

Lee: New film examines the life of courageous World War II photographer Lee Miller

Richard Phillips
13 November 2024

Lee, director Ellen Kuras's recently released first feature about American photographer and former model Lee Miller, was inspired by Antony Penrose's extensive 1985 biography of his mother.

Miller's extraordinary life and career—as a high-fashion model and then as a Surrealist photographer and confidante of numerous avant-garde artists in Europe—developed in the tumultuous years after World War I, amid Hitler's ascension to power in Germany, the betrayal of revolutionary struggles in Spain and France, and the eruption of World War II.

Miller (1907–1977) reached her creative peak as a photographer for British *Vogue* magazine, documenting Nazi Germany's bombing blitz on Britain and then, following the D-Day Allied invasion, conditions across war-ravaged Europe.

Miller's photos from France, of the Nazi concentration camps at Buchenwald and Dachau, and the devastation in Germany, Austria and Hungary are horrifying but deeply humane and, on occasions, possess an eerie poetic quality. Once seen, her images cannot be unseen.

Born in Poughkeepsie, about 100 km north of New York City, Miller studied art at an early age and was a frequent model for her amateur photographer father. She left home aged 19 and moved to New York where she was discovered by publisher Condé Nast, who made her a leading model for *Vogue*. By the late 1920s she was the most sought-after fashion model in the US.

Frustrated with the mind-numbing and exploitative character of this work, Miller resolved to become a photographer and moved to Paris in 1929. Attracted to the Surrealist movement, she persuaded photographer Man Ray, a prominent figure in that movement, to take her on as his apprentice. She became Ray's lover and is credited alongside him in popularising “solarisation,” a darkroom technique where the film or photographic paper is briefly exposed to light during processing, resulting in a striking and unusual reversal of tones.

Miller ended her relationship with Ray in 1932 and moved back to New York, where she established a successful commercial studio. Her photographs were included in the Modern European Photography group show in New York that year, and in 1933 she held her first solo exhibition. Miller's work was also included in various European shows.

In 1934, Miller married Aziz Eloui Bey, a wealthy Egyptian businessman-engineer, and moved to Cairo. Three years later she returned to France, where she renewed her connections with her friends in the Surrealist artistic milieu and met British painter Roland Penrose.

Lee is structured around a fictional interview in the 1970s conducted

by a young journalist (Josh O'Connor) with the elderly Miller, combined with dramatisations of key incidents in her life between 1937 and 1945. Some of Miller's best-known war photographs are used, revealing both how they were taken and her fearless determination to expose the horror and barbarism of the war.

British actress Kate Winslet, a principal initiator of the movie, is compelling as Miller. She closely collaborated with Antony Penrose, Miller's only son, on the production. Frustratingly, however, the film fails to examine Miller's earlier career and artistic foundations.

One of the movie's opening scenes is a languid summer picnic in southern France with friends and artists in 1937. They are voicing their concerns about Hitler and the rising danger of war, when Roland Penrose (Alexander Skarsgård) arrives. It is Miller's first meeting with the British artist. Attendees include Man Ray (Seán Duggan), model and muse Ady Fidelin (Zita Hanrot), French Surrealist poet Paul Éluard (Vincent Colombe) and his wife Nusch (Noémie Merlant), French nobleman Jean d'Ayen (Patrick Mille) and his wife Solange (Marion Cotillard), the editor of French *Vogue*, and Spanish painter Pablo Picasso (Enrique Arce).

Éluard warns that Hitler is “not a lunatic but calculated evil,” while d'Ayen insists that the French “will not accept Hitler's ideas and stand against them.” Penrose wryly quips that if that fails then England “will come to the rescue.”

At a house party in France in late April 1939, just before the eruption of WWII, the group are drinking wine and watching a newsreel about Germany's militarist national holiday to celebrate Hitler's 50th birthday.

Penrose and Miller are alarmed, but Picasso flippantly declares, “The only sane response to tyranny is to create, paint, drink, write and dance.” Solange and her husband Jean attempt to push aside the issue and dance cheek to cheek in front of the newsreel, tragically unaware of the approaching military onslaught.

Miller and Penrose relocate to Britain just as the war begins. A pacifist and conscientious objector, Penrose is employed to develop camouflage for the army. Miller is hired by British *Vogue* editor Audrey Withers (Andrea Riseborough), who wants the magazine to feature female involvement in the war.

Miller, who would like to go beyond reporting on Britain's war situation, meets *LIFE* photographer David Scherman (Andy Samberg) and they become lovers. She circumvents British rules blocking her from the frontline and uses her American citizenship to accredit herself with the US forces.

Scherman and Miller move into France with US troops following D-Day (June 6, 1944). She reports on the bloody battle for St. Malo where US forces first used napalm. She photographs wounded Allied

soldiers being treated and reprisals against young French women who formed brief relations with German soldiers.

Miller and Scherman report on the liberation of Paris and she reunites with surviving friends Nusch and Éluard, and Solange d'Ayen, who has just been released from prison but has no idea about her husband Jean's whereabouts.

The two photographers follow American forces into Germany and visit Buchenwald and Dachau. They arrive at Dachau the day after surviving prisoners are liberated by US troops. Miller and Scherman are the first war photographers to report on the Nazis' industrial murder of Jews and the general horror of the camps. "I implore you to believe this is true," Miller tells *Vogue* back in London.

In a letter not used in the film she writes, "Dachau had everything you'll ever hear or close your ears to about a concentration camp. The great dusty spaces that had been trampled by so many thousands of condemned feet—feet which ached and shuffled and stamped away the cold and shifted to relieve the pain and finally became useless except to walk them to the death chamber."

Shortly after, Miller and Scherman travel to Munich. After bribing their way into Hitler's luxury apartment, which has been taken over by the US military, Miller asks Scherman to take her picture in the Führer's bath.

After setting up and taking the now famed photograph, in one of the film's more powerful moments, they break down in each other's arms as the emotional impact of the unspeakable crimes they have witnessed hits home.

On returning to London, Miller is furious upon discovering that her photographs were not included in the magazine's "Victory" edition. While the images were published in the magazine's American edition, she is distraught, self-medicating with alcohol and other drugs, and cannot cope with the new situation.

Miller's post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which afflicted tens of thousands of war victims, was not recognised by the medical profession at that time.

As Antony Penrose's biography recounts, Miller often spent days in bed weeping uncontrollably. She appealed to a doctor friend for help at this time. He reportedly brushed her aside, declaring, "There is nothing wrong with you and we cannot keep the world permanently at war just to provide you with excitement."

Lee does not explore either these issues or the explosive arguments between Miller and Penrose during this time.

Miller apparently wanted to go back to Europe to continue her photographic documentation of the massive human tragedy. Penrose insists she should stay in Britain. She walks out and returns to France, and then travels to Austria, where she witnesses children dying from lack of basic medicines, throwing her into even deeper depression.

In a cable to *Vogue* from Austria she writes, "For an hour I watched a baby die. He was dark blue when I first saw him. He was the dark dusty blue of these waltz-filled Vienna nights, the same colour as the striped garb of the Dachau skeletons, the same imaginary blue as Strauss' Danube... This tiny baby fought for his only possession, life, as if it might be worth something, and as if there weren't a thousand more right here on the doorstep of the hospital waiting for a bed as an arena for their losing battle."

While *Lee* is a noteworthy and sincere effort, it is weakened by its plot-driven approach and avoidance of political-historical complexity. Penrose is relegated to a subsidiary figure and not given any context, while Picasso, Man Ray, Éluard and Solange d'Ayen make little more

than cameo appearances.

During the movie, the fictional interviewing journalist asks Miller, "I still don't understand how you all didn't see it [the war] coming." She replies, "It happened so slowly, yet kind of overnight. We woke up one morning and Hitler was the most powerful man in Europe. Even as it was happening it didn't feel real."

This is a complicated matter, but this comment "solves" the problem by glossing over all the contradictions and problems. Following Hitler's coming to power and in the explosive years leading up to the war, alarm bells were going off all over the world. The Spanish Revolution and the fight against fascism, the French general strike and the surge of working class struggle, were exercising the minds of artists, intellectuals and workers everywhere.

The great obstacle that stood in the path of social revolution was Stalinism and the Communist Parties, which continued to hold great sway, including in artistic circles. The Stalinists betrayed the Spanish and French revolutions, opening the way for Hitler to complete his military preparations and unleash the German army's blitzkrieg across Europe.

It is important to point out that leading Surrealist André Breton and others well-known to Penrose, Miller, Picasso, Man Ray and company, publicly aligned themselves with Leon Trotsky's assessment of these events and his analysis of the counter-revolutionary role of the Soviet Stalinists and their local satellites.

In April 1938, Trotsky, Breton and Diego Rivera issued their *Manifesto for an Independent Revolutionary Art* and called for an International Federation of Revolutionary and Independent Artists. Breton, in fact, fought to establish branches of the federation in Paris, London and New York, winning support from leading artists and writers.

Notwithstanding these significant weaknesses, *Lee* does make clear the bloody consequences of downplaying the rise of fascism and the eruption of imperialist barbarism, horrors being replicated in the Middle East and elsewhere across the globe today.

Critically viewed, *Lee* can be a starting point for a deeper investigation into Miller's life and courageous work, and a detailed study of the political and historical lessons of this period.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)