

LACOMBE, LUCIEN  
(1974)

"It's odd. Somehow I can't bring myself to really hate you."  
M. Horn to Lucien

Major Credits:

Director: Louis Malle  
Screenplay: Louis Malle and Patrick Modiano  
Cast: Pierre Blaise (Lucien), Aurore Clement (France), Holger Lowenadler (Albert Horn), Therese Gieshe (Grandma Horn)

Background:

The theme of collaboration during the Nazi occupation had recently been explored in depth in Marcel Ophüls' magnificent 4½ hour documentary, The Sorrow and the Pity, to which this film may be paying homage in the character of the ex-bicycle racer. Malle, whose filmmaking career began as an assistant to Jacques Cousteau and who had scored big hits as part of the French New Wave (The Lovers, Zazie), here combines the documentary techniques of Italian Neorealism with the moral ambiguity of the New Wave.

Pierre Blaise was a country boy who had never before acted and, according to some sources, had never even seen a movie before. Aurore Clement was also a non-professional. Holger Lowenadler was a veteran Swedish stage actor, relatively unknown to European and American audiences. The most interesting member of the cast, however, may have been Therese Gieshe, a well-known stage actress in Nazi Germany and much admired by Hitler, who proclaimed her to be the perfect example of the great German actress. Gieshe immediately sent the Fuhrer a letter saying, "Fuck you, I'm Jewish!" and left the country.

Stylistic Qualities:

Except for its jazzy tracking shots during the credits and the evocative montage accompanied by the recorder and the end, Lacombe, Lucien is almost a pure case study in what philosopher Hannah Arendt called "the banality of evil."

1. narrative pace--the deliberately slow pace functions in several significant ways: a) it recapitulates the sense of boredom the characters themselves so often complain about; b) it suggests the apparently will-lessness and direction-lessness of Lucien's life; c) it reinforces the sense of the war winding down--just as all movies tend to wind down (note the editing pace is livelier in the beginning of the film); d) it encourages contemplation of the faces of the main characters and meditation on the moral and political themes being represented.

2. hand-held camera--more than half the film is shot this way, adding to the documentary feel and contrasting sharply with the carefully composed, aesthetic shots at the very end.

3. framing--notice how Malle allows us only glimpses of the Nazi torture but also how, often using the sound track, he reminds us of the violence lurking just outside the frame. Similarly, France's piano playing defines a more significant space existing just beyond the living room in Horn's apartment.

4. depth-of-field--Malle composes several shots in three spatial planes to reinforce the film's moral complexity.

Questions for Discussion:

1. The film begins with a quote from George Santayana: "Those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it." But what is the lesson of history we are being taught here?"

2. How is Lucien's career with the Gestapo foreshadowed in the film's early scenes?

3. Lucien's mindless activities seem to reflect the attitude of Von-negut's protagonist in Slaughterhouse Five: "And so it goes." Like Rafelson's Bobby Dupea, Lucien seems utterly unreachable and incomplete--consider his probably motive for shooting the German and helping the Horns escape--yet he also seems beyond conventional moral judgment. In light of the film's determinism--the absence of free will and meaningful choice, the significance of chance--is Lucien exonerated from moral responsibility?

4. What is the importance of the film's pervasive animal imagery?

5. How does the final sequence, announced by the recorder music, affect your perception and understanding of the film as a whole. Consider the closing title telling us of Lucien's fate.

"The movie is the boy's face."

--Pauline Kael