Lacombe Lucien

France / West Germany / Italy | 1974 | 138 minutes

In Brief

The location is a small provincial town in south-west France, during the Nazi occupation in the summer of 1944. Tired of his life as a hospital cleaner, 18-year-old Lucien Lacombe tries to join the French Resistance, but is turned down on account of his age. All too easily he is recruited by the German police and works as a Gestapo agent, arresting his fellow countrymen and generally tyrannising his former friends and relations. However, whilst initially reveling in his new-found position of power, Lucien begins to have second thoughts when he meets and falls in love with a young woman, who is the daughter of a Jewish tailor he has been persecuting.

Lacombe Lucien is a brilliant study of the corruption of innocence and the realisation of guilt in a young impressionable adult. It is one of the finest films made by director Louis Malle, who made a virtue of tackling difficult subjects in the course of his long filmmaking career.

Introducing himself to a delicate, fine-boned parisienne, the farm-boy hero of Louis Malle's new movie does not give his name as Lacombe Lucien; he gives the bureaucratic designation—Lacombe, Lucien. He presents himself name inverted because he is trying to be formal and proper, as he's been trained to be at school and at work, sweeping floors at his local, small-town hospital, in southwest France. When he meets the girl, France Horn—and falls in love with her—his new job is hunting down and torturing people for the Gestapo. He likes it a whole lot better than the hospital. The title Lacombe, Lucien refers to the case of a boy of seventeen who doesn't achieve a fully human identity, a boy who has an empty space where feelings beyond the purely instinctive are expected to be.

The time is 1944, after the Normandy landings, and the Nazis and their collaborators won't be in power long. Lucien doesn't know that. He had tried to join the Resistance, but the local Resistance leader was his old schoolmaster, who thought him stupid, and Lucien stumbled into a job with the Nazis. Actually, he isn't stupid; he has the kinds of talents that don't show at school—he has a country boy's skills, and he knows how to survive in the wild. The schoolmaster is right, though, in perceiving that Lucien is apolitical and unprincipled—that he just wants some action. Lucien is good to his mother, and in normal circumstances he would work on a farm, taking care of his own and not bothering anybody, and he'd probably be a respected, unconscionably practical member of the community. But in wartime, he's a perfect candidate for Nazi bullyboy. Malle's film is a long, close look at the banality of evil; it is—not incidentally—one of the least banal movies ever made. The actions are handled plainly, with restraint—with no attempt to shock anyone, or impress anyone; the actions are what we knew already. There's no special magic involved in the moviemaking technique—it's simple, head-on, unforced. The movie is the boy's face. The magic is in the intense curiosity and intelligence behind the film—in Malle's perception that the answers to our questions about how people with no interest in politics become active participants in brutal torture are to be found in Lucien's plump-cheeked, narrow-eyed face, and that showing us what this boy doesn't react to can be the most telling of all.

In [Marcel Ophüls'] The Sorrow and the Pity, we watched former Nazis and collaborators give their accounts of their behavior, and with some of them, we were left staring at big empty spaces. That's the space Malle attempts to define. It can't be done by setting up a character for us to identify with; the whole point of the film is that we have always been unable to identify with these people, and yet we don't know what makes us different from them—if we are. Malle can't think himself into Lucien's shoes; he could think himself into the very soul of the burnt-out, self-pitying hero of The Fire Within [1963], but Lucien is outside the normal range of a dramatist's imagination. The screenplay Malle devised (together with the twenty-seven-year-old Patrick Modiano, author of three novels on the occupation) tries not to dramatize and not to comment. The director sets up his wartime situation and puts in as Lucien a teenage country boy, Pierre Blaise, who has seen few films and has never acted before—a boy, that is, who can respond to events with his own innocence, apathy, animal shrewdness. Malle stages the action, but he uses the camera as an investigative instrument. His technique is to let the story seem to tell itself, while he searches and observes. His gamble is that the camera will discover what the artist's imagination can't, and, steadily, startlingly, the gamble pays off.

We look at Blaise's face in a different way from the way we watch a trained actor. We look into it rather than react to an actor's performance. The enigma of a Lucien, whether he is a bullyboy of the right or the left, is the enigma of an open face and a dark, closed mind. Professional actors have the wrong kind of face for this sort of unborn consciousness, and they tend to project thoughts and feelings from the blank area. Blaise doesn't, and we trust our readings of his silent face almost as if we were watching a documentary. We examine it in that way, and we're more engaged than at most fictional films. There's nothing about Lucien that one can take for granted. Even those close to him don't feel close; his own mother (Gilberte Rivet, in a fine performance) isn't sure how to talk to him. His incomprehensibility is a mystery we're caught in, and Malle astutely surrounds Lucien and the girl with unfamiliar faces (actors from the theater, with little exposure in films), so that we won't have past associations to distract us. By the end, the case of Lacombe, Lucien has been presented to us. We know the evidence on which he will be judged a traitor, and we've also seen how remote that term is from anything he's ever thought about.

The French Resistance in Film
When things are going his way, Lucien is nothing more than a big puppy dog, eager for admiration, and his Gestapo mentor, a seedy, thieving French aristocrat, treats him as a pet; but the wrong tone, the wrong words, or a smile that suggests condescension, and he can be violent. The Parisian girl, France Horn, and her family—Jews who are trying to stay out of sight—have no weapons for dealing with him. They're helpless when Lucien moves out of the Gestapo headquarters at the local hotel and into their attic apartment, sharing France's bed. Mr. Horn (Holger Löwenadler), formerly a tailor to fashionable Paris, is so meticulously cultivated that he seems precious; but Horn's punctiliousness is a serious—tragic—expression of the dignity he believes in. He cares deeply about the smallest nuances of a class society, yet he finds himself paying extortion money to Lucien's buddy, the son of a count who was part of his own clientele, and he is forced to accept Lucien—an uncouth child—at his table and in his daughter's bed. And, worse, he knows that his daughter is not unwilling.

Aurore Clément, who plays France Horn, had not acted before; Malle must have selected her for her fair coloring and tall, slim fragility and her ultracivilized, poignant little face. She lacks an actress's tension, and so at times she seems a passive camera subject, but she gives us the double nature of France's response to Lucien: her amused derision of his ignorant attempts to play the courtier, and the sensual bond that draws them together. We see, even, that underneath France's fastidiousness and her sharp sensitivity there's a practical animal streak. Clément's beauty is almost prehensile, like the young Nicole Stéphane's in [Jean-Pierre Melville's] Les enfants terribles, and maybe it was this extra quality that attracted Malle. Her old-young face is incapable of surprise yet permanently marked by fear, like a doè's. The French heritage, in all its vaunted refinement, has made her hard in a way that connects with Lucien's precivilized obtuseness. She doesn't suffer, as her father does, from the humiliation of their position, and it may be Mr. Horn's recognition of this that makes him flail about and bicker with her—berating her as a whore and in the next breath begging her pardon. Lucien, we feel, is the last straw for Horn. After the long period of hiding, behaving prudently, and playing by whatever signals the scummy aristocrat sent out, Horn suddenly can't tolerate the pain of polite self-effacement any longer, and he begins to break. He dresses in his showiest boulevardier's finery and takes a promenade; he decides he must talk things out with Lucien "man-to-man," and when Lucien is too busy to talk at home, he stalks over to Gestapo headquarters to wait for him.

Throughout the film, this Gestapo hotel-headquarters recalls the hotel gathering places in thirties French films, yet it has an unaccustomed theatricality about it. The collaborators who work there, live there, torture their victims there, and party there, too, have a wide range of motives. Nothing links them but their willingness to serve the Nazi cause, and that willingness is highly variable, since—not much more political than theatricality about it. The collaborators who work there, live there, torture their victims there, and party there, too, have a wide range of motives.

There is nothing admirable in Lucien, yet we find we can't hate him. We begin to understand how his callousness works for him in his new job. He didn't intend to blab about the schoolmaster; he was just surprised and pleased that he knew something the Nazis didn't. But he's indifferent when he witnesses the torture, and he shows no more reaction to killing people himself than to shooting a rabbit for dinner or a bird for fun. After the Maquis have raided the hotel, reprisals are ordered, and Lucien is sent, with an SS man, to arrest France and her grandmother (Thérèse Giehse). Lucien has no feelings one way or the other about hauling them in—so little sentiment that he reclaims a gold watch he looted earlier and gave to Mr. Horn in a buttering-up gesture. The German takes it away from him, however, and Lucien, piqued, shoots him. It is perfectly apparent that if the German had not pocketed the watch, which Lucien felt was properly his own, Lucien would have stood by as France was taken away. (He wanted his watch back because he didn't see why it should be wasted.) Yet with the SS man dead, Lucien needs to get away, and he escapes, with France and her grandmother, to the countryside. When we see him in his natural environment, setting traps, killing game, making love to France, and once even lying flat on the ground and laughing like an innocent, confident boy, we know, with absolute conviction, that he hadn't seen them—he felt as though he'd been caught coming out from a pornographic film. The pornography of The Sorrow and the Pity, in its calm, leisurely, dispassionate way, addresses it on a deeper level than most of the films of its period. It has a directness that makes it seem like a sort of truth serum. Without even mentioning the subject of innocence and guilt, Lacombe, Lucien, in its calm, leisurely, dispassionate way, addresses it on a deeper level than most of the films of its period. It has a directness that makes it seem like a sort of truth serum. Without even mentioning the subject of innocence and guilt, Lacombe, Lucien, in its calm, leisurely, dispassionate way, addresses it on a deeper level than most of the films of its period. It has a directness that makes it seem like a sort of truth serum. Without even mentioning the subject of innocence and guilt, Lacombe, Lucien, in its calm, leisurely, dispassionate way, addresses it on a deeper level than most of the films of its period. It has a directness that makes it seem like a sort of truth serum.
Louis Malle has always been an alert and daring director who doesn’t repeat himself, but in recent years, since he broke with the smooth professionalism and surface sophistication of his early work, and made the series of documentaries that form Phantom India [1969], he appears to have begun anew. The picture he made after that experience, the high comedy Murmur of the Heart [1971], set in 1954, suggested an artist’s autobiographical first work, except that it showed a master’s command of the medium. Now he has gone back further, to the period of his childhood (he was born in 1932), to events he couldn’t make sense of. Lacombe, Lucien is more of a test even than India: Malle could approach India in terms of his own sensibility, but in Lacombe, Lucien, he is trying to seek out and create a sensibility utterly different from his own.

In all the most important ways, he succeeds, triumphantly. But in a million small ways, he fails flat. Malle’s earlier films were very precise, the work of an orderly, classical mind; they were films by a Frenchman who believed in reason, and although the Indian series brought out the humanist in him, he remained the raconteur. This time, he’s working on a subject that can’t be thought out, and he’s going on instinct. His greatest involvement is in the looser material, and when he stays with the gambler-improvisor’s intuitive method, he wins. In this film, Malle is best at what he’s never done before—the almost wordless scenes, especially; he gets perhaps even more than he’d hoped for from Pierre Blaise’s Lucien. In these scenes, it’s not just that one can’t separate Lucien’s innocence and his corruption, but that they really seem to be the same thing. However, Malle can’t give a sense of life to all the situations he puts Lucien in. He seems to have lost interest in the scripted scenes, and there’s a fatal hint of the obligatory in some of them. In setting up the atmosphere in the hotel, Malle probably knew that it was tricky to try to suggest that these Nazi collaborators, aping authority, are like bad actors. However, we have to extrapolate his subtle intentions, because the situations are often inert. The two scenes involving Lucien’s affair with the hotel maid are glaringly unconvincing, and contradictory besides. In the first, before going to bed with him, she gives him a little Resistance talk, telling him that the Americans are winning, and warning him against having any more to do with the Nazis; in the second, after he is involved with France Horn, the maid suddenly comes on like a woman scorned, a provincial Mrs. Robinson full of anti-Semitic fury. We can guess that her outburst is meant to indicate how an angry person can blame the Jews for his frustrations, but this sort of worked-out reason (spite, jealousy) is what we’re used to—it’s specious, without resonance, like the perfunctorily reasons that are given for why the various people in the hotel have become collaborators. No doubt Malle means to tell us that their reasons are banal, but his handling of the people is so enervated that we just feel we’ve seen all these types, with their quirks, before.

Some artists have a natural feeling for the riches of chaos; when they don’t pin things down for us to know exactly what’s going on, we understand that they’re not giving us that kind of meaning—they’re giving us more than that. And Malle achieves that with Lucien, but he isn’t skilled yet at merging scripted scenes with found material, and at times we feel that something has been left out. (What is France doing with those piled-up stones? Has her grandmother died?) In the scene of a Resistance doctor’s arrest, when the doctor’s phlegmatic teenage son shows Lucien his model ship, it looks as if Malle couldn’t control the elements, and chose to retain the scene because of the overtones in the boy’s physical resemblance to Lucien, and despite the boy’s unconvincing lack of interest in his father’s fate. Working with nonprofessionals in the leads and adapting the script to Lucien’s emerging character, Malle probably had to cut scenes he needed that didn’t pan out, but there are ellipses that aren’t easy to account for—principally in Horn’s sudden, suicidal carelessness. Some stages in Horn’s breakdown seem to be missing, and his later scenes are largely directed. Holger Löwenadler, a distinguished figure in the Swedish theater for over half a century (he appeared in [Ingmar] Bergman’s 1947 film A Ship to Panama, and in recent years he has toured Europe in Bergman stage productions, playing leads in Ibsen and Strindberg), prepares Horn’s character so carefully in his early scenes that it’s puzzling when the later ones are truncated. We miss Horn’s shift to recklessness, and not enough is made of the moment when he appears all dressed up, his hat tilted rakishly over one eye. Is he deliberately calling attention to himself? There are brilliant ideas, like that “man-to-man” talk Horn wants with Lucien. (How can a Jew talk man-to-man at Gestapo headquarters, and what could Horn and that thug Lucien possibly talk about?) But Horn’s breakdown is too fast, and we can’t perceive why he is doing what he’s doing; this is the wrong place for Malle to stand back and let the story just seem to happen—he has failed to provide the necessary information.

The picture is a knockout, and the flaws don’t diminish its stature, so it may appear silly to discuss imperfections—which could be passed over as ambiguities. But it’s because the picture is a major work that it seems necessary to distinguish between the great ambiguities of its theme and the piddling, diversionary gaffes and gaps in its execution. There’s another reason for bringing up the crudenesses: they are the price that Malle the aesthete is willing to pay for discovery. Here is a director who achieved sleek technical perfection in his early, limited films and who is now saying that perfection is cheap and easy (which seems to be true for him). He’s looking for something that he doesn’t have the tools or the temperament to grab hold of, and he’s catching it anyway. Malle’s renunciation of conventional drama—or his new indifference to it—cripples him in places where he still needs it. He hasn’t fully cast off the hard shell of the brilliant young pro who made The Lovers [1958] and Viva Maria! [1965] and Zazie [1960], but he’s lost his slick. He’s in the process of turning himself inside out and reaching into the common experience. Malle isn’t used to playing by ear; he keeps looking at the notes and seeing they’re wrong, revising them and hoping they’re better. Yet somehow, with all the wrong notes he hits, and parts of the bass left out, he gets sounds that nobody’s ever heard before.

- From Pauline Kael’s 1974 New Yorker review.