

THE LACEMAKER (LA DENTELLIÈRE)

Origin: France

Released: 1977

Released in U.S.: 1977

Production: Yves Peyrot and Yves Gasser for Citel Films, Action Films, and Filmproduktion Janus

Direction: Claude Goretta

Screenplay: Claude Goretta and Pascal Lainé; based on the novel by Lainé

Cinematography: Jean Boffety

Editing: Joëlle Van Effenterre

Art direction: no listing

Music: Pierre Jansen

MPAA rating: no listing

Running time: 108 minutes

Principal characters:

Béatrice (Pomme).....	Isabelle Huppert
François.....	Yves Beneyton
Marylène	Florence Giorgetti
Pomme's mother	Anne Marie Düringer
Marianne.....	Renata Schroeter
Painter	Michel de Ré
François' mother.....	Monique Chaumette
François' father.....	Jean Obé

Swiss director Claude Goretta's third feature, *The Lacemaker*, his first made in France, is a beautifully crafted "little" film, rich in feeling and understanding. The film synthesizes several potentially sentimental genres—*Bildungsroman*, pastoral, seduction story, poor-meets-rich romance—and manages to evoke fresh responses to its own particular time and place. This is partly because Goretta has filtered his contemporary morality tale, reminiscent in some ways of director Eric Rohmer's films, such as *L'Amour, l'après-midi* (1972; *Chloé in the Afternoon*), through the political consciousness of May, 1968; more important, he has drawn upon the humanist tradition reflected in the seventeenth century genre paintings from which the film derives its title. The result, like the heroine's face, is deceptively simple, redolent with meaning, though its expression is shifting and ultimately bittersweet.

The heroine is Béatrice (Isabelle Huppert), nicknamed "Pomme," a shy young shop girl in a Paris beauty parlor. The story depicts her first romance with a well-bred Sorbonne student named François (Yves Beneyton), who

meets her while on vacation in Normandy and rejects her some months later, bringing on an emotional and physical collapse. As the seasons shift from spring to late autumn and the scenery, from seacoast resort to the crowded Parisian streets, the film seemingly invites interpretation as a modern parable of lost innocence, a Marxist allegory on the plight of the working class, or even a clinical study of mental breakdown. Goretta's concerns, however, are less moralistic than Rohmer's, less political than Jean-Luc Godard's or Alain Tanner's, and less intellectual than Alain Resnais'. His deepest interest—and sympathy—lies with Béatrice herself, what she has lost and, possibly, what she has gained.

The film begins with a slow tracking shot through the beauty salon and first explores the friendship between Pomme and Marylène (Florence Giorgetti), a slightly older and far more experienced beautician. Like her illustrious namesake, Marilyn Monroe, whose poster adorns a wall in her high-rise apartment, Marylène is blonde, restless, and seductive, a compulsive poser. Pomme seems her complete opposite: small, quiet, unworldly, utterly guileless. In the opening sequences Marylène acts almost as an older sister, bringing Pomme home for dinner after work, giving her a sweater for her eighteenth birthday, inviting Pomme to join her on her vacation at the beach. Though her extroverted personality, sensuousness, and superior position in the shop clearly present her as a foil, Marylène is shown to be no less vulnerable to men than Pomme will be. Early in the film her married boyfriend of three years calls her at work to inform her that he is breaking off their affair. That night Marylène takes Pomme home for dinner and weeps bitterly over the phone to her lover. After he hangs up on her, she seems bent on jumping off the balcony, but instead throws her white teddy bear over the balustrade. At a loss to help her friend, Pomme can only offer to retrieve the bear from the street, but Marylène tells her to forget it.

This opening movement of *The Lacemaker*, concentrating on the friendship between the women and Marylène's unhappy affair, establishes both the essentially passive quality of Béatrice's character and the motif of abandonment associated with her life. Before she came to Paris, her father had left their home in the country, forcing her and her mother to move in order to find work. In the film's second movement, Marylène will move out of their double room at the hotel to take up with another man; in the end, François will also abandon her.

Marylène decides to forget her troubles by taking a vacation in Cabourg. Pomme will be good company until she can pick up a new man. At the disco, Marylène gyrates provocatively in her see-through blouse; when Pomme is finally asked to dance, she declines—she does not know how. Marylène soon meets someone and returns one morning to move out her things. Pomme acquiesces silently, setting forth for the beach alone and seeming to enjoy the ambience of the peaceful resort town. While eating an

ice cream at an outdoor café, she meets François, who introduces himself as a brilliant student of literature from Paris. Goretta departs from his customary unobtrusive cinematic style in the following scene, with a beautiful sequence of long tracking shots and crosscutting to depict François and Pomme looking for each other the next day. The distance between them in the panoramic vistas and the high-angle camera placements suggest both the separate worlds that they inhabit and the fate that draws them together. When they finally meet on the boardwalk, Pomme wears a white dress and François a dark T-shirt and jeans, visually underscoring their differences the very moment their romance begins.

Pomme is attracted by what she calls his considerateness. François shows her the town, invites her for coffee on the sea wall, takes her on a picnic where a local artist secretly sketches her, fetches her shawl when she shivers in the night air, drives her to the soldier's cemetery where she marks a single white cross with a stone. There they meet Marylène and her new boyfriend. She tells François, "Take good care of her. She's fragile." Goretta symbolizes their growing relationship in a game of blindman's buff they play on a steep cliff overlooking the channel. François leads her to the very edge, but Pomme follows his commands without ever opening her eyes. When she finally does, he has to grab her to keep her from falling with fright. Soon after this strangely disturbing interlude, Pomme agrees to sleep with him, her first time with a man.

Goretta cuts abruptly from the bucolic courtship in Cabourg to the domestic arrangements back in Paris. Béatrice leaves her mother's flat, taking one last look at her scrapbook, and moves into François' walk-up. While he goes to classes, she paints his apartment. After an evening listening to an intellectual discussion among his friends about bourgeois society, she asks François what "dialectical" means. When he suggests that she look for a more interesting job, she says that she hopes one day to become a hair stylist. Almost imperceptibly through such scenes, Goretta traces the erosion of their relationship. Though his allegiance is clearly with Béatrice, the director never caricatures those who ignore or undervalue her, nor does he turn his story into a strident feminist tract. Marylène, though a trifle vulgar and superficial, is also a victim of society's illusions; François, though self-absorbed and finally no less shallow than Marylène, is always courteous and genuinely well-meaning. His life with Béatrice seems epitomized in a scene where she tries to eat an apple silently (her nickname, "pomme," means "apple") without disturbing his studies, and he becomes bothered not so much by the sound as her effort at self-effacement.

The pivotal scene occurs during the couple's visit with François' parents. The drive to the country is cold and rainy. When the dinner conversation turns to news about François' successful young friends, Béatrice is overcome by a violent fit of choking. Once she has recovered, François' mother

(Monique Chaumette) asks about the American writer who died that way. If François' mother is insensitive toward Béatrice, his father (Jean Obé) is quite caring. In a tender scene, he takes her out back to see the family kennels. Asked if she is scared by the dogs, Béatrice replies that they seem very nice. Her trusting nature here recalls her role in the game of blindman's buff. The danger for Béatrice in both cases remains muted, imperfectly repressed.

Somber chamber music accompanies the couple's return to Paris, and without a single argument, their romance declines. In a high-angle long-shot foreshadowing their parting and mirroring the panoramic views of Cabourg, François rushes across a city boulevard, leaving Béatrice stranded on a traffic island. Goretta then crosscuts between François at home rehearsing a speech calling off the affair and Béatrice walking back from work, the editing again reinforcing their separation. Béatrice silently accepts the news, washing lettuce while he explains how breaking up will be best for both of them.

Goretta has employed a slow narrative pace throughout *The Lacemaker*, but now events lead quickly to the film's powerful denouement. Béatrice becomes physically ill and severely depressed (the critic Gillian Parker assumes that she is pregnant, but this point is never made explicit). François describes their parting to one of his Marxist friends (Renata Schroeter), who chastises him for ignoring Béatrice's virtues and treating her "like an employer." One day, Béatrice collapses in the middle of a busy intersection.

The final sequence takes place four months later in a sanatorium where Béatrice has been convalescing. François decides to pay a visit, but only after persuading his two friends to keep him company on the drive. When Béatrice walks down a long corridor of the institution to greet him, her appearance is profoundly disquieting. She wears a shapeless black dress like a shroud; she moves and speaks mechanically, drained of all of her former charm. They pass the time together in a park filled with fallen yellow leaves, François filling the gap between them with small talk. When he asks what she has been doing since they parted, Béatrice tonelessly describes a trip to Greece with someone she met. François seems relieved to learn that she has taken new lovers, and they say goodbye with smiles. In the car before rejoining his friends, however, François weeps over the change that has come over her. In the closing shot, the camera tracks in on the therapy room where Béatrice sits alone in a corner knitting in front of a bright poster of Mykonos. Her foreign travel was an illusion, both a deception and a farewell gift for François. As the truth dawns, she turns to the camera with a chilling expression which Goretta then freezes. The closing title appears, with its reference to the anonymous working women—seamstresses, water-girls, lacemakers—of the old paintings: "He will have passed her by without really noticing her. . . . She is one of those who leave no clues, one of those

who are difficult to fathom, who require close questioning to come at their meaning." Béatrice's face as she stares into the camera is indeed ambiguous. Is it the face of madness, a solitary soul broken by society's injustice? Or is it the look of defiance and recrimination born of inarticulate rebellion? Goretta leaves it for the audience to judge. Perhaps her expression may best be read as the shock of recognition that follows knowledge of the world.

The Lacemaker is marked by the economy, compassion, and close observation of its director and the virtuoso performance of its star, Isabelle Huppert. Goretta captures Pomme's essential innocence through the many images of white associated with her: the uniform she wears at work, the dress she wears when she first meets François, the sheets she folds while visiting his relatives, the walls she paints in his apartment, even the yarn she knits in the final scene. Similarly, he identifies François with the conventions of his bourgeois class: his 2CV, the *Le Monde* he buys when he meets Pomme, the Gallimard editions that line his walls. Huppert, who appears in nearly every scene, appears to age a full generation from the plump and freckled girl who splashes carelessly in the sea to the wasted woman whose stare haunts the viewer long after the film's closing credits. Along with her performance as the murderous Violette Nozière in her next film, Claude Chabrol's *Violette* (1978), Huppert has created two of the definitive roles in French cinema of the 1970's.

Lloyd Michaels