more facile representation of the forties that indulged in a very questionable nostalgia for its cars, clothes, music, and politics, these echoes from Reinhardt’s life, evoking dangerous identity issues, suggest another kind of political reading of the film’s choice of period music.⁵ The fundamental polyvalence of the music is emblematic of the film in general as it works against unthinking repetitions of right-left political stereotypes. In what follows, I review some of the critical readings of *Lacombe Lucien* and argue that the film provides its own critique of simplistic political interpretations via its artistic strategies.

Like Marcel Ophüls’s *The Sorrow and the Pity*, *Lacombe Lucien* was not just a representation or account of the issue of collaboration in the past. For an older French public, to see Malle’s film was to be forced to rethink one’s own (and France’s) guilt or innocence in the present. As Richard J. Golsan has pointed out: “the film is less a symptom of what Henry Rousso has labeled the ‘Vichy Syndrome’ than its victim.”⁶ *Lacombe Lucien* was in effect less involved in repressing or twisting truths about the Occupation than were some of its critics whose political agendas often hampered rather than helped their evaluations of the film, particularly on issues of collaboration. Rather than simply identifying *Lacombe Lucien* as one more myth about France’s wartime years, we will be looking at how the film, whose script was written by novelist Patrick Modiano, turns to fiction and art in order to articulate more forcefully historical facts concerning French collaboration—often in ways that were difficult for critics to accept, because the recognition of these facts was too painful, too threatening (because potentially generalizable), or too well hidden by “clean,” unambiguous versions of events.

Additionally, the controversy surrounding *Lacombe Lucien* reveals a general climactic change on the French cultural scene of the seventies, as the “work of art” becomes a term of derision for critics returning to a more Sartrean description of committed literature. As the obsession with the memory of the Holocaust has intensified from the mid-1970s onward, literature, fiction, and art in general have sometimes become suspect because of their ability to shape events and thus alter or falsify history, but the renewed commitment to be faithful to the truth of the past by such imminent historians as Henry Rousso has also generated a false sense of security in the historian’s ability, *over and above* the creative work, to state *the*

(only) truth about the past. Instead of turning to an oppositional model of history versus fiction, I prefer to stress instead the ways in which *Lacombe Lucien* artistically dramatizes the calamity of collaboration without excusing it. The nation's duplicity during the war is worked out through ethnic, class, and gender issues: for example, the cultured, bourgeois, Jewish woman who is attracted to the young peasant collaborator, Lucien, is named *France*, as if to underscore ironically questions of national identity as they are tied to anti-Semitism, class difference, and betrayal. To the irritation and anguish of some, *Lacombe Lucien* shows French identity as a performance, a rehearsing of traits whose evolution is often subject to chance and unexpected twists, rather than as a portrayal of innate or static national traits.

II. Scandalous Fictions/Artistic Devices

Although *Lacombe Lucien* focuses on the lives of unknown villains and heroes, with real-life national figures only looming in the background, its creative moves cannot escape the close scrutiny of those concerned with a historical "signified" involving the dark side of the Occupation. The issue of accountability is always at hand. According to Malle, Ophuls "wanted to make a point . . . to expose French collaboration . . . making a moral judgment," but Malle says that in his own film he "wanted to scrutinize a kind of behavior that is very hard to understand and was certainly contemptible."⁷ While both films explore the historical period, Malle's feature focuses on an individual collaborator in a limited time frame (a few months in 1944) and is less concerned with advancing an ideological message than with revealing the plausibility of the implausible, that is, with helping us, via a specific plot, to fathom an iniquitous political choice, with neither ideology nor an evil "nature" providing a (reassuring) explanatory cause. In Hannah Arendt's terms (that Malle himself used to describe his film), *Lacombe Lucien* is a fictive enactment of the "banality of evil" (*MM*, 91). Like Eichmann's crimes (as Arendt has shown), Lucien Lacombe's criminal acts are rooted in conformism and thoughtlessness rather than in political activism.

Malle's character Lucien was no doubt disturbing to certain critics because he did not replicate established patterns of collaboration.⁸ Both on the Right and the Left, critics were troubled by the absence of ideological fervor in Malle's protagonist. The filmmaker's apparent unwillingness to make his protagonist's metaphorical black hat appear anything other than an accoutrement, rather than part of a fundamental political identity or nature, brought harsh criticisms. Even Ophuls was reportedly shocked by the ambiguity of *Lacombe Lucien* (*MM*, 89). At a very elementary level, it was no doubt Malle's refusal to delineate and separate clearly good and bad in the same character that triggered the negative reactions. Historian Paul Jankowski has aptly pointed out that *The Sorrow and the Pity* gives "top billing" to an aristocratic collaborator and a peasant resister, as if to confirm and perhaps widen the class gap between the good guys and the bad, whereas Jankowski notes that "*Lacombe Lucien* blurred edges."⁹ The conviction that class appurtenance determined which side one chose (resistance or collaboration) is characteristic of a time when Sartre and the Left in general maintained that it was mostly the bourgeoisie and rich elites who were guilty of

collaboration, not the working class or peasants. Given Malle's own bourgeois origins and his family's Pétainist leanings during the war, some critics on the Left have, predictably, accused him of hiding bourgeois guilt and complicity under Lucien's peasant status. For my purposes, it is not necessary to try to ferret out authorial intentions (whether conscious or not), because the focus will be precisely on issues of substitutability. (I will return to this in a moment.) But what is perhaps the most striking aspect of the negative criticism is that critics on the Left, who frequently complained about the ambiguity of the protagonist, had to resort to eliminating some of the ambiguity of various scenes in order to make a stronger case for their own manicheistic reading of the film (that is, as a film sympathetic to the Right and to collaboration).

III. Mixed Messages

Ambiguity is understandably intolerable for the moralist. Its manipulation can contaminate the righteous on the one hand, or attenuate the guilty's responsibilities on the other. With the advent of the "mode rétro" in the seventies, Michel Foucault described the stakes of films on the Occupation in terms of a fight to articulate, and thus appropriate, the popular memory of the war. He pointed out that the Right was turning everybody into a collaborator (with a certain complicity between Gaullists and the Right), while the Left clung to the memory of popular resistance.¹⁰ Clearly, the debate on political ambiguity was a charged one that colored both the making, and the viewing, of films on the period. Strategic indeterminacy, however, as it promotes the play of multiple meanings and interpretations and challenges us to rethink the world and its representations, can also be read as the mark of a strong work of art, rather than as a sign of insufficiency or negativity. The intolerably ambiguous has the potential to make us review memories that have become too pat. For many French who in the early seventies remembered the Occupation, the Gaullist myth of generalized French resistance had clearly become one of those unexamined, empty truths that neglected or underplayed the population's part in collaboration and anti-Semitism. In the case of *Lacombe Lucien*, the burden of interpreting actions is particularly heavy on the spectator who is compelled to ask questions about the nature of collaboration without a reassuring voice-over or political message, to confirm the "proper" way to read the film. This is both the film's strength and its vulnerability. At a time in the seventies when the battle lines were well drawn between proponents of politicized or committed art and those championing a self-enclosed estheticism, the esthetic opacity of Malle's film, as it enacted murky political questions for the individual, was especially disturbing. This film also made its public uneasy, however, because it made no attempt to offer a *balanced* view of French resistance and collaboration, concentrating instead on specific kinds of collaboration near the end of the war. *Lacombe Lucien* was often criticized because the specific acts of complicity it portrays were taken to represent the French as a whole.¹¹ At issue here is the relationship of individual to type.

Malle's film does not psychologize the portrait of Lucien Lacombe: the seventeen-year-old's inner thoughts are not presented to the viewer; his choices

are not so much explained by the camera as they are performed. Lucien is taciturn, often doesn't respond to others' remarks, and any causal chain among his actions must be apprehended, and worked through, by the viewer. When, in the opening scenes, the camera provides a close-up of a song bird and we hear its idyllic, innocent chirping, followed by Lucien's killing of the little bird with a slingshot, we don't know whether to laugh at a boy's mischief or to be horrified by a cold-blooded killing. Following the action, Lucien looks satisfied with his shot and, making sure no one has seen his feat, he goes back to scrubbing the floor of the Catholic hospice where he is a janitor. Meanwhile, the film's soundtrack launches into the light-hearted music of Stéphane Grappelli's fiddle and Django Reinhardt's guitar. There is no dialogue at this moment, and as in so many instances in the film, Lucien's face remains relatively closed, without defining expression, thereby providing us with few clues about his motivations, thoughts, or feelings.

This beginning is indicative of the way the film as a whole establishes Lucien's individual actions in relation to the historical frame. Just before the slingshot killing of the bird, Lucien dusts lightly around a portrait of Pétain on a bedstand, and while Lucien is taking aim at the bird, we hear the hospice radio broadcasting a speech by the notorious Philippe Henriot, the anti-Semitic propagandist for Vichy in 1944. For the spectator, the sheer proximity of the signs of Vichy seems to relate them to the boy's actions: we are trained by our viewing experience to find metonymical connections, to bind the background detail and the foregrounded action, to suggest that the boy's violent inclinations are consonant with the violent actions of Vichy as represented by the insinuating tones of Henriot discussing the "propaganda" of Radio London. And yet, the binding of foreground to frame doesn't actually work in terms of the character's consciousness, because Lucien's attention is focused exclusively on the bird.¹² The connection between Lucien's pleasure in shooting a bird and acts of collaborators (Pétain, Henriot) is merely incidental rather than natural or necessary. For the peasant Lucien, the killing of the bird carries no political impulse, nor is it necessarily sadistic. It is an integral activity in his up-bringing, something a peasant does for fun (and/or for food). Later on, Lucien's actual entry into the German police is seen as a function of proximity: when his bike gets a flat tire in front of the collaborators' headquarters (the Hôtel des Grottes) after curfew, Lucien is picked up by the collaborators who take him in.

If the film is an enactment of collaboration in the past that triggers strong reactions in the present, it is because the camera in effect calls upon the spectator to perform the role of the witness or judge who will decide upon the extent of Lucien's political guilt in the war. Our function is to weigh what the character lives on a personal level in terms of ethical or public responsibility. Whereas Lucien, as an uneducated, abandoned peasant boy, seems unable to articulate connections between his individual actions and their political or social significance, the camera repeatedly creates patterns that encourage the spectator to do so. For example, the ease and matter-of-factness with which Lucien kills animals for food, or in the sheer pleasure of a hunt, parallel his enjoyment in the hunt for resisters with his collaborator buddies, or his amorous pursuit of the

young Jewish woman, France. The desire for recognition (and thus, for a sense of self), goes hand-in-hand for the disenfranchised boy with the pleasure of *power* over others. There is a sort of flattening or leveling of experience in Lucien's framework that makes all action and all people dangerously equivalent in ethical terms. It is up to the spectator to determine the nature of the differences. At the end of an article on Malle's *Goodbye, Children*, Stanley Hoffmann provides a real-life equivalent to this leveling as it informs French collaboration: "When I was doing research in the French archives, I came across a report from the *préfet* of Belfort to the Minister of the Interior. One part of each *rapport de préfet* was devoted to Franco-German cooperation. In this one, that section was divided in two. One dealt with cooperation in hunting down wild boars; the other, with cooperation in hunting down resisters."¹³ These are precisely the kinds of dehumanizing equivalents that Lucien takes for granted. Again, it is the viewer's responsibility to acknowledge the horror of the parallel construction, to see the evil of the routine killing.

For each negative building block in the construction of Lucien's character, there is a concurrent positive one, making it difficult to pigeonhole him. For example, Lucien's delectation in killing animals is balanced by a scene in which he tenderly strokes the head of a horse that has just died. His awkward, although sometimes poignant, wooing of France turns physically rough at one key point, and the camera's visual sequence suggests that Lucien rapes France. Yet this violence does not end their relationship: in the final scenes they still care for each other. The combination of the peasant's brutality and naiveté creates an unsettling image: there is no singular vision of Lucien, and this fact leaves it up to the spectator to decide whether the announcement of his execution (written on the screen in the final scene) is just. What is difficult in this evaluation is that from an esthetic point of view the two sides of Lucien, corresponding roughly to good and evil, are visually equivalent (given equal time, equal importance), even if their ethical values are opposed. Although critics alternately criticized the character for being stupid or for being portrayed too sympathetically, we may surmise that it is the fear of a gullible or guilty public that is at issue here, one that would identify with, and then exculpate, the character.

In numerous ways, the seductive nature of Lucien lies in the unstated but clearly repeated, moving search of the adolescent for a father figure who would help him make life choices. Lucien is both displaced and rejected: as the son of a sharecropper, he belongs to a rural underclass. In addition, we learn at the beginning of the film that his father is a prisoner of war, his family's lodging has been taken over by another sharecropper family, and his mother has moved in with the farm owner and boss, Mr. Laborit, who makes it clear that Lucien is an intruder. Significantly enough, the fact that Lucien's father is a prisoner of war does *not* provide a key for political or ethical action that the son might follow, since the issues of resisters versus Vichy sympathizers came after French soldiers had been taken prisoners of war by the Germans. Lucien's first inclination is to try to sign up in the *maquis* as a member of the resistance through the local schoolteacher, Peyssac, a potential father figure for Lucien, but the spectator infers that Lucien's action may already be in imitation of the farmer Laborit's son,

Joseph, who has joined the resistance (and who receives recognition from *his* father for this act). Peyssac himself is skeptical of Lucien's reasons for wishing to join the resistance, suspecting that they may have little to do with ideology. When the teacher dismisses Lucien as being too young, it is not clear where Lucien will turn next. What is evident throughout the film, however, is that Lucien seeks to emulate others—principally men—in an effort to establish who he is, and to belong to some group (first to his own family, next to a group of collaborators, finally to a Jewish family). Like most of the male protagonists in Patrick Modiano's novels, Lucien searches continually for a substitute to the missing father, and this paternal absence troubles him much more (albeit subconsciously) than the nature of the dividing lines between resister and Vichy supporter, or between fascists and Jews. When Lucien is caught after curfew by French Gestapo agents, he turns to *them* for a father figure and imitates their criminal acts which for him become associated with power, self-importance, and revenge on those who have rejected him.¹⁴ Later, when he is introduced to a Jewish family in hiding, the father of the family, Albert Horn, a dignified, accomplished tailor, becomes the paternal model that Lucien will imitate. In psychoanalytic terms, the "place of the father," that is, the symbolic position he would occupy in the boy's identity formation, is repeatedly filled by extraordinarily different men whose ethical stances are beside the point for the boy.

Ultimately, however, the fact that for Lucien it does not matter whether the person filling the role of father is morally deplorable or uplifting *never excuses* the adolescent's choices in the film. When Lucien refuses to bend to the pleas of a captured resistance fighter to switch sides (from collaboration to resistance), there is no visual justification or moral explanation for Lucien's taping shut the man's mouth or his capricious drawing of a mouth onto the tape. He is guilty of cruelty and of actively turning away from a just cause. In one of the curious twists of ill-learned lessons, Lucien's mean reaction to the resister is articulated through his identification with Albert Horn: in an earlier scene Horn had met the fascist collaborator Faure in Lucien's presence, and the eminently dignified Horn asked why Faure spoke to him with the familiar form of address ("tu"), given that they didn't know each other. In this context, Faure clearly wished to manifest his contempt (and feelings of superiority) toward Horn as Jew, and Horn resisted the social insult. Then, in the scene between Lucien and the resister, the latter speaks to Lucien in the familiar form ("tu"), no doubt through a desire to create a bond between them, to win Lucien's trust, but Lucien merely responds to the form of address: "Je n'aime pas qu'on me tutoie," "I don't like your using 'tu' [your being familiar] with me." Instead of understanding the use of the familiar as a bond, Lucien repeats Horn's refusal to be placed in an inferior social position, to be treated like a child. But in the identification with the mistreated Jew, the disenfranchised peasant lacks the model's ability to manipulate language to his advantage. Lacking verbal prowess, Lucien silences the resister by taping his mouth shut. Lucien's linguistic repetition is emptied of its moral, social content and is understood as a weapon of power. It is reminiscent of the way father figures can be interchangeable for him regardless of their ethical value.

IV. Rereading the Critics: The Terror of the Typical

Having sketched out some of the film's key traits, let us consider the flurry of criticisms of *Lacombe Lucien*. Charges most frequently made include the lack of verisimilitude; the obliteration of idealism, of ideology, and of historical specificity; the atypical quality of the film's portrayal of collaborators and Jews; the lack of a critical attitude toward the collaborating protagonist; and the choice of a peasant (rather than a bourgeois). The early assertion in 1974 by one critic from *Le monde* that the film was a "work of art" seems to have incensed many critics even more.¹⁵ A few months later, another critic from *Le monde* would be asking whether one should see the film at all.¹⁶ The communist *maquis* fighter, René Andrieu, complained in the seventies that Malle chose actual marginal events and characters over realistic ones.¹⁷ Naomi Greene's essay "La vie en rose: Images of the Occupation in French Cinema," offers a very useful review (and endorsement) of many of the critical positions on *Lacombe Lucien* from the Left in the seventies.¹⁸ I would like to explore in some detail these arguments concerning *Lacombe Lucien*, because they exemplify the tensions in the esthetic performance of history and in its subsequent political readings. Our own viewpoint from the late 1990s will obviously color our reading (with its attendant blind spots and peculiar focuses), but within that frame, I hope to show that the political interpretations of the film must also be read critically. Ultimately, the film itself offers the most effective challenges to a reified political thinking about art.

The first objection to Lucien Lacombe is that he is "a most atypical collaborator," which is tied to the fact that he is not engaged in the fight on ideological grounds.¹⁹ As we noted before, Malle's character does not fit the description of the collaborator who acts according to political beliefs, the figure that audiences in the seventies were already familiar with. To provide a more contemporary viewpoint about the norms of resistance and collaboration among the young, Greene also quotes a 1988 article by Stanley Hoffmann, whose own childhood experience of the war was clearly articulated along ideological lines. An argument based on personal experience of the events must, of necessity, carry at least some weight in discussions of historical "types." The problem is: *whose* experience are we to use as model for the type? Greene implicitly acknowledges the problem, since she also cites, from the seventies, Jean-Louis Bory (who had won the Goncourt prize in 1945 for his novel *Mon village à l'heure allemande* [My Village Under the German Occupation]). Bory describes *Lacombe Lucien* in the weekly magazine, *Le Nouvel Observateur*, as "the first real film—and the first true film—about the Occupation. . . . I know. I was there."²⁰ Ultimately, though, it is Hoffmann's personal remarks that are given more prominence, so that they become the gauge by which to measure the (lack of) verisimilitude of Malle's collaborators.

And yet, as Hoffmann has so aptly pointed out elsewhere, there were probably as many forms of collaboration as there were collaborators.²¹ Malle himself was surprised to discover just before shooting *Lacombe Lucien* just how close to reality his fictive character actually was:

I was in Limogne, the village next to here, and was talking to the man who owns the garage. . . . I described what the story [*Lacombe Lucien*] was about. He said, "Oh, you're talking about Hercule." Hercule was a tiny young man with a physical defect, he had one shoulder higher than the other, and he had worked for the Gestapo in Cahors. He was eighteen at the time, and they had sent him to infiltrate one of the *maquis* here. . . . The garage owner in Limogne confirmed that this young man Hercule had stayed with the *maquis* in my house, which was really bizarre! . . . Eventually, Hercule was arrested and executed immediately after the war. So the garage owner said, "You're telling the story of Hercule." I said I'd never heard of Hercule before. After all this research, and zeroing in on this region, I find that somebody very close to Lucien Lacombe had actually existed and lived in my house! I thought that it was a sign of fate. (MM, 92-93)

While I don't think that Malle's discovery of an individual equivalent to his character makes Lucien's claim to verisimilitude and to being typical any more imposing than Hoffmann's, I do think that attention to detail and to historical specificity allows us to appreciate how close to the events of the Occupation the portrayal of Lucien might actually be.²² For instance, Greene finds it completely implausible that Lucien should ask "What is a Jew?" in 1944.²³ And she would be right, were it not for the fact that Lucien never asks this question. It is the much younger boy, Julien, in Malle's 1986 film, *Goodbye Children*, who makes this query and even there, it is more a political question than one of complete ignorance, closer to the kind of philosophical question Lucas Steiner, the Jewish theater director in Truffaut's *The Last Metro*, asks as he considers roles, stereotypes, and the layers of propaganda that have piled up against Jews, distorting their image to the point of unintelligibility.²⁴

Lucien is also faulted with simply mimicking others' ideas rather than developing his own. This is certainly a valid comment, but one wonders if it isn't true for all youth as they try out new ideas. When Lucien remarks: "Monsieur Faure says that Jews are the enemies of France" (a mimicking quotation that troubles Greene), Lucien is indeed repeating what he has heard. Given that he knows that his interlocutor, Albert Horn, is himself a Jew, the comment looks almost like a challenge, as if he were testing the validity of Faure's statement, to see what sort of reaction it will elicit from Horn.²⁵ By attributing the remark to another (Faure) rather than saying it as his own, Lucien leaves himself a margin in which to evaluate Faure's statement *through* Horn without direct confrontation. Lucien is depicted as ignorant, but the adolescent's repetition of others' ideas doesn't seem particularly unlikely.

Greene extends her criticism to the general portrayal of collaboration in the film, arguing that the collaborators profess no moral or political ideology, that they are all misfits and outcasts. This is not entirely accurate, however: the character Faure harangues those around him with a collaborationist discourse: he asserts faith in Germany, and contempt and hatred for communists, Jews, and the British. De Gaulle is dangerous, according to Faure, because he is surrounded by Bolsheviks and Jews. It is also Faure who has Horn deported (after comparing Jews to proliferating rats) when Horn shows up at the Hôtel des Grottes looking

for Lucien.²⁶ As horrendous as Faure's convictions are, they nevertheless constitute sociopolitical beliefs. Alongside Faure, we also find the secretary, Lucienne Chauvelot, who says that if the French had been more disciplined like the Germans ("obliging" and "punctual"), they would have won the war. It is true, however, that the group includes an inordinate number of misfits: a washed-up alcoholic cyclist; an ex-(bad) cop; a handsome black rogue from Martinique; an aristocratic, amoral dandy; a vacuous, mean, would-be actress; etc. It is an unsavory bunch that has chosen Germany over De Gaulle *and* over Vichy (the group members practice target shooting with a portrait of Pétain). This is not, as Hoffmann and others have pointed out, the more commonplace kind of passive collaboration.²⁷ Malle and Modiano do portray more conventional forms via such characters as Lucien's mother, a peasant woman who accepts Lucien's Gestapo earnings even as she takes distance from his collaboration with the Germans. In her case, political guilt runs parallel to a sexual betrayal (sleeping with the boss). But ultimately, Malle's primary focus is on active participants in fascist collaboration.

Because French collaboration covers a range of groups and activities (from passive to active), and because *Lacombe Lucien* is about specific types, it becomes important to pay attention to the time frame of Malle's and Modiano's story. The scenes take place in the summer of 1944, culminating with Lucien's execution in October of the same year. If we match up the story's events with its historical framework, the collection of odd characters involved in collaboration with the Germans turns out to be quite representative of the period. Michael Marrus and Robert Paxton, in *Vichy France and the Jews*, explain how the nature of collaboration in the French police was already changing in 1943:

The work of French policemen was becoming not only disagreeable but dangerous. Sabotage of rails and pylons begins to appear regularly in the prefects' reports, along with the first armed clashes between police and groups of *maquisards* and the first armed attacks upon police stations. . . . Small wonder that recruitment for the French police began to drop off sharply in the summer of 1943. . . . With fewer applicants, the police had to recruit with less selectivity.²⁸

By June, 1944, there was even less incentive for Frenchmen to join the ranks of those faithful to Franco-German collaboration. Historian Bertram Gordon describes the latter part of the Occupation thus: "As German pressure for French wealth and manpower intensified, the prospect of increased collaboration offered little to most Frenchmen. The collaborationists remained a small group of ideologues, adventurers, and bandits."²⁹ Malle's and Modiano's group of torturers, murderers, blackmailers, ideologues, and black market opportunists covers a good part of the spectrum of active collaboration, without claiming to be all inclusive. Modiano's influence may be most strongly felt in this context. In several of his novels, as well as in the script of *Lacombe Lucien*, Modiano explores the underworld of collaboration, one that resembles quite closely actual groups of bandit-fascists, such as the Bonny-Lafont gang, which, as Gordon explains, "blackmailed Frenchmen and served the Germans as an auxiliary police in Paris

[and] usually functioned independently of the political parties, although individuals may have been involved in both. The ranks of those who collaborated with the Germans included criminals in it for the money or for personal revenge, but also . . . personally disinterested warriors who lost their lives at the Eastern front.”³⁰ *Lacombe Lucien*’s gang is located in southwest France, and the same mixture of adventurers and believers makes up its group of collaborators.

What is no doubt equally as troubling as Lucien’s work for the fascist-bandit gang is how typical his situation was for many adolescent boys toward the end of the war. Paul Jankowski has shown that the fear of the STO (the “Service du Travail Obligatoire”) was a motive shared by resisters and collaborators alike as they chose a means of escape from the enslaved work force in Germany. Hence, a political solution—the choice between collaboration (either with the German police or the French collaborationist Milice) and the resistance—was often triggered by a human, personal dilemma. Contrary to the Left’s desires in the seventies to believe, as Sartre had maintained, that collaborators were almost exclusively bourgeois, the youth in 1944 who joined the ranks of the Milice and the Maquis also came from the poor and working class. And while the reasons for these young men to collaborate or to resist did differ—with collaborators tending toward immediate self-interest and resisters toward more abstract, idealistic group goals—the lines between them were not absolute, and combinations of motives were very frequent.³¹ Thus, historians now confirm what political criticism in the seventies was reluctant to accept as even plausible: first, the representative quality of Lucien’s situation and, second, the logic of his “fall” into collaboration. This is *not* to say that, overall, greater or even equal numbers of youths joined the Milice or the German police than the Maquis. As John Sweets points out, the Milice frequently inflated its own numbers to appear more influential to the Germans.³² By 1944, many, many more escapees from the STO were turning to resistance rather than to collaboration, at a time when the Milice was increasingly hated and discredited. Lucien’s choice is thus one of an ever decreasing minority; but then, we must remember that the German police was not even *his* first choice.

Just as Malle’s collaborators raise critical ire because of the filmmaker’s specific rather than stereotypical choices in representing a story of collaboration, so it is the case for the Jews portrayed in *Lacombe Lucien*. It is fascinating to me that the film again reveals a critical unease about functional stereotypes. What is revealing about the criticisms is that the Horn family members are alternately interpreted negatively, but in *opposing terms*, either as facile stereotypes or as totally atypical characters. Once again, as the film explores the problematic nature of identity, the ways in which identities are marked, or deviate from norms and stereotypes, provoke uneasy reactions. The viewing public is forced to think through the relationships between individual and type, between a marked ethnic identity and an assimilated national one. What emerges from the film reviews are the unresolved tensions that continue to be played out in the reading of the film, as if *Lacombe Lucien* were preparing the way for later discussions of ethnic identity in the eighties and nineties.

Contemporary film critic Annette Insdorf is bothered by how “non-Jewish” the blondhaired, blue-eyed young woman France appears and by the fact that her

father thinks of his own identity more in terms of having been the best tailor in Paris than in terms of being Jewish. Insdorf faults him for not taking an active position of solidarity with other (Jewish) victims and resisters and with being complicitous with the enemy. (The aristocratic dandy, Jean-Bernard de Voisins, extorts money and clothing from the Horns with the false promise of passage to Spain.) Despite its eloquence, there is a certain self-consciousness to Insdorf's argument concerning *Lacombe Lucien*:

Filmmakers in the seventies . . . finally addressed themselves to the fatal indifference and complicity of the French, but only with Jewish characters assimilated (or classy) enough to appeal to an audience still subject to anti-Semitism. This is not to say that the more "authentic" Jewish characters are or should look unattractive; but rather that the predominance of characters who bear neither external nor internal acknowledgment of their Judaism can offer only a fraction of the historical picture. When physical beauty or social class eclipses all other roots of identity, there is a danger that the aesthetic can become an anesthetic.³³

What seems surprising in this quotation is Insdorf's curious use of "authentic" in referring to physiognomy, as if a blond-haired, blue-eyed person could not be authentically Jewish, or as if a bourgeois Jew were less "authentic" than a working-class one.³⁴ While there may be tendencies that feed a stereotype, the contradictions in this one loom in the background in nasty, heartwrenching ways: if "authentic" Jews were so recognizable, then the Nazis' imposition of the yellow star on their lapels would have been superfluous. And what does "authenticity" have to do with physical beauty? Would a dark-haired, brown-eyed beauty, or a red-headed one, be an authentic Jew, or would beauty once again efface ethnicity? Is a Sephardic Jew's appearance more genuine than an Ashkenazi's?

Given Insdorf's discomfort and that of many other critics, it would seem that Malle's esthetic is anything but anesthetic. Insdorf's own quotation marks around the word "authentic" make her discomfort tangible. The fact that France is blue-eyed, blond, *and* Jewish makes us ponder the issue of ethnic identity and the Diaspora. As we noted earlier, esthetic choices of the filmmaker can be (mis)read as antithetical to the truthful representation of the past when they stir up difficult questions about identity. Although Malle's film does not evoke the horrors of the Holocaust (the latter being the topic of Insdorf's book), the threat to the Horns' life hangs over them in tangible fashion. The point may well be that even the supposedly assimilated Jew, the one who does not choose solidarity and does not fit conventions, cannot escape being marked by a vicious Nazi order in 1944. We do not *see* Horn in a concentration camp, but there is little doubt that that is where Faure has him sent. Marie, the maid who is employed by the collaborators at the Hôtel des Grottes and who becomes jealous because Lucien courts France rather than her, does not hesitate to hurl anti-Semitic epithets at France, who cannot avoid being labeled despite her supposedly "non-Jewish" looks.

On the flipside of Insdorf's argument, Mona Ozouf and Naomi Greene take issue with the portrait of the Horns because they are too stereotypical, not assimilated enough. Greene challenges Horn's profession and his refinement:

"improbably piling one stereotype on another, Malle depicts M. Horn as both a cultured cosmopolite and a tailor."³⁵ But in a European society where fashion is a major mark of culture, the connection between tailoring and social refinement is perhaps not so implausible. Ozouf complains that the Horns are too passive, complicitous with the enemy, and that they have an accent, "which, in a little town in Aquitaine, makes of them manifest émigrés, wandering Jews, not French citizens."³⁶ One may wonder to which accent Ozouf is referring, given that the daughter's accent is distinctly Parisian, whereas her father's sounds German, or perhaps East European or Scandinavian, at any rate foreign.³⁷ (With the exception of one word, the grandmother speaks German the whole time.) But even if the markings of Lucien's thick southern accent might relate him to some traditional notion of authenticity in which regionalism and property are the sign of social belonging and identity, his social disenfranchisement and displacement make of him an outsider who ill-fits the picture of the quintessential Frenchman. In our time at least, France's Parisian accent would be closer to a "pure" French accent. The ironies concerning the link between identity and language continue to accumulate when we take into account the scene between the fascist Faure and Albert Horn. Faure phones the German Kommandantur, his ally (representing "the master race"), to turn Horn in, but Faure can barely make himself understood in German, whereas the man on whom he has heaped his contempt, Albert Horn, speaks impeccable German. We remember, too, that Horn's understanding of the social differences between the familiar and formal forms of address ("tu" and "vous") make him an ill-understood linguistic model for Lucien, the native speaker.

Ozouf's contrast between "French citizens" and "wandering Jews" is an uneasy one. The crisscrosses among language, class, and identity (national and personal) in Malle's treatment of the Occupation challenge the simplicity of such a contrast. The opposition between "French citizen" and "wandering Jew" tends to reestablish, albeit implicitly, a mythical model of French purity, and intimates that the legitimacy of national identity is tied to the land and to how one speaks the language (a *particular* French). The film's treatment of the Horns' displacement does not make it a matter of choice or nature, but rather an imposition brought about by the fascists. The Horns are not "at home," because they have been forced to flee Paris and to go into hiding.

Christian Zimmer's critique of *Lacombe Lucien*, from the seventies, is no doubt one of the more vehement indictments of the film. He describes it contemptuously as a reactionary "work of art." ("Work of art" for him connotes perfection revealing man's imperfection and inalterability.)³⁸ He affirms that there is no personal life outside the political sphere and criticizes the film for suggesting that the personal could escape the political, but he does not connect the personal/political debate to Lucien's demise: Lucien does, after all, pay for his crimes with his life. What is shocking is that his execution by a resistance military tribunal is announced when Lucien looks the least guilty: the information is written over a bucolic image of Lucien lying in the grass, at peace with his surroundings. Zimmer interprets the final idyllic scenes, where the collaborator Lucien, the young Jewish woman France, and her grandmother live briefly together in the

beautiful countryside—outside of history—as a false image of reconciliation that the Right in the seventies was trying to promote. (Zimmer and Mona Ozouf agree on this issue.)

The point is well taken, especially given the politics of the seventies, when the Left saw in Giscard d'Estaing's arrival in power the triumph of an anti-Gaullist, cynical bourgeoisie that could manipulate the images of the Occupation to its advantage. For Zimmer and many others, this film, *Lacombe Lucien*, made by a rich bourgeois, must inevitably perform bourgeois politics of the Right in representing the past. That the adolescent collaborator and the young Jewish woman care for each other, with each reciprocally providing an image of the radical Other, cannot fail to disconcert, but what Zimmer neglects to note is that the potential for violence and discord runs through the last scenes, too, threatening at every moment to topple the idyll *from within*. All is not so harmonious in the final section: at one point, the camera shows France standing over Lucien with a big rock in her hands, as if she were about to kill him. Even a love game of "hide and seek" between the two takes on almost sinister tones: as boy chases girl in the attic of an abandoned house, we hear their voices before seeing them, and it isn't clear at first whether France's shrieks are in jest or in fear. The game recalls Lucien's pleasure in hunting down animals and resisters (with the emphasis on the *hunt* rather than on any particular *object*). By reproducing the same struggles and ambiguities of events in history, the back-to-nature episode reveals its own precariousness and destroys any notion of a simple harmony between the two characters. The power dynamics between them continues to underscore cultural, class, and gender tensions.³⁹

In order to place Malle's film more solidly in the camp of the Right, Zimmer paradoxically has to eliminate the very ambiguity that he was initially criticizing (as a function of the film's Rightist tendencies). The final scene has to be a pure idyll in nature that bears no violent or ambiguous undercurrents in order to confirm the Rightist reconciliation theme that Zimmer attributes to it. Zimmer acknowledges, of course, that collaboration took place during the Occupation, but even the smart critic, like so many other Frenchmen in the postwar period, is more comfortable with a clearcut past, with good guys and bad guys and nothing in between: he mourns the good old days of "virtuous indignation, intransigence, faithfulness," when there were still "*great designs*: the Resistance was one, Gaullism too."⁴⁰ The problem is that the film does not deny these designs. It portrays resistance fighters who are faithful to their cause to the end. The teacher Peyssac is one case. The film also shows much more subtle forms of resistance that the eyes of a critic in the seventies have trouble identifying. For example, one character who remains faithful to a principle of resistance throughout the film is the old grandmother, Bella Horn (magnificently played by Therese Giehse). Although her age and fragility do not permit her to resist in active, overt ways, the grandmother is clearly hostile to collaborators. She willingly retreats into silence when either Germans or French collaborators are around, and at one point she tries to keep Lucien out of the Horn's apartment after her son has disappeared. Her games of *solitaire* are a retreat from the

untenable situation in which her family finds itself. Interestingly enough, she comes to provide a counterpoint to Lucien in one of the last scenes in the country. As she plays solitaire, Lucien lays out his money as if he were copying her play and then utters an awkward “good night” in German when he leaves the room, as if to seal the bond between them. Bella, however, resists the linguistic connivance, murmuring “bonsoir” back to Lucien in a spirit of contrariness. This is the only French word she utters during the entire film, and it is in response to Lucien’s German. Now it is certainly true that the grandmother’s action in this scene can be read in a jocular or playful way, and one might even see it as a form of cross-cultural bonding between her and Lucien. The characteristic opacity of the film leaves room for both personal and political interpretations. Zimmer’s political reading, however, reduces the grandmother to a one dimensional character who is indifferent to everything around her, and thus overlooks the subtle aspects of her resistance (as well as her playfulness and will to survive).

The frequency of critical blind spots and strong reactions to Malle’s treatment of the French collaborationist past allows us to appreciate the extent of the postwar repression. Paradoxically enough, although Leftist critics were concerned that the Right was using ambiguity to recast events so that resisters and collaborators looked alike, thereby excusing the latter, many critics on the Right were actually critical of *Lacombe Lucien* because the protagonist was not politically aware. Thus, Left and Right harbored similar criticisms.⁴¹ But Malle’s film does not so much show that apolitical art is dangerous to its viewers, (*Lacombe Lucien* is implicitly critical of amoral or hypocritical behavior), as it reveals that narrow or obtuse political interpretations are dangerous to art and can foreclose productive discussion.

If Malle’s film resists being appropriated as an easily defined political message in terms of Right or Left, it nevertheless requires that viewers make ethical evaluations, that we decide for ourselves (with the camera guiding us in certain directions) upon the guilt of the characters, especially that of Lucien. Ultimately Lucien’s guilt is never excused, even if it is understood. That *Lacombe Lucien* continues to stir up controversy even now about its artistic choices in articulating this dark view of the Occupation and collaboration may well suggest that the Vichy Syndrome’s obsessive phase is still with us. The strong critical reactions (and their blind spots) also reveal a critical nostalgia for a particular kind of *art engagé*, an art designed to present a politicized point of view rather than an ethical interrogation.⁴²

NOTES

1. Stanley Hoffmann, “Cinquante ans après, quelques conclusions essentielles,” *Esprit*, special issue “Que faire de Vichy?” 181 (May 1992), 38–42.

2. Henry Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France since 1944*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 235.

3. For a biographical account of Reinhardt’s life, see Charles Delaunay, *Django mon frère*

(Paris: Le Terrain Vague, 1968).

4. Like Pierre Blaise (and Lucien Lacombe), Django Reinhardt was hungry for fame and is said to have wanted to have the star-stature of a Cary Grant or a Tyrone Power (along with the pay). See Delaunay, 107.

5. For an overview of the "mode rétro," See: Alan Morris, *Collaboration and Resistance Reviewed: Writers and "the Mode Rétro" in Post-Gaullist France* (New York: Saint Martin's, 1992).

6. Richard J. Golsan, "Collaboration and Context: *Lacombe Lucien*, the *Mode Rétro*, and the Vichy Syndrome," *Identity Papers*, ed. Steven Ungar (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1996), 140.

7. Louis Malle and Philip French, *Malle on Malle*, ed. Philip French (London: Faber and Faber, 1993), 104. Further references to this work will be indicated in the essay with the abbreviation *MM* and an accompanying page number.

8. Parenthetically, it is interesting to note that the difficulty in finding a role model through which to evaluate his life choices is precisely the problem Lucien powerfully and repeatedly enacts in the film.

9. Paul Jankowski, "In Defence of Fiction: Resistance, Collaboration, and *Lacombe Lucien*," *Journal of Modern History* 63 (September 1991), 457.

10. Pascal Bonitzer and Serge Toubiana, "Anti-Rétro: Entretien avec Michel Foucault," *Cahiers du cinéma*, 251–52 (July–August 1974), 5–15.

11. This reading of the global nature of *Lacombe Lucien*'s collaboration is shared by some contemporary critics, including those who look upon this film with favorable eyes. See, for example, Richard J. Golsan's enlightening essay, "Collaboration, Alienation, and the Crisis of Identity in the Film and Fiction of Patrick Modiano," *Film and Literature: A Comparative Approach to the Adaptation*, eds. Wendall Aycock and Michael Schoenecke (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 1988), 107–21.

12. See Annette Insdorf, *Indelible Shadows: Film and the Holocaust*, second edition (Cambridge UP, 1989), 123. Insdorf ties Lucien's violence to his survival instincts, which in turn are associated with his collaboration. Insdorf does agree, however, that Malle avoids using the camera to provide "directorial judgments" on the actions we are viewing (123).

13. Stanley Hoffmann, review of *Au revoir les enfants*, *New York Review of Books* (12 May 1988), 21.

14. Although spectators might wish to excuse Lucien's betrayal of Peyssac, whose name he reveals when he is plied with liquor by the French Gestapo, they soon change their minds, because Lucien shows no remorse when Peyssac is captured and tortured.

15. Jean de Baroncelli, "*Lacombe Lucien*, un adolescent dans la Gestapo," *Le Monde*, (31 Jan. 1974), 1.

16. See "Faut-il voir *Lacombe Lucien*?" *Le Monde* (14 Feb. 1974), 13.

17. René Andrieu and Louis Malle, "*Lacombe Lucien* et l'Occupation: Louis Malle s'explique, René Andrieu conteste," *Humanité dimanche* 156 (3 April 1974), 19–22.

18. Naomi Greene, "La vie en rose: Images of the Occupation in French Cinema," in *Auschwitz and After: Race, Culture, and "the Jewish Question" in France*, ed. Lawrence Kritzman (New York: Routledge, 1995), 283–98.

19. Greene, 289.

20. qtd. in Green, 288.

21. Stanley Hoffmann, "Collaborationism in France during World War II," *Journal of Modern History* 40 (September 1968), 375.

22. Hercule's physical description and situation resembles, in fact, more closely that of the character Joseph in *Goodbye, Children*, the kitchen boy who, after being fired for his black market activities in Catholic boarding school, collaborates with the Germans.

23. Greene, 289.

24. Actually, the young Julien uses the derogatory term "youpin" ("Yid") when asking the question, as if he wanted to know what the negative connotations were of being Jewish. Lucien asks instead "What is a Freemason?" which seems a relatively plausible question for a peasant boy to ask, particularly given the secret nature of the group. Even supposing that Greene were right and that Lucien had asked about the nature of being Jewish, it would still be possible to understand the

question as an interrogation about ethnic identity.

25. Greene says that it is Tonin, the ex-cop, whom Lucien is quoting but it is in fact Faure, the ideologue, who makes the remark. It seems fitting that Faure would be the one spouting anti-Semitic rhetoric.

26. Golsan, in his essay, "Collaboration, Alienation, and the Crisis of Identity in the Film and Fiction of Patrick Modiano," has aptly spoken of Faure as the "fascist zealot of the collaborationist group" (115).

27. Michel Mohrt's review of *Lacombe Lucien* in *La Nouvelle Revue Française* 257 (May 1974), 116, calls the film unrepresentative "even if many copies of Lucien existed." What viewers of the seventies seemed to expect was a collage of "typical" collaborator traits molded into one, the height of verisimilitude, whereas Malle and Modiano offer a portrait that relies more on specific, extreme cases of collaboration. For example, although it was certainly not common to find blacks among the collaborators, Malle's character from Martinique is based on an actual person (see *Malle on Malle*, 100). Malle and Modiano chose to include the character as much for the provocative effect as for actual veracity.

28. Michael R. Marrus and Robert O. Paxton, *Vichy France and the Jews* (New York: Stockmen Books, 1983), 322.

29. Bertram M. Gordon, *Collaborationism in France during the Second World War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), 338.

30. Gordon, 339.

31. Jankowski, 473–79.

32. John Sweets, *Choices in Vichy France* (New York: Oxford UP, 1994), 92.

33. Insdorf, 126.

34. I am not so much trying to negate Insdorf's interpretation here as to suggest that the film's heterogeneous choices trigger uneasy critical responses that reopen the issues of ethnicity, especially when the critic years for more clarity to reveal the specificity of the Jewish experience.

35. Greene, 289. Albert Horn's cosmopolitanism is in line with his multicultural background.

36. Mona Ozouf, "Sans chagrin ni pitié," *Le Nouvel Observateur* 489 (March 1974), 56 (my translation).

37. The actor, Holger Lowenadler, is in fact Swedish.

38. See Christian Zimmer, "La paille dans le discours de l'ordre," *Les Temps Modernes* 336 (July 1974), 24–95.

39. Colin W. Nettelbeck and Penelope A. Hueston add that the "back to nature" episode, with Lucien playing the "good savage" providing food and shelter for the "family," and France resuming her role as city girl, looks like a return to the way things were before the war, as if nothing had changed. But the violent undercurrents of the episode hearken back to the historical reality of the war. See *Patrick Modiano: Pièces d'identité* (Paris: Lettres Modernes, 1986), 62.

40. Zimmer, 2493.

41. See Golsan's essay, "Collaboration and Context: *Lacombe Lucien*, the *Mode Rétro*, and the Vichy Syndrome."

42. This research was supported by a grant from the Amherst College Research Award Program.