

Lost Illusions: Balzac's great novel interpreted for our time

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Directed by Xavier Giannoli; written by Giannoli and Jacques Fieschi, based on the novel by Honoré de Balzac

Lost Illusions (*Illusions perdues*), directed by Xavier Giannoli, is a film adaptation of the novel with the same title by French author Honoré de Balzac (1799-1850). The book, written between 1837 and 1843, appeared in three parts. The film concentrates almost exclusively on the second (and strongest) portion, *A Great Man of the Provinces in Paris* (1839).

The semi-ironic title refers to Lucien Chardon, a young man from a provincial city in the southwest of France, who comes to Paris in 1821 to pursue a career as a poet. He has artistic aspirations, influenced by Romanticism, of the most elevated sort. Novel and film both recount the painful process of his systematic disillusionment and corruption. Balzac places the vileness of the press and the willingness of journalists to be hired by the highest bidder at the center of things. Beyond and behind that, the writer lays bare the transformation of art itself under capitalism into a commodity.

Lost Illusions is a monumental novel, a turning point in modern literature, and Giannoli and Jacques Fieschi, his co-screenwriter, have done a remarkable job of interpreting and dramatizing it.

When the film opens, Lucien (Benjamin Voisin) still lives in the provinces. He has developed a relationship with the intellectual-aristocratic leading light of his town, Louise de Bargeton (Cécile de France). He dedicates florid verses to the elegant woman, who has an older blockhead of a husband. Lucien's more serious rival is the Baron du Châtelet (André Marcon), an indefatigable intriguer. Indeed, when Mme. de Bargeton breaks with her husband and moves to Paris, with Lucien in tow, Châtelet quickly convinces her to drop the youth.

Subsequently, at a point when Lucien is almost penniless in the unforgiving French capital, he encounters Etienne Lousteau (Vincent Lacoste), who writes for various "insolent" publications, with generally Liberal leanings, as opposed to the competing Royalist periodicals. The Bourbon Restoration, bringing Louis XVIII (brother of the executed Louis XVI) to the French throne, took place after the fall of Napoleon in 1814-15, following a quarter-century of revolution, war and upheaval.

During their first encounter, Lousteau asks Lucien, "What do you think I do?" The other tentatively suggests something about enlightening the public about art, the world... No, Lousteau responds, "My job is to make the shareholders rich, and along the way, rake it in."

Through Lousteau, who once had artistic ambitions himself, Lucien makes contact with other journalists, editors, publishers and theater managers. One of Lucien's first new acquaintances is the publisher/book dealer Dauriat (Gérard Depardieu). The latter contemptuously rejects the notion of publishing Lucien's volume of sensitive verses. There's no profit in it. Later, Lucien will be able to blackmail the publisher into putting out his poetry by savaging a new work by the well-known writer Nathan (the Canadian filmmaker Xavier Dolan in a very affecting performance), one of Dauriat's leading authors. Lucien soon after pens a heartfelt, laudatory comment about Nathan's volume.

Much of the journalists' feverish activity centers around the Paris stage, and the ferocious competition between theaters and between performers. Everything is for sale. Streetwalkers circulate by the thousands, but prostitution is rife in every sphere. Theater owners, playwrights, actresses bribe Lousteau and his associates for favorable notices. The master-cynic Singali (Jean-François Stévenin) makes a career out of being paid to direct his sizable *claque* to jeer at or applaud a given piece or performer.

Money is the new royalty, someone explains, and no one wants to chop *its* head off. Despite trepidations and inner conflicts, Lucien makes headway in this new realm. He authors scintillating, but shallow reviews that attract attention. He takes up with Coralie (Salomé Dewaels), a young actress with ambitions, including artistic ones. She already has a protector and lover, the wealthy Camusot (Jean-Marie Frin), but the young people easily find their way around that.

Lucien continues to rise in prominence. But his head has now been fatally turned. All that is weakest, most unresolved, most fame- and wealth-seeking in his nature comes to the fore. He takes the line of least resistance at each decisive juncture. (In the novel, Balzac writes that the course of sacrificing oneself for art is "beset with hidden dangers," it is "a perilous path," whereas "Lucien's character" impelled him to proceed along "the shorter way, and the apparently pleasanter way, and to snatch at the quickest and promptest means.")

Lucien, now feted everywhere, in one scene—drunk on champagne—puts on a fake crown: "To Paris! To our loves!" He's on top of the world, literary royalty. Lucien is even able to exact a degree of revenge against Châtelet and other enemies with his cruel wit. His attachment to principles, to poetry slowly dissolves. In any case, as Lousteau tells him, "What we write is forgotten." Or, as a character from the same journalistic milieu casually observes in the Balzac novel that follows the further misadventures of Lucien (*The Splendors and Miseries of Courtesans*, 1838-1847), "Are there such things as opinions nowadays? There are only interests."

However, Lucien remains dominated by one obsession that will help bring about his downfall: changing his surname legally to "de Rubempré," his mother's maiden name, thus enabling him to enter the ranks of the nobility. For that, he needs assistance at the highest level of the French state, from the king himself or his entourage. When Lucien once again meets the well-connected Louise de Bargeton, she promises to aid him. As part of the effort to ingratiate himself with the powers that be, Lucien abandons his old Liberal friends (and convictions) and begins writing for a Royalist publication. His former colleagues thereupon plot to destroy him, in part through the public humiliation of Coralie, booed off the stage and "torn to shreds" by the reviewers. In addition, Lucien's name, through a trick, appears on anti-Royalist articles, finishing him off in that quarter too. The would-be poet is reduced to writing advertisements while Coralie lies terribly ill. "A new world was dawning," the narrator explains ...

Giannoli and Fieschi have accomplished something intriguing, and demanding. They have attempted to absorb Balzac's novel as a whole,

retain its essential structure and gist, while rewriting the actual dialogue, reworking individual situations and changing certain characterizations. The thrust of Balzac's story is here, although not so many of his lines. Giannoli speaks about the desire not to "plagiarize" the novel. He comments, "Art feeds on what it burns. Cinema is by nature the transfiguration of a reality or a book. Otherwise, what good is it?"

To a considerable extent, the filmmakers have succeeded. They have "softened" the novel's attitude toward certain figures—Madame de Bargeton, for example. They have also added a more hopeful conclusion. The director explains that he found some of Balzac's writing "harsh and punitive." It's possible that something has been gained in the process, and perhaps something has been lost. Balzac's relentless, ferocious assault on this environment and its denizens can at times be wearing, but, fortunately, this version of *Lost Illusions* has not shied away from the novelist's deep aversion to the falsity, hypocrisy, venality and all-embracing corruption he saw around him.

Giannoli made some other interesting observations to an interviewer:

"This theme of lost innocence, of 'self-waste,' of what was beautiful and precious in oneself, particularly touches me. This insidious way that an era or an environment has to lead you to deny your ideals, your most beautiful 'values.'

"During the period when Balzac wrote *Illusions*, Marx was in the streets of Paris and [British author William Makepeace] Thackeray was preparing [*The Luck of Barry Lyndon*], which would be serialized a little later. We could find dozens of other examples of authors who understood that the world had entered, to use a formula dear to Marxists, 'the icy waters of selfish calculation.' The critic Georg Lukacs has written magnificent pages on this great novel of the 'capitalisation of minds' and the 'commodification of the world.'

"Balzac sees this moment when being degenerates into having, and having degenerates into appearing, because he also tells the story of France's conversion to capitalism... The human, political, spiritual and artistic damage caused by this earthquake.

"What still has meaning in a world where everything is assessed at a market value?... Does art still have a place in such a world?"

The acting is excellent in *Lost Illusions*. The younger actors throw themselves into their parts, and the more veteran performers—Marcon, Depardieu, Stévenin, Louis-Do de Lencquesaing as Finot, Jeanne Balibar as Madame d'Espard)—add extraordinary texture and coloring. Great care has been taken with every aspect of the production. The filmmakers clearly want their audience to be gripped and engaged. This is important to them and thus it becomes important to us.

The intense and increasingly intolerable pressures and contradictions building up in French and global society must play a role in this. Artists turn to past works and past eras because of something pressing in the present. Giannoli and Fieschi are not simply amusing themselves here. This is a serious effort reflecting serious conditions. The revulsion for the upper echelons and their literary-media apologists resonates strongly today. By making the film, its creators, whether they fully mean to or not, set themselves in opposition to the widespread and often well-paid acquiescence of the current "intelligentsia" in the face of the pandemic, unending war, the resurgence of fascism.

Balzac was writing under the July Monarchy of Louis Philippe (1830-1848), that early stage of French capitalist development during which, according to Marx, it was not the entire bourgeoisie that ruled, "but one faction of it: bankers, stock-exchange kings, railway kings, owners of coal and iron mines and forests, a part of the landed proprietors associated with them—the so-called financial aristocracy." Marx famously added that during these years, "an unbridled assertion of unhealthy and dissolute appetites manifested itself, particularly at the top of bourgeois society—lusts wherein wealth derived from gambling naturally seeks its satisfaction, where pleasure becomes *crapuleux* [debauched], where

money, filth, and blood commingle. The finance aristocracy, in its mode of acquisition as well as in its pleasures, is nothing but the rebirth of the lumpenproletariat on the heights of bourgeois society."

A thoughtful artist today would understandably associate features of that epoch with features of our own, during the *terminal decline* of bourgeois rule.

Balzac, a Royalist himself, opposed the rise of the bourgeoisie from the point of view of defending the old, "model" aristocratic society then going out of existence. As a great realist, however, he went "against his own class sympathies and political prejudices," in Frederick Engels' phrase. In his vast *Human Comedy* (dozens of interconnected novels and stories), the novelist chronicled "the progressive inroads of the rising bourgeoisie upon the society of nobles" and around this central picture grouped "a complete history of French Society from which," wrote Engels in a letter, "I have learned more than from all the professed historians, economists, and statisticians of the period together."

Balzac did this as an artist, not a sociologist. Underpinned as they are by a definite and urgent conception of the epoch, his stories develop spontaneously, with a vivid, complex life of their own. His characters are individualized and their actions socially and psychologically convincing. The protagonists are not the mere "fleshing out" of social groupings or tendencies, but actual human beings, battling out the central moral and social issues confronting them. In Balzac's work, as Georg Lukacs commented in his essay on the novel, the sum total of socially determining factors is expressed in "poetic form," in "an uneven, intricate, confused and contradictory pattern, in a labyrinth of personal passions and chance happenings."

Lukacs makes a number of other points. He argues that *Lost Illusions* portrays the deterioration of literature "in great detail. From the writer's ideas, emotions and convictions to the paper on which he writes them down, everything is turned into a commodity that can be bought and sold." Moreover, Lukacs points out that Balzac was writing at a time when the capitalist corruption of ethics was still a work in progress, so to speak, in the stage of "its primitive accumulation in all the sombre splendour of its atrocity." The fact that "the spirit" has become a marketable item "is not yet accepted as a matter of course." Balzac still exhibits outrage, not acceptance or resignation.

This anger and disgust at the sad fate and degeneration of the post-Restoration youth in France finds expression in many, many passages in *Lost Illusions*. For example: "'It is difficult to keep illusions on any subject in Paris,' answered Lucien as they turned in at his door. 'There is a tax upon everything—everything has its price, and anything can be made to order—even success.'"

And: "For the past two hours the word money had been sounding in Lucien's ears as the solution of every difficulty. In the theatre as in the publishing trade, and in the publishing trade as in the newspaper-office—it was everywhere the same; there was not a word of art or of glory. The steady beat of the great pendulum, Money, seemed to fall like hammer-strokes on his heart and brain."

Lucien is advised, "Swim with the stream; it will take you somewhere—A clever man with a footing in society can make a fortune whenever he pleases." Another admonishes him, "I credited you with the omnipotence of the great mind—the power of seeing both sides of everything. In literature, my boy, every idea is reversible, and no man can take upon himself to decide which is the right or wrong side."

Lucien eventually concludes from his experiences, "Perhaps it is impossible to attain to success until the heart is seared and callous in every most sensitive spot." These conceptions are not scattered throughout—or tacked on to—*Lost Illusions*, they form its connective tissue. And they have the greatest immediacy in our time.

For its honest approach and artistry, Giannoli's film is highly recommended.



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