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## Lee

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## Lee

### Abstract

This is a film review of *Lee* (2023) directed by Ellen Kuras.

### Keywords

Shoah, Holocaust, Lee Miller, Photography

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### Author Notes

Sherry Coman is the Director of the Centre for Spirituality and Media at Martin Luther University College in Waterloo, Ontario, where she also teaches courses in film, media and spirituality and also in gender justice. An ordained deacon in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, she is also a writer, educator and story editor with more than thirty years experience in theatre and film. She works privately as a development consultant with writers and artists in film, fiction and digital media and is the curator and creator of online devotional projects.



***Lee* (2023), dir. Ellen Kuras**

Artists have long been interested in other artists, but it is a particular gift when a photographer brings their visual sensibilities to the work of another photographer. Ellen Kuras, director of *Lee*, has been a well-known and revered cinematographer for decades, shooting projects as diverse as *I Shot Andy Warhol* and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. Now she brings her particular lens to the work of Lee Miller, the one-time model for surrealist visual artist Man Ray, who became distinguished in her own right as a war photographer, and was among the first to document and reveal the atrocities of the Holocaust. As remarkable as this sounds, it barely scratches the surface of what Lee Miller, and the movie *Lee*, have to tell us about this extraordinary woman.

Lee Miller is found in the film's early scenes among the Bohemian artists of her generation, living in the south of France and spending long evenings debating the virtues of philosophy and art. She is established as sexually free-spirited, but earth-bound in her desire for truth and straight-

talk. She is a budding artist, whose interest in the work of other artists is not yet impacted by the vagaries of ego. And yet, she is completely without reserve, able to sit topless at a dinner party and carry on a deeply sincere conversation. These sequences are a beautiful establishment of character. While she seems committed to the *laissez-faire* of the bohemian life, her feet are firmly planted in the pursuit of what matters. Having learned from Man Ray many of the technical aspects of photography, composition, and lighting, she takes on the role of photographer almost as an extension of her soul. What began in her as a passive contributor to the development of Dadaism, becomes a career marked by documentary realism: Miller's photographs will have a profound role to play in the unfolding of the truth about the Holocaust.

It begins when her passion for the camera deepens as she realizes it can be a tool for justice. Arriving in London from France at the start of the blitz, she first finds work for *British Vogue*, documenting the war effort of women. In an early scene, she stumbles into a women's barracks and, uninvited, begins laying out the intimate apparel of some of the women to photograph it. When she is surprised in the task, what should be a scene of embarrassment and apology becomes a chance for two women to talk candidly about sexism and war, ending in a photograph that makes the offended woman look like the heroine she is. Miller seems to have a knack for how to work any situation to her advantage, largely through her own lack of artifice and unbridled interest in other people.

It doesn't take long for her to become politicized to larger contexts. When she is sent by *British Vogue* to go to the war front in then-occupied France, she hears word that her bohemian companions have chosen instead to work for the Resistance. They are striving to save the victims of war, rather than documenting them. This difference becomes an important moral axiom for Lee, and is a thread woven throughout the film's story. Later, when the war is over and she is reunited

with some of her old friends, these reunion scenes act as a critical axis of awakening. When a Jewish friend emerging from hiding remarks that she cannot find any of her Jewish friends, we watch them all wrestle with rumors of forced disappearance and worse. The scene is a rare accomplishment for a Holocaust film; it allows us to hear what we already know only too well — for the first time. And now it is Lee who is in a position to investigate that truth. She can go where her friends cannot.

A critical sequence comes in one of the most famous passages of Miller's life, when she negotiates her way into the newly re-occupied apartments of the Gestapo in Paris after France has been liberated. Finding Hitler's rooms, she stages a photograph of herself sitting in his bathtub. The photograph contains layers of internal commentary. Miller is posing in the style of a Grecian sculpture sitting on a nearby counter, while symmetrically opposed on her other side with a framed picture of Hitler. We see this scene acted out in *Lee*, adding the layer of yet another ironic eye. Miller's photograph was later controversial. It seems to come from her surrealist roots, where image and symbol are so readily available they become easily manipulated into abstractions. And yet, the underlying gravity is vivid.

As we begin to encounter the horrors of post-war concentration camps, the filmmakers carefully choose to reveal the devastations entirely through the eyes of Lee, only now the camera is both implicitly and explicitly turned on the photographer. Rather than seeing what Lee is shooting pictures of, we are focused on the photographer, arriving at Buchenwald even as the allies do, taking the photographs. The horror in her face behind the camera says almost more than the actual images can.<sup>1</sup>

One of the framing devices of the movie is an interview being undertaken by an unnamed journalist about Lee's work. Throughout the film, we periodically come back to this conversation

as it is unfolding. Eventually, the connection between the journalist and Lee is revealed to be more than what it seems. The revelation offers a chance for us to suddenly see Lee again as the subject of her own life. It is here that we come closer to the realization that the subject of her frame was not the narrative of her contexts, but always her own experience of what she encountered.

Kate Winslet offers an astonishingly layered performance as Lee, traversing decades and different contexts with a physical presence that changes dramatically as she ages. We can see the physical impact of war in her posture and her self-awareness. We completely forget the early bohemian nudity as the body becomes camouflaged in fatigues and gear. And yet the soul shines in these times. The film also benefits from strong supporting role performances, including Andy Samberg as Lee's closest photographer companion at the front, Andrea Riseborough as the open-hearted editor of *British Vogue*, Josh O'Connor as the journalist, Noémie Merlant as the Jewish friend who goes into hiding, and a chilling scene late in the film with Marion Cotillard as another friend who suffers more profoundly from having done Resistance work. This scene marks a startling contrast to the early scenes when the two friends hung around on the Riviera. As Lee tries to offer her assistance, she confronts the most gutting truth of war: not only does it kill, but it forever harms the souls of those who survive.

Kuras chose Pawel Edelman as her cinematographer. This veteran cameraman brings some of the same harsh hues that mark his work on *The Pianist* to the harrowing post-Holocaust concentration camp sequences, in which long deep shadows cast on the walls of gas chambers not only evoke the horror of the moment, but also conjure something of the *film noir* ethos of the era. It is a vivid contrast to the sunny southern France sequences in which we can almost feel the sun on skin, and the warm glow of evening lamp light. Under his caring gaze, the work of all three photographers — Kuras, Miller and Edelman — lingers on after the frame has flickered to its end.

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<sup>1</sup> In an interview with Cameron Bailey on stage after the Toronto premiere of *Lee*, director Ellen Kuras, producer Kate Solomon, and Anthony Penrose, Lee Miller's son, name some of these intentions as part of the film's background preparation. Kuras describes a decision that was made early on, not to try to recapture what Miller's photographs themselves already captured. This was an essential decision that would deeply affect the film's impact. See "LEE at TIFF 2023/Q&A with Ellen Kuras," TIFF Originals, September 10, 2023. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C6kcCCM756Q>)