Appendix: conversation with Patrice Leconte, 9 February 2003¹

Lisa Downing: The title of your autobiography intrigues me. Why are you an impostor? Or is it just a joke?

Patrice Leconte: Of course, it is a bit of a joke to create a catchy title. When the publisher convinced me to write a book of this sort, I was looking for a title and I didn't want to say something like 'The Story of My Life', because I thought that was far too pretentious. It had to be rather eye-catching, while still reflecting a certain reality. Indeed, the idea that I am an impostor does move around my head on a regular basis. What I mean by it is that when one says to a painter or a novelist, for instance, 'Your painting is magnificent, or 'Your book is magnificent' this comment refers to the artist's work only. A filmmaker, by contrast, brings together the work of many different people, who are all talented. Alone, one means nothing. Alone, the filmmaker doesn't have talent. Of course, he may be talented, but at the end of the day, when a film is successful, when it receives good reviews, when one reaps the rewards, when someone says: 'I love your film, Mr Leconte', it is still being said to a single person. Yet that person didn't do it all by himself. I always say to myself: 'This isn't right. There are so many of them'. There is the set designer who is so talented, there is the editor who was wonderful, there is the writer who had a sensational idea, the actors, the lighting team, all of those people ... So the idea of being an impostor is both true and false, but it mainly refers to the feeling of sometimes receiving compliments that need be shared with many different people.

LD: I understand. It is a very modest notion.

1 This conversation was transcribed by Dany Nobus and translated from the French by Dany Nobus and Lisa Downing. It is reproduced with the kind permission of Patrice Leconte

PL: But it is not false modesty. I have never thought 'me, me, me'. My talent, if I have it, is to be successful in bringing together various things, so that, at the end of the day, the talent of all these people together may generate successful films. From time to time it doesn't work, I make a mistake, and the films aren't successful at all. But, there you go: one is never alone when it comes to making films.

LD: But you are still young. Why did you decide to write your autobiography at this stage of your life?

PL: I didn't really choose to do it. A charming guy from Flammarion, who edits a collection of books, said to me one day: 'I would like to meet you. I really like your films. Let's have lunch together'. And when I met him, he said: 'I wanted to see you because I thought it would be interesting if you were to write down some anecdotes, some memories'. And I said: 'I am not sure. I think it's much better to do that when one is slightly older'. But he was insistent. And, then, during lunch he prompted me to recall things that had happened when I shot my films, encounters with actors etc., and I found myself getting into it. I told him things about my profession, about my films. And he said to me: 'This is exactly what I want'. So I finally agreed and said: 'Look, I shall try. If I succeed and it is interesting, you can publish it. If at the end of three or four pages I don't succeed and the whole thing is a washout, we shall stop the project'. Well, it was summertime and I left for the countryside. I wasn't working on a film at the time and every day I thought about what I was going to write during the evening. And, then, when the evening came and it was cooler, I would write this book. In September I gave it to him. And he told me: 'It's interesting. We shall publish it'. And there it is.

LD: So it wasn't your own decision. It wasn't a decision that you would have taken.

PL: Never, never. Obviously, I might decide one day to write a play, or to write a series of short stories, or to write things that are not directly related to my profession. I can make that decision, but the decision to write a book on my work, my itinerary, my films, would never have occurred to me.

LD: You make some interesting claims in the book, though. At one point you mention that during your youth, as a student at the IDHEC, you weren't interested in politics at all and that the events of May '68 left you rather indifferent. Is that true or is it a cynical remark?

PL: It is of course a bit cynical. It is a form of humour, but at the same time I have never felt like a person – neither a person nor a filmmaker – who is really, deliberately militant or politically committed. My own form of militancy is much more related to humankind. If I do militate for a better world, it would be through my films, through the happiness one tries to

instil, through the eyes of the spectator that one tries to open so that they see the world differently, so that they are more in love with their partners ... It wouldn't be all that bad if one were to succeed in it. Even if it only made people more tolerant, more aware even. My commitment is much more humanist than political, definitely. But I try to play my music in such a way that people feel uplifted, rather than being brought down. When I say it in this way, it sounds like 'mission impossible', but I shall always remember the words of Wim Wenders. One day, when he was the president of the jury at the Cannes festival, he was asked: 'Why do you make your films?' And he said: 'I make my films to make the world a better place'. And I said to myself: 'Well, this guy is clearly no fool'. It is a bit pretentious, I suppose. But in the end I think he is right, because one can indeed make the world a better place in this way. And one isn't even obliged to make films with the explicit intention of making the world a better place or stirring a revolution. One can gently slip some interesting ideas into people's minds. Hence, I have never been militant, or committed politically. I try to live my life and make my films more gently and more humanely. And politics pisses me off, enormously. I don't understand a thing that politicians say. They are all interchangeable. One does not know who to believe; who is a liar and who is telling the truth.

LD: Perhaps this brings us to *Ridicule*, a film in which you mock the political need to persuade and to convince, without any consideration for morality.

PL: Yes, *Ridicule* is a very good example of what I feel. The hero of *Ridicule*, Ponceludon de Malavoy, comes from the provinces, just like me. And he has an ideal. Of course, I myself do not have a humanitarian ideal. If I have an ideal at all, it is with regard to filmmaking. But this boy has an ideal. He arrives at Versailles and he knocks on the door of power, but he doesn't obtain anything. The boy is authentic. He has a project. He needs some money but he doesn't get anything. For me, this is a reflection of how I think. I have the impression that when one calls upon politicians these days, one never gets a good answer. But I am saying this in front of a person who agrees with me.

LD: For me, there is a strong ethical drive in your films. But it doesn't concern, let's say, a 'local' ethics, nor a question of politics, as you have said. It is much more concerned with encounters between people, with what you observe in everyday life when people meet one another, and which requires a certain authentic response, an ethical response, which sometimes your characters are able to give and sometimes they are incapable of giving. I find this dimension quite touching.

PL: I am very moved by what you have just said. It is true that the essence of my inspiration and what nourishes my imagination in the films I make is

the everyday, only the everyday. Because one can learn a lot from observing people leading their lives. That is how one learns to see and to think differently. 'And this is how people live': it is a song by Leo Ferré, isn't it... Well, this is what interests me. To ask the question: 'Isn't it possible to live a bit better than this? Isn't it possible to be better in the way we look at the other too?' It is not always evident in all my films, because I don't want it to be overwhelming as a message. For the notion of 'message' is also a heavy burden. But it is definitely what animates me.

LD: I understood you correctly, then?

PL: Yes, and it touches me, because sometimes I am told: 'I don't understand what you have tried to do' in a given film. So it makes me happy that you say that.

LD: I am pleased about that ... You have made several films, such as *Tandem* and *L'Homme du train*, about men who are struggling to find out what it means to be a 'man' within contemporary society. In your opinion, are twentieth-and twenty-first-century men facing an identity crisis?

PL: Well, yes ... I would want to avoid talking about myself all the time, but I guess one always puts oneself emotionally within one's films. We are never estranged from our own films. Actually, sometimes we can be strangers to our films, but it's unfortunate if that happens. One should not make a film if one is really distanced from it. The big question: 'How can one be a man these days – a husband, a lover, a father, quite simply a man, a man among other men' is a question which always comes back to me. But it is a question which always comes back because it is triggered by a lucid and very sincere observation. I think that at every stage of life, at each stage of equal ages, women are always more mature than men. Take five-year-old girls and five-year-old boys. Well, five-year-old boys are very stupid and the girls are already more interesting. At the age of 10, 20, 50 even, women always seem more interesting than men to me. I think there is always more that society as a whole could learn from women. I don't mean that as a sort of idolatry, but we men can learn a lot from women if we are able to keep our eyes open. For this reason too, I say to myself that this must make a man's life more complicated. If one believes that women are more interesting people than men, then it must obviously make it difficult to live as a man. In any case, it is true that the men in my films are asking themselves questions such as: 'How can one live and make as few mistakes as possible? How can one live in a more or less dignified fashion? How can one assume one's own cowardice? How can one assume one's defects, in full awareness of them?' All of this keeps me busy. It doesn't keep me awake, but it does keep coming back.

LD: And at a certain moment in your career you made a number of films in succession about masculine friendship. More recently, you have concentrated rather on the relationship between men and women. What inspired you to make this change?

PL: The first films I made were very much designed to put things on the road. I deliberately made comedies, *Les Bronzés* etc., with perhaps lower emotional stakes, one could say. I was less involved in them. Subsequently, when I started making slightly more personal films, which touched me more closely, I didn't think myself sufficiently mature, both in the films I wanted to make and in my ideas, to stage important female characters. *Tandem*, which was the first more personal film, was about two men in a car on the road. Afterwards, there was *Monsieur Hire* and in this film Monsieur Hire is behind the window and the woman is on the other side of the courtyard. Hence, there was desire, but it couldn't travel across ... And then things started to clarify themselves a bit with *Le Mari de la coiffeuse*, because here it really is about a man and a woman, alone and in love, in a hairdresser's salon. I approached it very gently. It wasn't conscious on my part. I am saying it today with hindsight. And then, afterwards, I succeeded in staging female characters and got a great deal of pleasure out of working with actresses, as opposed to working only with actors. I started to feel at ease. And I managed to enjoy making the other films. I amused myself drawing very important, strong female characters. And then I forgot about them again just for the duration of one film, because my most recent film, *L'Homme du train*, only concerns two men. I went back to the buddy movie or, if not buddies, then at least a certain masculine complicity. In the next film, it will be a man and a woman again. So now I feel that I am walking about freely.

LD: Of all your films, the one I get on with the least is *Le Parfum d'Yvonne*. What does this film mean to you?

PL: *Le Parfum d'Yvonne* is a strange adventure ... The origins of *Le Parfum d'Yvonne* are as follows: I harboured the idea, the desire, to make a film in which eroticism would be quite manifest, strong, open, deliberate. But I didn't want to make an erotic film all by myself, telling the entire story myself. When I came across this novel by Modiano, *Villa triste*, I felt that between the lines there was a slightly outdated eroticism that was nonetheless absolutely charming and which could be expressed in the images of a film, and which it was even possible to take a step further. I could already sense in the book this scent, this direction. And then I accepted this proposition from a producer who said to me: 'Have you read this?' And at that point I hadn't read the book by Modiano, but when I read it I said to myself: 'Well, perhaps this is an opportunity to follow a new direction, just for the duration of one film, which is more

deliberately erotic, sensuous'. And in the beginning, I made the film for these reasons. Later I was animated by other motivations, notably the character of René Meinthe, played by Jean-Pierre Marielle, who is this detached, decadent homosexual figure. I recognized that I started the film inspired by an interest in the sensuous or the erotic, and that gradually I developed a passion for the character of Meinthe, played by Marielle. But all of this resulted in a film made for bad reasons. And the result is a film which is hard to situate. But, strangely enough, I know people who are infatuated with it.

LD: It is certainly a very strange film.

PL: I don't watch my own films every night, but when I saw *Le Parfum d'Yvonne* again some time ago, I thought it was a rather vain film, a bit useless – although I am not sure whether films should be useful – but even today I think that *Le Parfum d'Yvonne* contains moments that I believe to be very successful at evoking a certain kind of distress, the twilight side of our emotional lives. There are very shallow elements in the film, without interest, and then there are much more serious things, close to vertigo, which I really liked. But, look, there are successful and unsuccessful films. It is really bizarre, because when you started talking and you said: 'There is a film I don't understand etc.', I didn't think you were going to mention *Le Parfum d'Yvonne*. I thought about another film. I thought you were going to say this about *Tango*.

LD: Oh no, I admire *Tango* immensely.

PL: You know, there is something bizarre about my films. Those people who like what I do – one cannot put everyone into that category, of course, thankfully – tell me: 'Well, really, the film I like the most is *Monsieur Hire*'. And then there are others who say: 'I like your films a lot. For me, the best one is *Les Grands Ducs*.' And so there is the club *Les Grands Ducs* and the club of people who prefer *Monsieur Hire*. There is the club *Le Mari de la coiffeuse*. There are people who admire *Tango*. There are people who adore *Le Parfum d'Yvonne*, and for others it is *La Veuve de Saint-Pierre*, etc.

LD: ... ah, the famous Lecontian eclecticism ...

PL: Yes, perhaps because my films are all so different, people attach themselves to one or another of them.

LD: It strikes me that you are almost the only French filmmaker of your generation who doesn't seem to respect, or to be limited by, generic constraints. This is a quality that I appreciate very much in your films.

PL: That is something I enjoy very much. I adore exploring in order to see what will happen ... I think that's the best analogy for it. When you go out for a walk, in the countryside, in a landscape you are not familiar with, along small paths, suddenly you say to yourself: 'Do I need to go right or left?' And then: 'What shall I do at the crossroads'. Somehow, though,

you always find your way home, because there is the sun to help you know where you are. I don't think that when you are out exploring you can really get lost. There are plenty of landmarks. There will always be a road to take you back home and you will be back by night fall. But it is about exploring without knowing too much in advance.

LD: It is a kind of wandering about (*flânerie*), then.

PL: Yes, it is intuitive. And I prefer that to the notion of a GPS [global positioning system] for cars that tells you: 'Take the first street to the right. Take the second street to the left. At the roundabout...'. GPS systems are quite clever when it comes to directing cars, but not for making films. I love to let myself go at the whim of the projects that I encounter and the ideas that enter my head.

LD: Do you think that this might be the reason why your films are sometimes misunderstood, not very well received? The difficulty one has in putting you into a category?

PL: Yes, perhaps, but in all honesty, I really want to claim this right to freedom, even when this freedom takes me from time to time in the direction of incoherence. I don't care.

LD: OK, a big question: as far as the love between individuals is concerned, as far as peace between the peoples and religions of the world, are you pessimistic or optimistic? It is not always clear from your films, at least not for me.

PL: I would love to be an optimist but alas an optimist these days is not a realist. Above all, an optimist is a dreamer. And this is what I try to preserve within myself. You know, I really believe that for the world to become a better place, there is one single magic formula that we might apply. For me, this formula is the 'respect for the other'. If one were to respect the other, there would be no famine anymore, countries would no longer be at war, there would be no racism anymore. All the ailments of our planet would be regulated, if each of us were to respect the other. And when I think this to myself, it is tempting to say: 'Oh, then it's incredibly easy'. But that would be the optimism of the dreamer. I myself try to slip this idea into my films, as best as I can, and also into my personal life, if possible, obviously. But I find it hard, because the notion hasn't made a lot of progress. And it nonetheless appears to me as a very simple thing. I can seriously say that I thought about this question for a very long time and I came to this simple notion of the respect for the other; these four words, which clearly don't seem to entail all that much. No kidding, it regulates everything. If you respect the other and you are a petroleum magnate you won't dump oil on the beaches. If you respect the other, you won't underpay the people who are doing important work ... etc. Hence, this is the magic formula. One can put it in gilded letters.

LD: I think you are right.

PL: I am really worried, though, because I don't have the impression that we are making much progress in that direction. And sometimes I worry and say to myself: 'I have kids and I hope that they won't be too unhappy, and the children of my children, what sort of world will they have?' But on the other hand, if one is to avoid having very negative thoughts and jumping from the balcony screaming 'I want to live!', one has to ask: 'Has there ever been a time when it wasn't so? Was there ever an era when we didn't have these black thoughts and ask these questions about the future, about peace between men and women, about peace in the world in general?' And we do continue to live today. Hasn't the world only known more sombre tomorrows? I have the impression that the world has never had anything *but* more sombre tomorrows. And, nonetheless, we are still here.

LD: It's true. We have survived the most unthinkable of things.

PL: We have survived religious wars. We have survived the most devastating diseases. We have survived famine. We have survived the Ice Age. We have survived incredible things.

LD: Apparently, we haven't learnt very much though.

PL: It's true. We haven't drawn many lessons from it. But I am not sure whether the phenomenon is accelerating now or not. Disrespect for the planet, all those who live now and say: 'We will be dead tomorrow and therefore we can't be bothered', disrespect for future generations. One has the impression that it is becoming more inhumane.

LD: Do you have a project under way at the moment?

PL: Yes, I am starting to shoot on 7 April [2003], a new film. I like the scenario very much. It is an original screenplay, written by a writer with whom I have worked before. The film is called *Confidences trop intimes*. We are still looking for an English title, because one day the film will be released in England and it is not easy to translate.

LD: What is it about?

PL: It is a very simple story that starts almost like a Hitchcock film. A young woman who isn't very well, who has sorrows, problems, decides to go and see a therapist.

LD: A bit like Adèle in *La Fille sur le pont*. Is it a similar type of character?

PL: Adèle is quite different, actually. One doesn't really know to whom Adèle is speaking at the beginning.

LD: It's true. I took it to be a mental health professional, but perhaps not.

PL: Yes, it's very stylized, on purpose. One doesn't know to whom she is speaking. And, in fact, she is speaking on a reality show, on television. She testifies ... I'm sure you have this in England, programmes where people say: 'Well, I have problems with my husband and other things ...'. Anyway,

a young woman who is troubled decides to see a therapist. It is an important decision because one is generally suspicious about these people, but she decides to do it. She is a bit fragile. She takes the name from a register. And she says: 'Right, it's close to where I work, so I shall take that one'. She makes an appointment. She arrives at the building. She takes the elevator to the sixth floor. And the attendant has told her: 'It's on the sixth floor, third door on the right'. She arrives on the sixth floor, but she takes the third door on the left, not on the right. She calls and she meets someone who is not a therapist but a financial advisor who doesn't realize that she wants to see a therapist. And she starts telling him about her problems. When he realizes that she has got the wrong person, he doesn't dare to tell her. She continues to talk to him and so suddenly, he, a man, is made privy, is given access to a woman's confidential secrets that are very intimate. No man, apart from mental health professionals ...

LD: ... and priests ...

PL: And priests, yes, and hairdressers ... Thus, he is very disturbed by this young woman, by the secrets that she trusts him with. And when after two sessions, for he doesn't dare to tell her that he is not a mental health professional, she realizes the truth, she comes back to him and says: 'I know you are not a psychologist'. And she continues to see him.

LD: That's great.

PL: I hope so.

LD: When will it come out?

PL: In about a year, in France.

LD: I look forward to it.