

Lacombe lucien essay sample



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“ More provocative than thought-provoking.” Explain how far you agree with this evaluation of Louis Malle’s “ Lacombe Lucien.” Louis Malle’s film “ Lacombe Lucien” is one full of scandals, controversies and unexpected traumas. It is perhaps for this reason that contemporary French historian, Henry Rousso, described the film as “ more provocative than thought-provoking.” Central to Malle’s film is the eponymous hero, Lucien, a young Frenchman who joins the Gestapo. The film portrays Lucien’s experiences of working for the Gestapo while giving us a strong insight into his private life in which he is in love with a Jewish girl, France.

This essay will critically examine to what extent Rousso’s evaluation of “ Lacombe Lucien” is credible by analysing the various techniques Malle employs to shock the reader and evoke them to think about the complex issues not only surrounding the French Occupation, but surrounding Lucien as a character. “ I wanted to provoke some thought, cast doubts, force the viewer to reconsider conventional ideas, for example that a collaborator was a monster.” Malle uses certain techniques in order to provoke the reader to think that anyone could be a collaborator.

Such a technique is Malle’s accurate mis-en-scene. In addition to selecting locals to be his actors rather than professionals, Malle dresses the actors in realistic clothes, which provokes the viewer to think about how the clothes reflect the development of Lucien as a character. When we are first introduced to Lucien he is dressed as a French peasant labourer, wearing loose dull clothing and a beret. During this time period, the Third Reich had outlawed the wearing of the beret as it was seen to connote “ frenchness”

and therefore resistance. As Lucien becomes more deeply involved with the Gestapo, he changes his clothes.

He has a suit hand-made for him and when he tries it on for the first time he is still wearing the beret. The reader is provoked to acknowledge that though the suit symbolizes his new-found power and status within his society, he hasn't yet completely conformed to the Nazi regime. During the scene in which Lucien tries on his suit for the first time, Malle uses a camera angle which allows us to see Lucien standing facing the mirror, looking at his own reflection perhaps searching for confirmation of his identity. Lucien instantaneously becomes more fascist upon wearing his suit as he turns and says to the Jewish tailor – “ les juifs sont les ennemis de la France.” This scene is particularly thought-provoking as it demonstrates Lucien's state of mind at this point in the film yet also marks a stage in his transformation into a fully formed member of the Gestapo.

The relationship between Lucien and France is especially thought-provoking and challenging for the viewer. It seems obscure that France should be attracted to the power-wielder who has so much control over her family and, furthermore, as connections begin to form between the pair Malle's use of background noise is critical. When Lucien refers to France as “ ma chérie,” Malle uses ominous signs such as thunder to connote the viewer to consider the dangers and complications which could arise from such a relationship. Even more crucially, at one point he uses the noise of a train as background noise which makes the viewer think of the Jews being transported to camps by the Gestapo.

Whilst these noises can act as a warning that such a relationship is dangerous they could also be present to serve as a reminder of the stereotypical relations between the Gestapo and Jews and therefore mark a contrast between these relations and that of France and Lucien. It is indeed typical of Malle to present Lucien not completely conforming to a certain stereotype since he has stated “ Je n’ai pas voulu porter de jugement.” Malle ensures that the reader thinks deeply about Lucien as a character and so makes sure his actions aren’t completely transparent, developing the idea of banality of evil and that anyone is capable of having evil traits without them being truly malevolent.

Henry Rousso believes Lacombe Lucien is “ more provocative than thought-provoking” and it could certainly be argued that the film was much more provocative at the time of release (1974) when the issue surrounding collaboration was politically sensitive. Lacombe Lucien challenged France’s denial of their role in the Holocaust via the Vichy Regime and critics have highlighted this as a reason the film was so controversial. “ It shocked the diehards of resistancialisme or gaullien mythology, for whom collaborators amounted to a handful of miscreants in an otherwise united France.”

Through effective characterisation Malle places emphasis on the idea that anyone could be a collaborator since his main character, Lucien, joins the Gestapo merely through coincidence and is not at all ideologically motivated. This made the film even more contentious at its time of release as it addressed the issue of ordinary French people conforming to the Nazi regime in occupied France. As well as the fact that collaboration was a sensitive

issue for the French population, it was also deemed ethically unacceptable to try to evoke images of the Holocaust through cinema.

For this reason, in order to shock the reader and provoke reactions Malle uses the deaths of animals to symbolise the victims of the holocaust. The dog is used to demonstrate brutal slaughter and death. Its inhumane death is particularly provocative since the dog and indeed other animals represent innocence in the film. The dog has no political agenda nor does it play any role in harming others yet it is slaughtered due to the behaviour of its owners, thus reflecting the killings of thousands of Jews based on the label they were given .

The dead animals point towards experiences which cannot be articulated through words or images. Furthermore, the viewer is forced to watch Lucien decapitating a chicken live on screen as well as shooting many rabbits and birds. Charles Altman refers to the opening scene as demonstrating action without thought: “ The close up Malle chooses to give us at this point provides an apt emblem for all of Lucien’s subsequent development: instead of focusing on Lucien’s face the camera reveals his mid-section. We see hands independent of the head.”

The purpose of these obscure sequences is to shock the audience but also to make them realise that a key component of this time period was that people were thoughtless and simply went along with the system. Lucien only regurgitates what he has heard from his superiors as he lacks his own views, for example that Petain is a “ vieil cul.” At various points in the film Lucien’s

actions derive from merely following instruction and not considering the reality of his behaviour or the effects it poses on those in his society.

This in itself is provocative to the audience. In conclusion, in 1974 when Lacombe Lucien was first released it would be justified to say that the film is “ more provocative than thought-provoking” and so in this sense; Henry Rousso’s evaluation is apt. This said, it could be argued that in 2011 it is more thought-provoking, particularly to those unfamiliar with the Vichy Regime and the political changes taking place in France at this time. However, the shock is necessary as it is this which leaves a lasting impact on the audience and provokes them to think about the issues addressed.

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