Directed by Bertrand Tavernier  
Written by Jean Aurenche, Bertrand Tavernier  
Based on the novel *Pop. 1280* by Jim Thompson  
Produced by Henri Lassa, Adolphe Viezzi  
Cinematography by Pierre-William Glenn  
Edited by Armand Psenny

Philippe Noiret...Lucien Cordier  
Isabelle Huppert...Rose Mercaillou  
Jean-Pierre Marielle...Le Peron et son frère L’adjudant Georges Le Peron  
Stéphane Audran...Huguette Cordier  
Eddy Mitchell... Nono - l’amant demeuré d’Huguette  
Guy Marchand...Marcel Chavasson  
Irène Skobline...Anne - la nouvelle institutrice  
Michel Beaune...Vanderbrouck - un nouveau riche arrogant


ISABELLE HUPPERT...Rose


JEAN-PIERRE MARIELLE...Le Peron et son frère L’ adjudant Georges Le Peron


EDDY MITCHELL...Nono - l’amant demeuré d’Huguette


MICHEL BEAUNE...Vanderbrouck - un nouveau riche arrogant

Bertrand Tavernier was born in Lyon on 25 April 1941, the son of Ginette and René. René was a writer and poet, and notably the founder of the literary magazine *Confluences*, named after the two great rivers whose merging influenced the design of Lyon’s landscape: the Rhône and the Saône….In *Lyon: Le Regard Intérieur*, Bertrand identifies his first memory of the city as that of being taken onto the terrace of the house in Monchat to watch luminous explosions in the sky on one evening in August 1944. The flashes of light were shell bombardments by the American troops who had at last entered the city in the final stage of its liberation from the occupation. Tavernier draws a connection between the emotional drama of the event and his own idea of cinema: ‘Everyone around me was laughing, clapping. Since then, I’ve never been able to separate this notion of light from all these emotions, from all that tumult, from all that life that seemed to be just beginning again.’

This sensitivity to the concept of light as something characterised above all by a persistent ability to reform and renew itself out of all kinds of human darkness is the vision which seems to lie behind all of Tavernier’s work, most explicit in the persuasive optimism of *La Vie et Rien d’Autre*, but also lying behind the small rays of light that offer some hint of hope within the fear and pessimism of *Death Watch* and *Coup de Torchon*. His inclusion of a reference to cinema within this description of his earliest memory is predictable in a man who would always choose to talk about cinema rather than himself, describing his inevitable tendency to lapse into a series of historical cinematic anecdotes as being his own defense against a shy nature. Jean Cosmos has referred to Tavernier’s ‘elephant memory’, and his ability to recall the details of films, their makers and their making is certainly remarkable, staggering even. His sheer energy for talking about this art-form which seems to be the very stuff he breathes inevitably makes one think of other high-profile cinéphiles such as François Truffaut and, perhaps most of all, Tavernier’s American friend and occasional colleague Martin Scorsese, with whom he shares the formative influence of a Catholic background, common admiration for personal favorites like John Ford and Michael Powell, and the same voracious appetite and memory for the cinema, old and new, the classic and the overlooked, and including films from cultures all over the globe.

Tavernier’s passion for cinema really began when he was around twelve. By the time he was fourteen, he had decided he wanted to be a film director, and remembers sticking photos from films in a scrapbook, along with the names of those whose films he admired, the first three who merited this recognition being John Ford, Henry Hathaway and William Wellman. …

Tavernier’s study of the law, for which he had enrolled at the Sorbonne [was mostly spent in cinemas] and going on to spend all of his study time at a number of small ‘arthouse’ cinemas which widened his experience, taking in directors such as Fritz Lang, Jean-Pierre Melville, Kenji Mizoguchi and Jean Renoir. For the end-of-year law exam, he handed in a blank paper.

At this time, Tavernier’s commitment to cinema was propelled further by two important ventures. First, along with some friends from the Sorbonne…he founded *L’Étrave* (The
Beauregard, Tavernier teamed up with Pierre Rissient and an ambitious concern. Before trying to direct something more, he really wanted to make, and finding a subject that imposed subject. Instead he decided to continue his period of directing a full-length feature, but decided against it. He was immediately offered the possibility of making a film, mainly for what he regarded as their immature emulation of some favourable reviews but Tavernier disliked them intensely. (1964), which de Beauregard produced.

Then, he started with the poet Yves Martin and Bernard Maritnand—dedicated mainly to seeing American films impossible to see elsewhere. The founders of Le Nickel Odéon adopted King Vidor and Delmer Daves as their Honorary Chairmen....

Melville recommended Tavernier to Georges de Beauregard, with whom Tavernier worked as press agent between 1961 and 1964, a period when de Beauregard produced many films of the New Wave, allowing Tavernier to work on the publicity for projects such as Adieu Philippine (Jacques Rozier, 1963), Les Carabiniers (Jean-Luc Godard, 1963), Cleo de 5 à 7 (Agnès Varda, 1961), Le Mépris (Jean-Luc Godard, 1963), L’Oeil du Malin (Claude Chabrol, 1962), Pierrot Le Fou (Jean-Luc Godard, 1965), La 317e Section (Pierre Schoendorffer, 1964). It was during this time that Tavernier was able to soak up all the practical and economic aspects of film production, interviewing directors, producers and editors, and talking to various technicians. Then Georges de Beauregard gave him his first chance at directing, allowing him to direct two short thrillers, Le Baiser de Judas (1963) and Une Chance Explosive (1964), which de Beauregard produced. Both films received some favourable reviews but Tavernier disliked them intensely, mainly for what he regarded as their immature emulation of American cinema. He was immediately offered the possibility of directing a full-length feature, but decided against the idea of going through another kind of exercise in style determined by an imposed subject. Instead he decided to continue his period of learning more about film-making, discovering what kind of cinema he really wanted to make, and finding a subject that concerned him personally before trying to direct something more ambitious.

Following his ‘apprenticeship’ with de Beauregard, Tavernier teamed up with Pierre Rissient and an associate independent press agent, working to promote the films of directors who included Robert Altman, Herbert Biberman, Claude Chabrol, John Ford, John Frankenheimer, Samuel Fuller, Howard Hawks, John Huston, Eila Kazan, Fritz Lang, Ida Lupino, Leo McCarey, Jacques Riffio, Claude Sautet, Jerry Schatzberg and Raoul Walsh. They also worked to champion the cause of blacklisted directors such as Joseph Losey and Abraham Polonsky, and promote the films of directors whose work was neglected or had fallen from favour. Jean-Pierre Melville had introduced Tavernier to Peeping Tom (Michael Powell, 1960) on its first release in Paris, and in 1968 Tavernier managed to get the film re-released, persuading Powell to come to Paris for the film’s opening. Powell’s career was still in ruins as a result of the concerted vilification of him in Britain that had followed the film’s release, and this screening and invitation, coming during the darkest period of his artistic career, started the process of his critical rehabilitation and rediscovery around the world.

At the same time, Tavernier continued to write articles and film reviews for a variety of publications, including Cinéma, Combat, Les Lettres Françaises and the two huge rivals of film criticism, Les Cahiers du Cinéma and Positif, his first review for the latter being of Joseph Losey’s Time Without Pity (1956). He took some delight in being able to defend the work of Delmer Daves in Positif, then go on to defend the films of Samuel Fuller in Cahiers du Cinéma. Tavernier consciously sought to write about films across various publications, avoiding the risk of always seeking to fit the mould of a particular viewpoint, but acknowledges that he did feel somewhat closer to Positif than to Cahiers du Cinéma, which he regarded as not being political enough. All the time, Tavernier kept in mind his ambition to go on to direct ‘properly’, with various encounters taking him closer to his goal with the opportunity for practical work in film....
Whilst acknowledging the fact that political feeling is essential to Tavernier’s work, it is obvious that concerns over the dramatic disturbance caused by his polemical views focus on a direct and sometimes detached form of expression which now and then add an uneasy preaching tone to his earlier films. The applause for Tavernier’s ‘maturation’ seems prompted by his switch to more perceptive and complex political examination, and one formal development in Tavernier’s work does aptly reflect the essential difference between the singular political feeling of his early films and the more open political exploration of the later ones: the increased complexity and mobility of his mise-en-scène….

The political content of Tavernier’s dramas is shaped equally by the documentary element apparent in all of his works, a feature reinforced by his use of camera, favouring an ‘uncomposed’ style which prefers to follow characters closely, with wide shots appearing to be used in order to accommodate the movements of characters whose movements are not prejudged, as if what the do next cannot be known. Tavernier’s first major work of non-fiction was Philippe Soupault et le Surréalisme (1982), a lengthy documentary produced for video about the elderly surrealist painter, which he developed with Jean Aurenche, and he has continued to make documentaries at regular intervals, once describing his need to return to the form as a way of ‘getting back to reality’ and ‘coming out of the dream’ again, ‘rediscovering how to open one’s eyes and think quickly’. Tavernier’s co-producer at Little Bear, Frédéric Bourboulon, said, ‘the word that always comes to mind when thinking about Bertrand is “cinéaste citoyen”—“citizen filmmaker”’. Identifying his director’s commitment to society as the most defining aspect of his cinema, Bourboulon stressed the dialogue between Tavernier’s dramas and his documentaries, regarding them as inseparable. His attitude is not surprising, he having been already closely involved with Tavernier as producer around the time when the latter created two works of non-fiction that are hugely important in defining his attitude as a political film-maker: La Guerre Sans Nom (The Undeclared War, 1991) and De l’Autre Coté du Périph (The Other Side of the Tracks, 1997)….

Since the release of his very first feature, analysis of the political content of Tavernier’s cinema has been offered alongside evaluation which tends to single out for comment the humanistic nature of the drama…Tavernier admitted that the pessimism of Coup de Torchon was partly a reaction against what he perceived to be the particular value that had been attached to the warmth of his earlier work, culminating in the tenderness that creates the optimism of Une Semaine de Vacances. ‘I made the film because I wanted to break the image of my nobility; because I was being labeled as a humanist director.’

In principle, Tavernier was irritated more by obsessive pigeon-holing than by his being equated with humanist values, and would later reaffirm his personal distrust of the crude categorization of artists: ‘…I reject all labels and categories. To lump so many directors as the tradition de la qualité or the nouvelle vague and now la nouvelle qualité française is the best way to ignore the individuality of each film-maker. I’d say that the definition of tradition de la qualité applies when academism stands in the way of expressing emotions…in the attempt to reinvent la nouvelle qualité française, I was lumped together with Claude Miller, Alain Corneau and a dozen others. We’re not at all alike.’

Coup de Torchon (1981)

Interviewer: Do you think of yourself in any sense as a religious film-maker?

Bertrand Tavernier: I think… I think that I believe in God.

From the quiet, introspective study of a young teacher’s uncertainties in Une Semaine de Vacances, Tavernier went straight on to another work revolving around themes of loneliness and doubt. Coup de Torchon (Clean Slate) concentrates just as intimately on the internal struggle of asinglecharacter, but Lucien Cordier, the lazy, ineffectual, corrupt police chief of Bourkassa could hardly have been more different from the fragile, dedicated Laurence Cuers, seeming to have little connection with her beyond sharing the same initials. Coup de Torchon was Tavernier’s third film to come directly from a novel, Pop. 1280 by American crime writer Jim Thompson.

He chose to work on the adaptation with Jean Aurenche again, and it was the last drama they created together. Like their earlier reworking of Simenon, Tavernier and Aurenche transposed the narrative to another place and time, but this time even more radically, substituting the American Deep South for French colonial West Africa. The setting allowed Tavernier to maintain the elements of endemic racism present in the novel, and to take another opportunity to confront French audiences with a chapter in their country’s history that was open to serious moral questioning. Tavernier and Aurenche also moved the story forward from around 1917 to 1938, just before the outbreak of world War II, showing once again the director’s fascination with a world on the brink by choosing to expose his protagonist’s anxieties and doubts against a backdrop of impending upheaval, just as he had done in Que la Fête Commence….

The celebratedly eclectic nature of Tavernier’s output could already be traced simply in the contrasting dramatic situations, settings and period that framed his fictional works, but the contrasts between Une Semaine de Vacances and Coup de Torchon seemed to run much deeper, amounting to a shocking, totally opposite perspective on the human condition. The sheer nihilism of Coup de Torchon ran counter to the apparently life-affirming attitude which underpinned Tavernier’s ‘humanism’, and its essentially reactive quality reflects Tavernier’s conscious rebellion against his own image:

I very often like to do a film against the previous film, maybe using the experience of the film I’ve just made but going against it, in order to set a new challenge, and so as not to become the prisoner of certain routines. I
had just done a film which had been pensive, lyrical, quiet, and I tried to do the opposite—a film which was in a way lyrical, but devastating, wild, angry, funny. I tried to get on film what I was finding in the books of Jim Thompson—the metaphysics and the humour, the farce and the sexual provocation and the despair—things which had already attracted people like Stanley Kubrick, whom I learned afterwards had wanted to do The Killer Inside Me and also worked with Jim Thompson on two screenplays—The Killing [1956] and Paths of Glory [1958]—you can see what Thompson brought to those films. Coup de Torchon was also a way of fighting against My image as a humanist director. I wanted to be faithful to Thompson, because he doesn’t leave any easy way out. It would have been very easy to include some character making a kind of liberal statement which would have helped us judge the other characters and the situation, but that would have been the worst betrayal of Thompson. I remember showing the film at the Sundance Festival and two people saying, ‘My God, how can we accept the fact that Philippe Noiret killed the black guy. It’s impossible.’ They were absolutely outraged and felt that it was not liberal to do that, not politically correct, but Thompson is not politically correct. I think that’s what makes him alive, and fascinating. He is very much on the left, but he is not a clean-up, liberal democrat. He does not allow you any easy way to cope with the situation. He forces you to stay there with your wounds, your doubts, your fear and you have to find a way to get out of that yourself. It is something which I loved in the book, and I tried to respect it, and it was very difficult.

Lucien, the fourth lead role to be played by Philippe Noiret, was an extreme contrast with the actor’s previous incarnations, and Tavernier’s least sympathetic protagonist to date. All the same, this anti-hero’s complex nature shared many essential qualities with those earlier roles which seemed to fit much more easily into the image of Tavernier’s humanism, and Lucien reinforces Tavernier’s interest in loneliness as an essential aspect of the human condition…. The difference between Lucien’s loneliness and that of others such as Michel Descombes is that he is not just aware of his lonely state, he is conscious of his situation to the point of becoming totally obsessed by it, allowing festering thoughts about himself and his position in a terrible world to turn over and over in his head, sharing them with anyone who will listen.

Throughout Coup de Torchon, Lucien’s obsession with the evil that surrounds him grows to the point that he cites it as justification for virtually anything that he does, notably a series of murders committed with increasing ease, and we see him in a vicious circle of petty revenge in the face of a world saturated with evil at every turn, being pulled inexorably into madness. Insanity is the other major theme of the film, and while Lucien is seen losing his grip completely on his own existence he shares some of the troubled facets of both Philippe d’Orléans in Que la Fête Commence... and Sergeant Bouvier in Le Juge et l’Assassin. Like the regent, Lucien is acutely aware of the problems that surround him, but he is overwhelmed by their sheer scale, expressing similar feelings of resignation and impotence. Lucien, like Bouvier, seems to apply real logic and truth in the arguments that he uses to justify his murderous behaviour, making a compelling case that his isolated acts of violence amount to very little in the face of the systematic evil that surrounds him. Lucien too is highly perceptive, although he offers fewer ready answers, preferring to accept a view that the unknown explanations for all the troubles of the world are probably extremely complex, and this awareness alone establishes that he is far from completely insane.

Tavernier’s previous films had all exploited characters’ sense of humour, and included comic moments to offset or counterpoint the darker elements of the drama, but Coup de Torchon was his first real comedy. Lucien is constantly up to no good, using practical jokes as a way of getting his own back on those who spoil his quality of life with petty abuse and exploitation, and almost every speaking character in the film provides moments of comedy, from Vanderbrouck’s descent through the vandalized floorboards to his own latrine, to Fête Nat’s devastating dismissal of the friendly advance of Le Peron’s ‘ghost’, to Lucien’s mistress Rose’s hilariously insincere shock at the news of her husband’s death. As well as engaging in jokes and pranks, Le Peron, Chevasson, Nono, Rose and many of the white population of Bourkassa are seen to be actively reveling in their own comic activities, and the constantly erupting comedy is integral to the film’s viewpoint on corruption and injustice. While everyone else seems content to protect their own status quo through self-indulgence, ignoring the darkening clouds around them, Lucien’s ability to lose himself in satisfying his sensual appetites and shut out the horrors around him decreases. He becomes, like Bouvier, the reluctant visionary, at the mercy of terrible thoughts that he is unable to stop entering his head. Instead of respite from splitting headaches, all Lucien craves is to sleep and to find some rest from his increasingly tangled life and his own dark ideas, which he is unable to find. His sleep is constantly invaded, either by nocturnal visits bringing new troubles resulting from his latest murder or by nightmares about corpses or his own terrible childhood.

Lucien’s confused uncertainty and the sense of impending chaos around him are the elements that shape Coup de Torchon stylistically. The film was the sixth and final collaboration on a drama between Tavernier and Pierre-William Glenn, and their work on the project resulted in a film that looked totally different from anything they had done before. In Death Watch they had already used the recently invented Steadicam to follow Katherine in the flea-market chase sequence, and they decided to use the device very extensively throughout Coup de Torchon, harnessing its particular effect on movement in order to place Lucien’s world within a peculiarly unsettling frame:
I wanted to do a kind of experiment—to do practically an entire film on Steadicam. For me, the image of the Steadicam fitted in very well with the moral ambiguities of Thompson’s world—giving the impression that you are never on stable ground and that nothing is ever quite solid in that. I wanted to use the Steadicam in the opposite way that Kubrick did in The Shining—not hide the way that I was using the Steadicam, but using it in order to gain the feeling from a certain kind of image that was the opposite of all the old colonial French films. We watched a lot of those colonial French films before making Coup de Torchon, and the films taking place in North Africa were always very dark and pessimistic, but the darkness was announced, publicized, and done in a very obvious way from the first frame, and the images were always very framed and stable, with a lot of importance devoted to the centre of image—the flag was always in the centre of image; the main character was always in the centre of image. In many of those films you knew that the people in them were condemned—I wanted to do the opposite in Coup de Torchon, to have nothing announced in advance. I wanted to create an image without any centre and without any diagonal composition, but having instead a sense that things are a little bit broken apart, that you never know where the central focus of the image is. Coup de Torchon was one of the films where the aesthetic principle was very clear long before starting the film.

Glenn’s use of Steadicam exploited its inherently unstable quality, where its listing effect, especially during rapid movement, tends to create a disconcerting, slightly sickening effect. Following the opening sequence in which Lucien is first introduced as a malevolent figure by the heavy blows and swollen melodrama of Philippe Sarde’s score, only to be seen lighting a fire to help the African children chilled by the sun’s eclipse, we see him walking towards the town once daylight has returned. Lucien approaches hesitantly at first, as though he cannot face returning to the town, before gathering the strength to march in. As he does, the town’s natural sounds of bustle are conveyed by a sweeping frame of Lucien’s travelling point of view. The combination of Steadicam image and the stretched perspective of a wide-angle lens exaggerate the dizzying, chaotic impression of the milling crowds which cross the frame, and this sense of sudden loss of control fixes the atmosphere of the film at once. The frequent use of Steadicam throughout the film also creates a frame that, like the protagonist, never seems to be quite at rest. Its effect is strangely supportive of the drama, in ways that are almost in opposition. The eerie fluidity enhances the sense of a dream-state, reflecting Lucien’s sleeplessness and nightmares, yet at the same time it seems to assist Tavernier’s typical desire for realism at some level, creating a frame that appears uncontrived, with the people of Bourkassa who form the story’s background of poverty seeming to move in and out of the frame randomly, rather than being placed there.

Lucien’s relationship with his environment is nervous, riddled with fear of the anxieties and threats that lurk all around him, and Tavernier employs a very reactive frame in Coup de Torchon, one which frequently moves rapidly in response to peoples arrival, as if to suggest Lucien’s increasing need to look nervously over his shoulder for yet something else to worry about, then deal with reluctantly. The sudden camera movements also serve as a mirror to the film’s intrinsic violence, which is always just around the corner. The framing of the film is far more kinetic than anything that Tavernier had done so far, creating a visual restlessness that underlines the nature of Lucien’s wanderings—always searching for something, but never really knowing what it is that he is looking for. Tavernier’s growing interest in using the camera to link people with their environment is more apparent than ever before, often linking Lucien and his world with a panning camera movement, but done in a specific manner in Coup de Torchon. Unlike most of the previous examples from the earlier films, the camera often takes us from an image of Bourkassa or one of its other inhabitants onto Lucien, but never in the other direction, in a system that conveys the idea that the community that exists in Bourkassa is exerting influence on him, but that he cannot hope to reverse the effect.

The visual style of Coup de Torchon is unlike anything that Tavernier had done, but Lucien has a very strong connection with two of Tavernier’s earlier characters in particular: Philippe d’Orléans and Sergeant Bouvier, and the crucial element linking them is despair. He understand that none of the things that need to be done to create justice in the world will happen, just as the regent did, and his superficial laziness masks the true sense of failure eating away at the soul of a man who has given up completely on the possibility of being good, overwhelmed by his sense of impotence when confronted with the unnecessary suffering of the Africans around him. His despair leads him towards the embrace of violence and murder himself, diverting his remaining energy into the task of working out arguments that justify his actions Like Bouvier, Lucien ends up referring to himself as Jesus Christ, coping with his failure to find any apparent divine meaning or explanation by filling the void himself, using any method he chooses. Although Aurencche was anti-clerical by nature, and this was clear from some of his earlier work with Tavernier, this did not come across in Coup de Torchon. The priest, who replaced a different character in Thompson’s novel, urges Lucien to show people he can perform his duties properly and honourably. He unwittingly provides him with the motivation to commit another killing, but his words are intended to do good., and he is one of the few characters who does not seem to share the racism that contaminates most of Bourkassa’s white population.

The only other truly benevolent character is Anne, the young teacher, who succeeds in provoking Lucien’s small acts of generosity towards the African children, and who pricks his conscience painfully after seeing him avoid an African who is being beaten by Marcaillou. At the time of its release, the film was, above all else, Tavernier’s most religious work so far. Lucien’s anxieties and fears do not relate to his concern with the
aggravating obstacles that threaten his daily quest for a quiet and easy life; instead they are the consuming despair of a man who is finding it more and more difficult to shut out enormous evils that he can see and hear and touch. Lucien not only realizes that he is utterly incapable of preventing the cruelty and injustice, but can actually sense it growing around him, as surely as the hints of the impending war that will engulf the world. He is aware of the small pieces of the jigsaw of his existence, such as his father’s racial prejudices and the fact that he himself was the cause of his own mother’s death in childbirth; he senses their importance in shaping his own life, but remains incapable of shaping them to help him cope. Having suffered constant blame and contempt at the hands of his bereaved father, both his childhood and the subsequent existence in Bourkassa that forces him to accept failure as a way of life have created a broken man whose destiny is mapped out by his desperate lack of self-worth. Lucien is the most child-like of Tavernier’s adult protagonists, more poignant than Roddy in Death Watch because he is older and because he is all too aware of the fact that he has been unable to leave childhood at all, never mind unscathed. When he tries to convey his sense of self to the teacher Anne while they are walking alone together at night, she seems simply lost for words, as though resigned to the fact that any response is ultimately futile.

Following on from Philippe d’Orléans’ soul-searching in Que la Fête Commence, Lucien’s confusion and despair render Coup de Torchon part of a trilogy of doubt, the second chapter of a terrible descent that would finally be completed in La Passion Béatrice (1987). In spite of the dreadful acts that Lucien commits and his claimed belief that his increasingly spurious reasons for murder are justified, a small flame of human kindness still flickers in his soul, through his apparently natural tendency to at least try to assist the vulnerable and defenceless people who cross his path. His soul is not yet empty, and although Tavernier shows him to be a man horribly contaminated by evils even greater than his own, there is little about him—including the worst of his actions, such as the merciless killing of Fête Nat—which could adequately prepare audiences for the terrifying chill and darkness to be discovered later in the soul of François de Cortemart in La Passion Béatrice. Philippe d’Orléans, Lucien, and François de Cortemart express doubt over the intentions, presence and existence of God, but whereas Coup de Torchon shows us a man becoming worn out with the struggle for answers, La Passion Béatrice confronts us with someone who seems to have reached the end, having totally given up on God.

Coup de Torchon opens with titles, initially obscured as if by a shimmering heat-haze, which then rapidly clears to reveal the words, providing the impression of sudden revelations, similar to those which will hit the main characters as the drama develops. Lucien’s twisted realization of the path he must take is only one of several such moments. Anne is almost struck dumb when she finds out from Lucien’s blackboard confession just how far he has gone, and this in turn seems to cause her to suddenly grasp the cynical nature of the situation in which she is mired, as she breaks off absent from her recital of ‘La Marseillaise’ with her class of African children. It is Rose who ends up with the task of trying to force Lucien to see the true nature of what he has done, her shocked efforts made all the more powerful because of their revelatory contrast with all the spoiled, childish naïvety she had displayed earlier. The film ends with Lucien seemingly having reached the inevitable point where his brutalized logic would take him: training a gun on some African children, murder having now been reduced to a casual event that finally requires no justification at all. The last thing we see is him lowering the gun, perhaps reaching another point of realization, perhaps simply too exhausted to continue, having spent so much energy while constructing his rejection of God and explaining it to the world that he seems ultimately unable to let go completely. Ultimately, Cordier’s doubts remain far more nihilistic than Tavernier expresses in real life, and it is Rose who seems to mirror the director’s own words more aptly in her exchange with the priest during the funeral of her husband, Mercaillou:

Priest: Come on Rose—you believe in God…
Rose: Well…yes.
Priest: Yes what? Really!
Rose: Well, I believe—but not really.

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