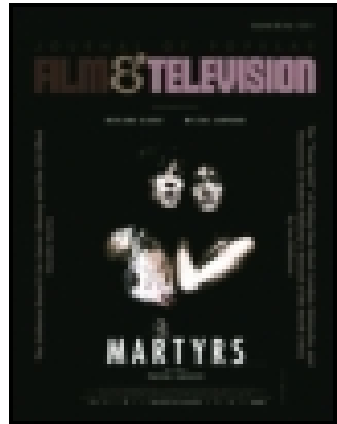


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Three Faces of Evil:

Fascism in Recent Movies

By *LESTER J. KEYSER*

Surely, some day the German people also will find a form for its perception and experience of God, a form dictated by its Nordic blood. Surely, only then will the trinity of Blood, Faith and State be complete.

Gottfried Feder, *Das Programm der NSDAP und seine weltanschaulichen Grundlagen*, quoted in Wilhelm Reich, *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*.

"Springtime for Hitler," once the bizarre fantasy of a Mel Brooks' comedy, now looms as the dominant theme in today's serious cinema. Fascist characters and settings have launched a veritable blitzkrieg upon contemporary movies. An endless parade of Nazi opuses has goosestepped across our screens, from the opulent almost decorous decadence of *The Damned* to the quiet sensuous beauty of *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*, from the strained seriousness of *England Made Me* to the forceful gaiety of *Cabaret*, from the lean documentary honesty of *The Sorrow and the Pity* to the ornate psychoanalytic poetry of *The Conformist*. Even Leni Reifenstahl is back, the guest of honor at the Telluride Film Festival.

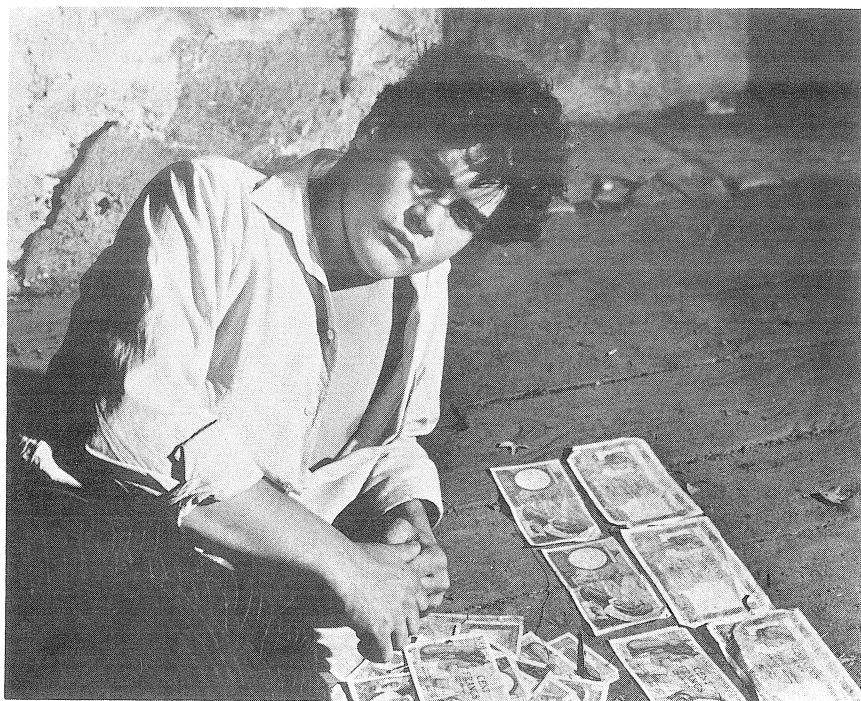
The remarkable thing is that we thought we had been delivered from all of this. Fascism seemed a dead topic for a while. Our schools have long taught the basic fallacies of fascism, a post-democratic, post-industrial disease, which distrusts reason and casts its lot with authoritarianism and blind force. Wilhelm Reich outlined the symptomology of fascism in his tome *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*. Most importantly, however, movies had unmasked the Nazi fiends for us. From *The Seventh Cross* to *The Moon is Down*,

we knew who the torturers were; we saw them in *Casablanca* and *North Star*. We all knew *Hitler's Children* for what they were, brutal clods who glorified war, distorted the truth, ravaged women, and beat children; they were unfeeling zombies who were putting the lights out all over Europe.

Yet none of this knowledge was enough to exorcise all our demons, to satiate our curiosity about the mass madness that caused the greatest holocaust in history. The question remained: how could people become such fiends, how did fascism happen? Three major film directors have recently focused their attention on this topic and their works are the most satisfying explorations of fascism ever, films which are both intellectually challenging and aesthetically fulfilling. Yet each film is different: Louis Malle offers almost a pure case study in his *Lacombe, Lucien*, while Federico Fellini provides joyous reverie in *Amarcord*, and Liliana Cavani mounts an erotic opera in *The Night Porter*. Each film offers its own explanation for the fascination of fascism; taken together, they reveal the diversity of the forces that generated man's most savage folly.

Louis Malle's *Lacombe, Lucien* chronicles the adventures of a seventeen-year-old peasant boy who is spurned by the Maquis, only to slide into fascism, and finally to die for his collaboration. The film has been furiously attacked by the Left in France; the one-time existentialist now Maoist intellectual community accuses Malle of picturing a fictional universe which abrogates historical responsibility, a world which eliminates free will and meaningful choice and thus absolves any action, regardless how base. Director Malle has been stung by this criticism and was visibly shaken by the scattered shouts of "*fasciste*" which greeted his appearance at this year's New York Film Festival. His public response to the charge of the Left was, however, rather restrained and double-edged. Malle commented that *Lacombe, Lucien* "does not maintain that a Frenchman could have become fascist by accident, as the Left in my country has claimed, but that could be an interpretation." The key word here is "maintain"; Malle's film does not propagandize. Lucien's story is, instead, Malle's portrait of one road to fascism, a singular example of how one man, a mediocre man, became a beast.

Malle's film actually grew, he has indicated, out of three abandoned projects.¹ One projected film was to have been set in Amer-



Pierre Blaise as Lucien in *Lacombe, Lucien*.

ica and was to have dealt with Vietnam, and this may explain the reference to Saigon still in *Lacombe, Lucien* ("It's hot as Saigon"). Another was to have been set in Algeria at the end of the Algerian War, which may explain Lucien's Negro colleague, a somewhat anachronistic fascist, and a third was to have been set in Mexico at the time of the student riots. The sense of recurrent patterns in history dominates Louis Malle's film, and he even used the old chestnut from Santayana "Those who do not remember the past are condemned to relive it" as an epigram for *Lacombe, Lucien*. Fascism, Malle clearly feels, is only one more manifestation of man's interaction with complex situations; like Vonnegut's heroes, Malle seems content to say "And so it goes."

Lucien, played by Pierre Blaise, an amateur actor who turns in a *tour de force* performance in his first professional screen appearance, is not a prepossessing character; Lucien always seems a little incomplete. He is too caught up in satisfying random urges to be aware of larger realities. Events constantly overwhelm Lucien, as

the wheel of fortune slowly turns, and the fates weave out the fabric of his life. Rejected by the Maquis, perhaps for his very impetuousness, Lucien's trail to the Gestapo involves broken bicycles, drunken boasting, accidental discoveries, and coincidental confrontations. Lucien just happens onto Gestapo headquarters, spills his information accidentally, and casually drifts into further collaboration. His affair with the Jewess, France, begins with a chance encounter and continues by fits and spurts. Even at the end of the film, fate and caprice play the most important role—just when Lucien and the police come to take France away, Lucien accidentally uncovers a gold watch and it is only when his confrere pockets this watch that Lucien impulsively kills him. Lucien and France then gamble everything by running for their lives. As always, however, fate has the upper hand.

Throughout, Lucien seems little more than a pawn in the game. He is constantly photographed in consort with a large speckled dog. Like the dog, Lucien trails after other collaborators. Like the dog, Lucien just noses around the house, and happens in on torture scenes quite haphazardly. Both the dog and Lucien are present when France is humiliated, and it seems that France's subsequent need for comfort and love, expressed in her affair with Lucien, is the accidental result of her shame rather than any real affection. Even the forceful shot of the dog lying panting and dying, after being wounded by the resistance, a shot which gets a strong audience reaction, foreshadows the freeze frame of Lucien at the end. Luis Bunuel, a director who takes a somewhat more sardonic view of life than Malle, was slightly dissatisfied with the ending of *Lacombe, Lucien* and half jokingly suggested to Malle a new ending in which Lucien escapes to Spain and becomes a rich man. Bunuel obviously saw the vagaries of fate that affect Lucien; his suggested embellishment reveals a sharp perception of the historical milieu of *Lacombe, Lucien*.

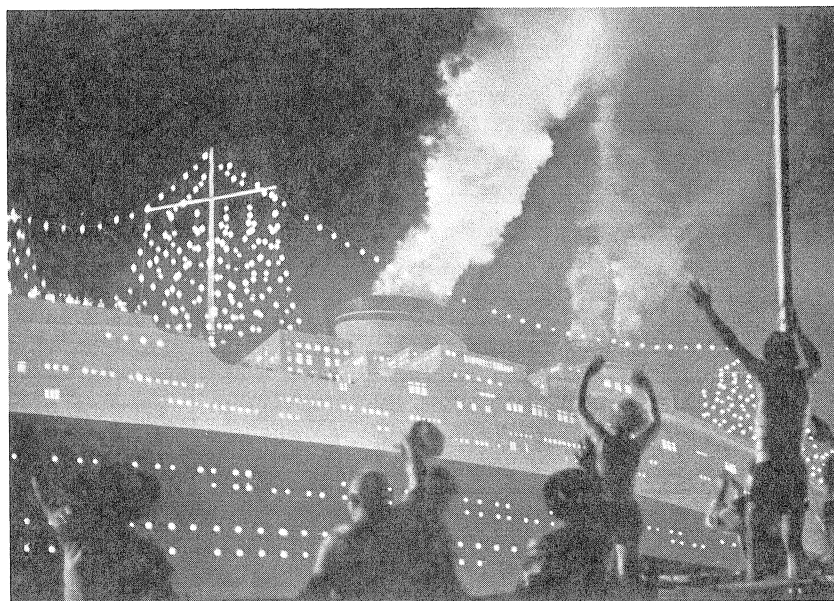
Fellini's *Amarcord*, like *Lacombe, Lucien*, is an unabashedly historical film; the literal translation of the title is "I remember." Fellini's avowed purpose in *Amarcord* is very straightforward: "I simply wanted to create a portrait of a little Northern Italian town for a couple of hours. A town with its fantasy, its cynicism, its superstitions, its confusions, its fetes, and the passing of seasons."² The film, however, is much more complex than a simple reverie or

unvarnished history. No one remembers quite like Fellini, as we all know, so the film is really a quite personal and idiosyncratic vision of social history.

Fellini's loving portrait of his little town lacks a unifying plot; *Amarcord* is an impressionist mood piece that generally outlines the seasons of the year and the stages in life. There are births and deaths, weddings and orgies, holidays and holydays, parades and movies, motorcycles and peacocks. Yet beneath the frivolity and sentimentality, under the gentle satire and savage grotesques, lies a rich perception of the appeal of fascism. Wilhelm Reich's *Mass Psychology of Fascism* has taught us that it is the everyday things, the routine, little-noticed occurrences of day-to-day existence, that mold man's larger institutions — to understand fascism, Reich proves, is to recognize that "in their subjective emotional core the notions of homeland and nation are notions of mother and family."³ Fascism, like everything else, comes out of the cradle endlessly rocking, to be nurtured in the schools and on the street corners, and to be fed by inhibitions and insecurities. To visit Fellini's home town in the thirties, to know the families there, to share Titta's relationship with his teachers, his mother, the town prostitutes, his schoolmates, and his church may finally be the only way to understand fascism. The very emotional, and seemingly harmless, attachments and taboos Fellini so lovingly delineates grew into a mass movement, a fanatical movement where inflamed emotion replaced reason.

One especially illuminating sequence in *Amarcord* begins with a boy in Church daydreaming during his confession, trying to avoid revealing his true sexual urges. In the background, the bumbling officious priest drones on about the absolute necessity to avoid masturbation, for when you "are touching yourself, the saints are crying." The scene fades and the film cuts to a military parade as the fascists celebrate the birth of Rome. As the fascists drone on about the "glories of ancient Rome" soon to be flourishing again, and declare Mussolini "a guy who's got balls," a young boy dreams of Mussolini greeting him and his virgin bride. Intellectually it's sometimes hard to tie social forces like fascism, militarism, sexual repression, and religion together; cinematically, Fellini draws the connection with ease. Youths who hear of saints crying when they masturbate can easily fantasize about fascist figureheads lauding them and their virgin brides. The glories and ceremonies of the

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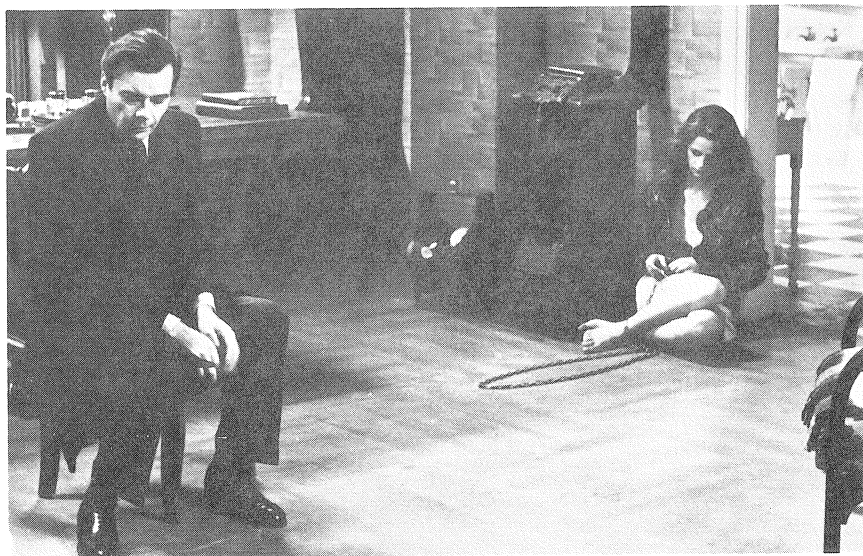
Two scenes from *Amarcord*.
Above: The Fascist Parade.
Below: Townspeople admiring "The Rex."

ancient Church of Rome can quickly shade into the glorious rebirth of the Roman Empire under fascism. The majesty of sacramental liturgy can also be paralleled by the exhibitionism of military ceremony. Religion, nationalism, and repression thus go hand in hand in forming an authoritarian personality.

Similarly, mankind's most inspiring dreams can often be confused with fascist ideology. In one of *Amarcord's* most beautiful and unsettling images, the townspeople row out at night into the dark ocean to catch sight of "The Rex," a grand new ocean liner. Fellini had the complete side of a ship built in the tank at Cinecittà studio just for this one shot, and it was well worth the expense. The glittering lights of the ship and its epic scale are the stuff that collective dreams are made of. The boat is, of course, a product of fascism's "new man," a floating monument to the "new Italy" of Mussolini, a tribute to the regal, the elite, the superman. Light and dark, the best and worst, are strangely mixed in life and in Fellini's films. Fellini's touch is a gentle one, however, and to view too much of *Amarcord* as a structural vision of the roots of fascism would be to belie the other obvious charms of the movie: the peacock in the snow, the madman in a tree, the overendowed tobaccoist, and Fu Manchu on his motorcycle. The thirties were not, Fellini intimates, a black era populated only by dark forces, for even his most earnest fascists do little more than use castor oil for their third degree. Instead of ominous symphonies, Fellini offers us what he calls "little music," a pleasant interlude "to be heard without needing to serve the chorus of eroticism and violence."⁴

The music in *The Night Porter*, Liliana Cavani's filmic exploration of the fascist mentality, is much more operatic than Fellini's, and both her principals and her chorus partake of eroticism and violence. In fact, eroticism becomes violence, and violence eroticism in *The Night Porter*, one of the first serious film treatments of sadomasochism. Many critics have already dismissed *The Night Porter* as stylish exploitation, featuring perversion for perversion's sake, a commercial rip-off more interested in box office than art. This is too facile a reaction, however. Liliana Cavani is not a cheap porno director; she is a sensitive artist whose earlier work has been exhibited in the New York Film Festival and who has already made an award-winning four-hour documentary on the Third Reich for Italian television. Cavani has obviously thought long and hard about

fascism, and it seems she has reached the same understanding of the fascist phenomenon that Wilhelm Reich eventually did. Fascism marks the substitution, Reich argues, of “the sadistic-narcissistic mysticism of nationalism” for “masochistic, international religious mysticism.”⁵ *The Night Porter* explores in depth this new fascist narcissism, its concomitant sadism, and its mystic dimensions. Andrew Sarris comes very close to the mark when he notes that the stars, Dirk Bogarde and Charlotte Rampling, “take us back to the age of the sleepwalkers, cut off from everything in the modern world except their own fear, desire, and disgust,” while director Cavani, as Sarris indicates, “presumes to transfer the horror of the Holocaust from history to mythology.”⁶ If Malle gave us history in *Lacombe, Lucien*, and Fellini sociology in *Amarcord*, Cavani offers abnormal psychology in *The Night Porter*. Each approach reveals a face of fascism, another of its guises. Chance, overblown emotions, and sexual perversion all had their role in the gigantic holocaust.



Max (Dirk Bogarde) and Lucia (Charlotte Rampling) in the midst of one of their perverse meetings in *The Night Porter*.

The very sensational nature of Cavani's material has already stirred considerable controversy. The film was confiscated in Italy and the Catholic Church has condemned it, yet the lines are forming at the box office. Distributor Joseph Levine was so sure of the film's box office appeal that he refused an invitation to the New York Film Festival for the film; he obviously didn't want the label "art" tied to the product. Instead Levine is banking on the audience that craved the sensationalism of *The Exorcist*; he obviously feels the same audience should line up to see Dirk Bogarde abusing the nude Charlotte Rampling, cutting her arm, forcing objects up her vagina, and teaching her the pleasures of fellatio. *The Night Porter* has already been jokingly referred to as "The Last Tango in Vienna."

This undue focus on the perverse aspects of Cavani's feature may indicate a basic failure in the enterprise. Audiences and critics are obviously seeing the symptoms of fascism in *The Night Porter*, but Cavani may have failed to lay sufficiently bare the less apparent aspects of fascism. If this is true, *The Night Porter* presents disease without diagnosis.

Dirk Bogarde's one attempt at explaining his strange infatuation is rather ambiguous and disjointed: "It all seems lost . . . something happens . . . ghosts take shape in the mind . . . this phantom with a voice and body." Bogarde, now a night porter in a hotel who wants to live as a churchmouse, thought his fascist days, those twisted days in the camps when prisoners were his playthings, were all gone and were sad, unexpected aberrations in a more orderly universe. Then Charlotte Rampling as Lucia, his favorite victim in camp, his "little girl," came to the hotel with her husband and the old itch was back for both of them—the "ghosts" took shape in the mind, and the phantom was once again incarnated. Lucia can no more explain their obsession than Max the porter can. When she is discovered chained in the apartment where she and Max hide from the world, she can only purr that "nothing is changed . . . there is no cure . . . Max is more than the past . . . I'm alright here . . . I'm here of my own free will." Both she and Max eventually die rather than give up their obsession. Their universe is so claustrophobic, so bizarre, so narcissistic, that it is almost impenetrable. Cavani's camera seems always on the outside looking into the retentive, convoluted, self-oriented world of sadism.

Max can't even share his vision with the Countess, a long-time

friend well-acquainted with depravity. Max recalls for the Countess a specific incident at the camps, when the bare-breasted Lucia, ludicrously decked out in a pair of baggy pants, entertained the Nazi officers by singing torch songs à la Dietrich and was rewarded for her exhibition with the head of a fellow prisoner. Max sees the experience as a perversely mystical one; in his words, "It's a story from the Bible — it's not very pleasant." Max recalls that the story of Salome came into his head at the camp and he couldn't resist it. Thus he arranged that the head of Johannes, a prisoner who had tormented Lucia, be delivered to her when she did her song with no veils. The Countess laughs and tells Max, "You were always insane." Max's rejoinder is "Sane, insane, who's to judge; we're both in the same boat." Communication between Max, Lucia, and the outside world has obviously broken down altogether; all that remains are the fragments of memory and the rushes of perverse passion. The film can do little more than record Max and Lucia's last few brutal moments, rolling on the floor fighting for jam, and then finally decked out in full drag off to face their inevitable destruction. Cavani makes her characters so atypical, so demented, that it is hard to see in them any general truth. *The Night Porter* suffers as art because it is so true to its subject.

Cavani, Fellini, and Malle have all been true to their intuitions in their respective films. In terms of Gottfried Feder's unholy trinity, Malle gives us the "State" in his exploration of fascism; social structures are, he demonstrates, often the result of chance occurrences. Fellini gives us "Faith" in *Amarcord*, gently sketching the subtle shifts that lead from Rome to Dachau. Liliana Cavani provides the "Blood" of fascism in *The Night Porter*, a forceful plumbing of sick passions close to the core of the holocaust. Taken together, this trinity of films may offer us the most complete response to the question, how did fascism happen?

NOTES

¹ Louis Malle, "On *Lacombe, Lucien*," *Film Comment*, 10, No. 5 (September-October 1974), 36.

² Federico Fellini, "Past and Present," *Continental Film Review*, 21, No. 10, 4.

³ Wilhelm Reich, *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970), p. 57.

⁴ Fellini, "Past and Present," p. 5.

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⁵Reich, p. 118.

⁶Andrew Sarris, "The Night Porter," *The Village Voice* (30 Oct. 1974), p. 60.

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