FILM FESTIVAL PREVIEW:

Louis Malle on LACOMBE LUCIEN

Louis Malle was interviewed in June by Jan Dawson at the National Film Theatre in London.

LACOMBE LUCIEN actually grew out of three abandoned projects. One was taking place in Algeria, at the end of the Algerian War; the next in America, at the time of the Vietnam War; and the last one in Mexico, recently. I was interested in describing a character like Lucien Lacombe, but I wasn't to sure in which historical context to place it. After the clash between the students and the Army in Mexico in '68, before the Olympic Games, it was very violent and bloody. The Mexican President, a very tough man called Díaz Ordaz, and the Mexico City police organized a group of young boys—eighteen, nineteen, twenty years old—from the slums, the *lumpen* of Mexico City, and manipulated these boys into a sort of civilian police force, with guns, very highly trained, and mixing it up with the students in the demonstrations. For two or three years they were very efficient.

Then in 1970 there was a new President, Echeverría Alvarez, who was more liberal; so the press started to speak about the scandal of these boys. Echeverría said that all the light, the truth would be exposed—and finally it was entirely covered. I was in Mexico at this time, in 1971, and came out very naively with my idea for a film. They had gotten these boys to practically disappear, to keep them from meeting with journalists. But through friends I managed to meet with two of them, and talked with them, and started writing a story about one of these boys.

Luis Buñuel was in Mexico at the time, and I remember telling him I was going to try to make that film. And he laughed: "You'll never make this film in Mexico. Even for a Mexican it would be difficult—but for a foreigner it would practically be impossible." And he was right. So I tried to make it in Chile, in the days when it was possible; but Chile was really so different from Mexico that it was not, in fact, possible. Then I tried to make it in Venezuela, but that was not easy either. So I dropped the project and came back to France.

But I still wanted to go further with this theme. And then I had the idea of putting it in the Occupation period. I started researching, studying about the period, which I found really incredible. It's a period that's so confused, so complicated, with so many contradictions, that I really got interested, and decided to start with this idea of a peasant boy from Southwest France who ends up working for the Gestapo. And then the film was enriched by the relationship of this boy with the Jewish family—the essential of the film: the opposition between different social classes, between this boy from a farming family and these Parisian bourgeoises hiding in a town in the Southwest of France.

I had expected the film to be a commercial flop; it's a long, difficult film with unknown actors. I felt that, after thirty years, it was possible to look at the French past without raising such a big turmoil. There have, after all, been films like LACOMBE LUCIEN before, which didn't raise any controversey. It's probably the impact of this film—which is very strong—that got people quite worried.

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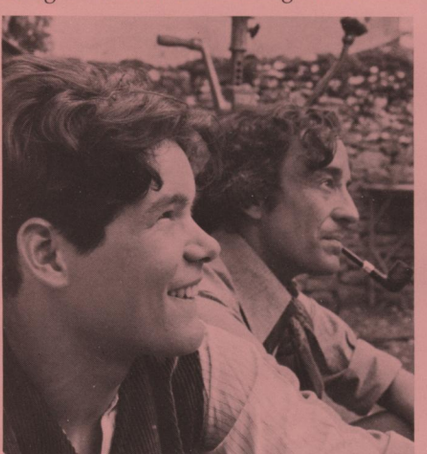
I don't want to dispense with writers, because I find it very difficult to write. I hate writing. What I like about making films is working with a lot of people. Working alone, just writing, I find very frustrating. But it's difficult for me to explain to a writer what I have in mind, so I have to write a first draft: that's what I did with LACOMBE LUCIEN. I wrote a sort of synopsis, and then I asked Patrick Modiano to come and rescue me. MURMUR OF THE HEART was different: it was written in a few days, it just came suddenly. When it was finished I read it to a few friends, and they liked it, and I shot it. For LE FEU FOLLET I did the adaptation of the La Rochelle novel, but it wasn't difficult: it was practically recopying the book.

I prefer to work with nonprofessional writers; I mean, I don't like too much to work with screennwriters—except for one, Jean-Claude Carrière, whom I worked with twice, and whom I enjoyed working with. But, for example, Modiano is a novelist, very young, twenty-six years old; he's written three novels, and he'd had nothing to do with film before LACOMBE. It was interesting: he kept telling me, "I don't know how to put it," and I told him, "Don't bother, just write what you think, and then I'll manage, because I'm supposed to be the director of the picture!" It's much more interesting to ignore the rules. In fact, rules don't exist; the language of cinema is still being invented. But some famous screenwriters I've tried to work with have very set patterns. They would say "You can't do that for such-and-such reason." Very mechanical. And most of the time they were better writers than I, so I felt insecure.

For me, the most interesting part of being a director is directing the actors.



Top: Pierre Blaise (Lucien) and Louis Malle. Bottom: LACOMBE LUCIEN.

(It took me some time to find that out!) And the most important part of directing the actors is choosing them: the casting is, I think, sixty per cent of the performance. I don't believe in directors getting miracles out of the actors; I don't believe in the "magic" of the director. I have an enormous respect for actors, because I think what they do is extremely difficult. And for the screen actor, there is always this moment of truth: when, after all the preparation, you say "Action!" and he is alone in front of the camera. So what I do is to try and help them as much as possible.

I've found that, sometimes, you have to direct actors in the same scene in a different way. In LACOMBE LUCIEN, there's a scene involving three people.One of them, the father, is a Swedish stage actor, who was so afraid of overacting in front of the camera that he was *under*acting. Which was surprising, because actually I had chosen him for his extroverted manner—something between a gentleman and a butler. So I had to sort of push him, which I didn't have to do with the nonprofessionals. It's my job to get them to function together; it's like being a conductor, more than anything else: trying to get the right tune. I don't mean that actors are instruments; they are instrumentalists.

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For LACOMBE, we used an Ariflex camera, a portable, synchronous-sound camera. Perhaps two-thirds of the film was shot with a hand-held camera; I had a very strong cameraman! And it really helped the actors. They didn't have to bother about the technique. We tried to solve problems of lighting and camera movement beforehand, so I wouldn't have to bother with them during shooting. Then, the essential is to get the best out of the actors. More and more, the technical problems are secondary for me.

None of the members of my Jewish family are really Jewish. I think it's childish to worry about having actors who are Jewish play Jewish parts, especially for what is really a mythical Jewish family. Only, Theresa Giehse, who plays the grandmother, is Jewish—but she told me she was Jewish only at the end of shooting. She's a fantastic woman. She created Mother Courage in Switzerland during the War. She had been quite a well-known stage actress in the Thirties in Germany. And Hitler, who as you know was very fond of actresses, once said that he admired Theresa Giehse because she was the perfect example of the great German actress. And the very next day she sent him a letter saying, "Fuck you, I'm Jewish," and left the country. She's very famous in Germany for that! ✣

FILM FESTIVAL PREVIEW:

David Robinson on A BIGGER SPLASH

A BIGGER SPLASH, directed by Jack Hazan in collaboration with David Mingay as co-writer and editor, defies comparison with any other art film or study in documentary biography. It appears to have taken both its makers and its subject by surprise. The painter David Hockney thought that the quiet young men with their camera, who trailed him for the better part of three years, were making "the sort of film where pictures revolve to bits of Bach"; and the makers started out with a much more recklessly fictionalized impression of the artist in mind. (The plan at one time seems to have been to show, without any basis in fact, Hockney disillusioned and giving up painting altogether.) It turned out to be a portrait of the artist—in his relationships with friends, work, and emotions—of an intimacy which is nothing short of startling.

The filmmakers found Hockney at a critical moment. A three-year affair with a young Californian, Peter Schlesinger, had just broken up, leaving the painter unhappy and restless at the moment he was trying to prepare a New York exhibition. In the film, his frustrations are focused on particular difficulties with a painting, "Peter by the Pool," which he destroys and redoes. (Hockney explains that his real-life difficulties were entirely technical, with no emotional basis. The event remains, however, a valid symbol.)

Reportage (of continuing events), reconstruction (of memories of Peter), and impressions (by the painter's anxious friends) mingle subtly and inextricably. Often the film takes off into surrealism as it follows Hockney into dreams—or carries the spectator, with the people in the film, in and out of the paintings themselves. Ossie Clark strides purposefully into the Tate Gallery to stare back at his portrait; Henry Geldzahler of the Metropolitan Museum sits on a sofa and freezes into the familiar painted image; the sunlit California boy satyrs of the drawings become reality; Peter emerges from the water to find himself in that strange swimming pool surrounded by glaring hunting trophies, still presided over by the serene lady of Hockney's painting of it.

Even apart from this exploration of specific images of the painters' creation, Hazan's color photography evokes the visual aspect of Hockney's universe: the clear colors, the meditative regard of a door or wall or window or cut-out tree.

You have the feeling (which the people in the film are ready to corroborate) that this is not exactly the way things were. And yet it is more like the way they were, in the sense of being an artistic distillation of events and emotions. Hockney had collaborated with the media of the Sixties to build up a protective public image, a clown face to dissimulate the lucid intelligence and sensibility of his work. Here, by contrast, he is exposed in the most personal aspects of his emotional and creative life—aspects which are most directly connected and most vividly revealed in a scene(shot at the moment of the break-up) where he is sketching Peter, and in which the intensity of the effort becomes a statement of love as powerful as any cinema can adduce.

A BIGGER SPLASH is a unique document and an astonishing first feature. (Hazan had previously directed a number of shorts, including one or two more conventional are subjects.) Even allowing for the conscious and controlled values of the film—the often breathtaking rightness of the image, the subtle juxtapositions, the perceptions of the camera-observer, the cool sensitivity of the handling of homosexual love—it is an effort which, depending as it does on a particular chance combination of personalities and circumstance, the filmmakers are perhaps not likely to repeat. The fact remains, though, that Hazan and Mingay proved equal to what chance offered. ✣