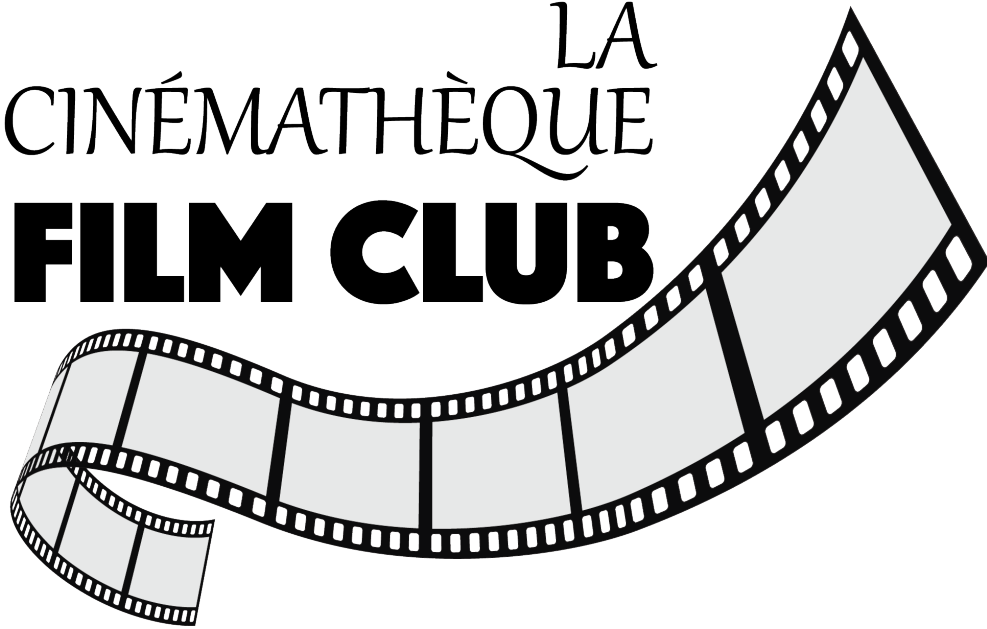


LA
CINÉMATHÈQUE
FILM CLUB



Cannes Palme d'Or Winners
2018-2019

Henri-Georges Clouzot
1907-1977

The Wages of Fear
1953

Henri-Georges Clouzot

Fiona Watson • July 2005

Article sourced from *Senses of Cinema*: <http://sensesofcinema.com/2005/great-directors/clouzot/>

b. November 20, 1907, Niort, France

d. January 12, 1977, Paris, France

Darkness Visible

You think that people are all good or all bad. You think that good means light and bad means night? But where does night end and light begin? Where is the borderline? Do you even know which side you belong on?

– Dr Vorzet, *Le Corbeau*

Anyone who can make Hitchcock uneasy deserves closer examination, and Hitchcock was nervous that Henri-Georges Clouzot might unseat him as “the master of suspense”. Although not as prolific, Clouzot’s is undoubtedly a comparable talent, and *Wages Of Fear* (1953) and *Les Diaboliques* (1955) regularly make it into lists of the greatest thrillers ever made.

Born in Niort, France, in 1907, Clouzot was something of a child prodigy, giving piano recitals at the age of four and writing plays. He went on to study law and political science. Dogged by ill health, he spent four years in a TB sanatoria during the 1930s and described it as the making of him. “I owe it all to the sanatorium. It was my school. While resident there I saw how human beings worked.”¹ Clouzot’s brush with mortality marked him permanently and is probably also responsible for his coal black, baleful sense of humour.

Clouzot began as a director of dubbing in Berlin at UFA’s Neubabelsburg Studios between 1932 and 1938. He then became an assistant director, working for Litvak and Dupont, among others. He moved on to writing, (*Un Soir de rafle* [1931], *Le Duel* [1939], *Les Inconnus dans la maison* [1941]) and it was in Germany that he acquired a taste for the work of Fritz Lang, whose unflinching view of the sordid side of life can be detected throughout Clouzot’s oeuvre.

Thematically, sickness – mental and physical – also rears its head time and time again. Christina Delasalle (Vera Clouzot) in *Les Diaboliques* has a weak heart. The irony that this character was played by Clouzot’s wife, who in reality also had fragile health and died comparatively young, can’t be ignored. Then there’s Inspector Antoine (Louis Jouvet) with his bad arm in *Quai des Orfèvres*, Kid Robert (Jean Despeaux) the blind boxer in *L’Assassin Habite au 21*, the lame Denise Saillens (Ginette Leclerc) in *Le Corbeau* along with her one-armed brother, not to mention the suicidal cancer patient, and almost the entire population of the sanatorium in *Les Espions*.

The other topics that turn up in almost every film he ever made are marital infidelity and jealousy. In *Le Corbeau*, Dr Germain (Pierre Fresnay) is carrying on an affair with Dr Vorzet’s young wife (Micheline Frances); *Quai des Orfèvres* has Maurice Martineau’s (Bernard Blier) potentially murderous jealousy of his partner Marguerite Chauffornier (Suzy Delair); Des Grieux (Michel Auclair) is unable to come to terms with Manon’s (Cécile Aubrey) duplicity in *Manon*; *Les Diaboliques* has Michel Delasalle’s (Paul Meurisse) blatant betrayal of his

1. Taken from the Henri-Georges Clouzot website.

wife with Nicole (Simone Signoret); in *La Vérité*, Dominique (Brigitte Bardot) is driven to murder by Gilbert Tellier's (Sami Frey) callous treatment of her; *La Prisonnière* has Josée's (Elisabeth Wiener) betrayal by, and of, her sculptor husband; and in his first feature, the comedy–thriller *L'Assassin habite au 21*, Mila Malou (Suzy Delair, Clouzot's long-term mistress) is jealous of her detective boyfriend's prominent position in the investigation of a serial killer, who leaves a calling card with “M. Durand” printed on it at the scene of his crimes.

Life has never been very kind to me. And when I say life, I mean people. People are evil, father.

– Monsieur Colin, *L'Assassin habite au 21*

In *L'Assassin habite au 21* (1942) the titular murderer uses three different styles of homicide and his address is known to the police. The problem is sifting through the residents of Les Mimosas boarding house to find him. A policeman with the spectacular moniker of Wenseslas Wens (Pierre Fresnay) goes undercover as a

priest, hindered (until finally saved) by the unsolicited interference of his wacky chanteuse girlfriend, Mila Malou (Suzy Delair, first seen singing a theatre producer into submission).



Adapted from a popular whodunnit by S. A. Steedman in the Maigret mold, superficially this doesn't resemble Clouzot's later work at all. It seems quite light-hearted, even if it is about murder, but on closer inspection contains all his usual corrosive elements – the black

humour, the world in microcosm, the ineptitude of the authorities, the characteristic twist at the end (in an ingenious bit of plotting, Delair suddenly has a “Eureka” moment while singing a number called “Trio”), and the idea that the potential for murder lurks in all of us.

Clouzot even implicates the audience, as the opening of the film features a POV shot from the murderer's perspective (this may be the earliest subjective camera murder in cinema). Historian David Shipman wrote “Few directors made such a brilliant start – literally.”² It's here that we see the first connection with Hitchcock, who had also been stylistically influenced by a stay in Germany. This sequence seems to echo the atmosphere in *The Lodger* (1926) as the camera creeps through rain-slicked darkened streets in a highly expressionistic fashion.

The film's comedy is dark, but it's brought into the light by the affectionate relationship between Wens and Mila. The fact that “good” triumphs over “evil” is only because they are as smart as they are, and nothing to do with the rest of the police or the politicians, who are all depicted as incompetent throughout. Although the film was made during the occupation, no mention is made of the war, as is the case with *Le Corbeau*, (1943) Clouzot's second feature.

² David Shipman, “Henri- George Clouzot” in John McCarty (ed.), *The Fearmakers: The Screen's Directorial Masters of Suspense and Terror*, Virgin Books, London, 1995, pp. 45–53.

Like a convalescent after an illness, you come out stronger, more aware.

– Dr Germain, *Le Corbeau*

In *The Films In My Life*, François Truffaut admits to having a strange boyhood obsession with *Le Corbeau*, memorising the dialogue by heart, and it's with this film that Clouzot's dark, twisted worldview emerges, fully formed. Opening in the graveyard of a provincial town, it moves on to the aftermath of an abortion, performed to save the mother's life. Dr Germain, the closest thing we have to a hero, briskly informs the mother of the woman involved that he has no guilt about what he's just done and that her son-in-law can try again in about eight months time. Another relative mutters that he had enough trouble the last time, so they'll have to get a neighbour in to finish the job. This extraordinarily black but very funny opening scene introduces us to the universe of *Le Corbeau*.

Soon a poison-pen letter writer, signing off simply as "The Raven", is causing chaos. Accusations fly around and everyone starts minding everyone else's business and peering through keyholes. In this atmosphere, skeletons tumble out of closets, catfights erupt during funerals, people either commit or attempt to commit suicide and all the while the cheerful psychiatrist Dr Vorzet (Pierre Larquey) passes amused comment on it all. Once again, as in *L'Assassin habite au 21*, what appears overwhelmingly bleak is balanced by the humour and the odd but touching relationship between the crippled Denise and Dr Germain. Both having been victims of tragedy in different ways, they find solace in each other.

With terrific use of sound in the "pursuit" and "dictation" sequences, and much use of expressionistic tilted camera angles, Clouzot's "who-wrote-it" speeds to its grim but satisfying conclusion and ends with a beautiful shot of a black-clad murderer wending their way down a street as children play in the foreground. (Clouzot would later begin *Wages of Fear* using the same playground image.) *Le Corbeau* also makes provision for the director's continued fascination with institutional settings, in this case a school and a hospital.

Le Corbeau was funded by Continental, a film company with pro-Nazi interests, and at the time the film was interpreted as blatantly anti-French, leading to Clouzot and his co-writer Louis Chavance's denunciation as collaborators by the CLCF (Comité de Libération du Cinéma Français) and, according to Clouzot, threatened with execution on London Radio. Chavance was able to convince them that the inception of the project was long before the Occupation, but Clouzot did not fare so well. In October 1944, he stood before the committee, charged with the accusation that *Le Corbeau* had probably been shown in Germany under the title *Province Française* (French province). Clouzot responded with the statement that because the film had not been dubbed, it was only shown in Belgium and Switzerland. In May 1945, the committee condemned him to a lifelong suspension, which was later reduced to two years.



It's only with the passage of time that we can see the interpretation of the film as anti-French propaganda isn't correct, and that it is pure Clouzot in its misanthropy. Clouzot and Chavance always maintained that it was based on a real incident that occurred in the 1930s, rather than being a metaphorical statement about France under the occupation. Backing this up, it begins with the caption "A small town, here or elsewhere."

Outside of his association with Continental, Clouzot was in no way pro-Nazi, anti-French or anti-Semitic, but he was a supreme cynic and Truffaut wrote that "the film seemed to me to be a fairly accurate picture of what I had seen around me during the war and the post-war period – collaboration, denunciation, the black market, hustling."³

Life's no fun, that's for sure.

– Hooker, *Quai des Orfèvres*

By 1947 Clouzot was back in business, making the noirish *Quai des Orfèvres*. Beautifully shot by his usual cameraman Armand Thirard, it explores the seedy underbelly of showbiz in the 1940s. Maurice Martineau (Bernard Blier) is a loser musician, madly jealous of his blowsy chanteuse wife, Marguerite, who is threatening to run off with Georges (Charles Dullin), a hunchbacked, millionaire film studio head.

Martin plots to murder Georges. However, the plan falls apart when someone else beats him to it. Not only that but his carefully planned but clumsily executed alibi fails when a thief steals his car at the murder scene.

Inspector Antoine (Louis Jouvet) – a cross between Columbo and Maigret – arrives, and we're introduced to the film's other microcosm, the universe of the police. The Inspector's seasoned instincts soon lead him down a circuitous path in this joyfully cynical character study masquerading as a murder mystery that has the most upbeat (some might say too upbeat and verging on the saccharine) ending of any Clouzot film

Once again it is a warm but unconventional relationship, that between the Inspector and his illegitimate son, that gives the film its heart, acting as an antidote to the other tortuous associations, and even they are not quite what they seem: Marguerite is immediately overcome by grief when she hears her lover might be dead, despite her flighty attitude in the rest of the story.

Quai des Orfèvres was a big success commercially and won Clouzot the Best Director prize at the Venice Film Festival. His next film however, would not be so warmly received.

Nothing is sordid when two people love each other.

– Manon Lescaut, *Manon*

Leonard Moseley described *Manon* (1948), a post war updating of Prévost's novel *Manon Lescault* (the source of Puccini's opera), thus, "Though I have been going to the pictures since I wore rompers, I do not recall a more horrible film."⁴ It's hard to disagree, especially since the central character seems little more than a sluttish opportunist, yet she has an almost likeable passion and zest for life. As Clouzot was himself, *Manon* is accused of

³ François Truffaut, *The Films in My Life*, Allen Lane, London, 1980, p. 3.

⁴ Leslie Halliwell, *Halliwell's Film and Video Guide 2002*, 17th Edition, edited by John Walker, Harper Collins, London, 2001, p. 523.

being a collaborator, and she flees with her ex-resistance fighter lover Des Grieux to Paris, where her appetite for luxury drives her to more and more squalid methods of acquiring it.

This pessimistically unsparing vision of love and greed managed to alienate audiences in the late '40s, but is much more palatable today. Clouzot based the relationship between Manon and her lover on his own with



long-term mistress Suzy Delair. The film was one of his personal favourites and has a strangely romantic if tragic ending. He told Paul Schrader, “I directed it with all my heart.”⁵

He also directed it with his fists. Clouzot had a fondness, shared by William Friedkin (who remade *Wages of Fear* as *Sorcerer* in 1977), for smacking actors upside their heads to create the emotion required. P. Leprohon recalled being on set at the time and saw Clouzot strike Cécile Aubrey, saying, “I haven’t time to muck about. That character she’s supposed to be acting, it’s essential it come into being, whatever the cost.”⁶ Clouzot practiced this philosophy in *Quai des Orfèvres* when he subjected Bernard Blier to a real blood transfusion, in *Les Diaboliques* when he presented his nauseated cast with rotting fish to consume, and in *La Vérité* when he had Brigitte Bardot drink whisky and pop tranquillisers to create the necessary air of emotional exhaustion.

Carrying on with the post-war theme, the survivor of a concentration camp (Louis Jouvet) in Clouzot’s “Retour de Jean” episode of compendium film *Retour à la vie* (1949) finds a wounded Nazi war criminal hiding in his hotel. Instead of handing him over to the police, he interrogates and tortures him himself in an attempt to find out what makes a human being behave in such a way. The lesson he learns is that he has taken on the mantle of torturer himself, leading him to shelter the man from the police so he can die in freedom. This is a typically dark, emotionally draining, yet ultimately humane piece that makes no concessions to playing down Clouzot’s association with Germany. Despite being only 40 minutes long, it achieves the same power as his best features.

Miquette et sa mère (1950), however, was not one of his best features, and was Clouzot’s least favourite of his own works. Something of a journeyman job, this frothy belle époque comedy tells the story of a stage-struck young woman who is offered dubious encouragement by an older ham actor. Clouzot himself said, “It is extremely difficult to adapt a light comedy created for the stage, without having to reconsider it completely. For me this was the entire problem with this film. From the moment one tries to transfer to the cinema an essential quality of the theatre – i.e. the close collaboration between spectator and actor – one finds oneself in front of an extremely deep ditch. And I, for one, did not find the bridge necessary to cross it.”⁷ But he was straight back on track three years later when his path would cross with Hitchcock’s for the first time.

You don't know what fear is. But you'll see. It's catching. It's catching like smallpox. And once you get it, it's for life.

– Dick, *Wages of Fear*

⁵ Shane Danielsen, *57th Edinburgh International Film Festival* program, 2003, p. 120.

⁶ Colin Crisp, *The Classic French Cinema: 1930–1960*, Indiana University Press, 1997, Bloomington, pp. 312–313.

⁷ Danielsen, p.121.

Hitchcock attempted to buy the rights to *Le Salaire de la Peur*, a novel by Georges Arnaud, but lost out when the writer announced he wanted them to go to a French filmmaker. Coincidentally, Clouzot was looking for a Brazilian-set project. Three years earlier, he had married Brazilian actress Vera Gibson-Amado and honeymooned in her native country. So fascinated was he by the place, that he wrote a book, *Le Cheval des dieux*, set in the region.

Clouzot opens *Wages of Fear* in a hellish Central American town where the American manager of an oilfield offers a bunch of down-at-heel, desperate characters, including Mario (Yves Montand) and M. Jo (Charles Vanel), big money to drive trucks carrying nitro-glycerine through a not-exactly-smooth jungle, in order to put out an oil well fire.

Wages of Fear contains several typical Clouzot-isms: the deliberately unlikeable yet oddly sympathetic characters, the way these characters are reduced to childlike demonstrations of emotion in the face of extreme situations, and the classic twist in the tale. Although the opening section of the film is arguably overlong, the rest resolves itself into scene after scene of gut-wrenching suspense, during which the audience feels like they've driven a truck full of explosives through the jungle themselves—sweaty, grubby and terrified. The film can be, and was, read as an attack on imperialism, capitalism and greed, and Clouzot found himself in the unusual position of having been vilified as a fascist and a communist.



Unlike many film writers, I've endeavoured not to give away the endings of Clouzot's films, but let's just say that it's Mario's bravado that has kept him alive and it's this very impetuosity that creates the flippant but memorable ending quite in keeping with the maker's sardonic world view.

Wages of Fear was Clouzot's first worldwide critical and commercial success and this may have made Hitch hot under the collar. His anxiety must have been exacerbated when Clouzot beat him, for the second time, to the rights of a novel he wanted. *Les Diaboliques* by Boileau and Narcejac, inspired by the hard-boiled crime fiction of James M. Cain, became one of the finest thrillers ever committed to the screen. The put-upon wife (Vera Clouzot) and abused mistress (Simone Signoret) of a sadistic headmaster (Paul Meurisse) plot to murder him, but afterwards the body disappears and his presence continues to haunt them.

A painting is always quite moral when it is tragic and it gives the horror of the things it depicts.

– Barbey d’Aurevilly, opening caption, *Les Diaboliques*

Les Diaboliques has one of the most famous and influential twist endings ever, and the film was a huge commercial success, something unprecedented for a foreign-language film at that time. It had a memorable ad campaign stressing refusal to the theatre of anyone turning up late and urged viewers not to give away the ending, something that Hitchcock would later emulate for *Psycho* (1960).

Psycho is usually credited with changing the entire landscape of thriller/horror cinema, but in fact that honour rightfully belongs to *Les Diaboliques*. With its everyday setting, dark psychological overtones, black humour (in a little personal “in-joke” Clouzot has the headmaster killed in a hotel in Niort, his birthplace), hints



at the supernatural, and the plot twist that alters the audience’s entire perception of what has gone before, the film paved the way for numerous attempts based on the same template, some anaemic (William Castle’s *Macabre* [1958]), others strong enough to stand on their own merits (Seth Holt’s *Taste Of Fear* [1961]).

Intriguingly, although the film has a lushly orchestrated score for the title sequence, there is no incidental music for the rest of the film, throwing us jarringly into what appears to be a piece of “realist” cinema. But Clouzot also adds many other genres to his pot, including horror, murder mystery and film noir. The emotional centre of this little stew is Vera Clouzot, as the faint-hearted murderess. We actively want her to murder her appalling husband and she is completely sympathetic all the way through. We experience the plot twists and shocks alongside her, as (until the very end) we see everything from her viewpoint.

As in *Wages of Fear*, the film takes its time to establish the characters, seemingly at the expense of plot, but we are in the hands of a master and everything is there for a reason. Atmospherically, there is an overwhelming air of decay, symbolised by the overgrown weeds clogging the pool, and the extraordinarily Byzantine architecture of the school itself. Containing all his characteristic elements, the microcosm of the school, the dispassionate view of the murder plot and the twist in the tail, this is probably the apex of Clouzot’s career, with everything working as a symbiotic whole.

Hitchcock was brazenly light-fingered with this film and *Psycho* borrows its main elements – the dead seem to have risen from the grave and a highlighted murder takes place in a bathroom. The films even share identical close ups of swirling water going down the plughole. Hitchcock also appropriated the swinging overhead light casting eerie shadows from a scene in *Le Corbeau* where Vorzet and Germain discuss “light” and

“night”, for the climactic unveiling of Mrs Bates. Later, he felt compelled to snap up Boileau and Narcejac’s other work, *D’Entre les morts*, which he adapted as *Vertigo* (1958), arguably his masterpiece. Interestingly, the writers had heard about Hitchcock’s interest in *Les Diaboliques* and set about writing *D’Entre les morts* specifically to appeal to him.

Sadly, Clouzot had to abandon two projects after this, due to illness (one of them, *L’Enfer*, the story of a hotel keeper driven mad through jealousy of his wife, was later made by Claude Chabrol) and followed up *Les Diaboliques* by making the documentary *The Picasso Mystery* (1956). The film used the technique of filming Picasso painting on a semi-transparent canvas with ink, causing the image to show through clearly on the other side. Clouzot filmed this process and the entire shoot took three months, after which Picasso destroyed all the pictures, making the film itself the art. Black and white, colour, and widescreen film was used to complete the mosaic and the result was declared a national treasure by the French government in 1984. Catharine Rambeau called it “the twentieth century equivalent of watching Michelangelo transform the Sistine Chapel”⁸ (though logically it could only be called that if Michelangelo had burned down the Sistine Chapel immediately after painting it).

You’re lucky enough to live in a world where when a woman sleeps with you, it’s not to find out what you did the day before. Where words have the same meaning as in the dictionary. You can drink till you drop without fearing the last drink is poisoned.

– Vogel, *Les Espions*

In *Les Espions* (1958), spies from different countries converge on a psychiatric clinic where an atomic scientist is being hidden. Clouzot may have been trying to appeal to the international audience he’d gained with his two thrillers by casting Martita Hunt, Peter Ustinov and Sam Jaffe. If he was, then the attempt failed and the result, remarkably after his previous form, is quite low key. It’s not without interest however, and contains his usual flourishes: the microcosm of the sanatorium, the preoccupation with illness, and, like many films of the 1950s, it was concerned with the nuclear threat. It would be his wife Vera’s last acting collaboration with her husband. Her final contribution to his career was co-writing *La Vérité* (1960), and the film has an almost proto-feminist vein running through it in its dissection of Left Bank sexual mores. She was terminally ill when Clouzot began filming the courtroom drama.

You have no heart. One must be capable of love to judge love.

– Guérin, *La Vérité*

Dominique, a young woman from the provinces, comes to Paris, succumbs to a Bohemian lifestyle, becomes obsessively involved with a young composer, Gilbert, and in a classic crime passionelle, shoots him. At her trial her lifestyle is scrutinised and found to be immoral. Bardot would later claim it was one of her favourite films but her relationship with the director was a tempestuous one. Clouzot complained of her childishness and

⁸ Danielsen, p.124.

resorted to doping her with tranquillisers and giving her shots of whisky to get the performance he wanted. At one point he grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her violently, saying, “I don’t need amateurs in my films. I want an actress.” Bardot’s response was to slap him and shout, “And I need a director, not a psychopath.”⁹ All this drama only served to make the press think they must have been having an affair, but they were barking up the wrong tree. She was in fact seeing her co-star, Sami Frey.

David Thomson describes *La Vérité* as “strident but unfeeling.”¹⁰ I would take issue with this stance, as there is no more emotionally devastating moment in Clouzot’s work than when Gilbert shoves Dominique’s head down out of view as they pass his concierge’s window, embarrassed at being seen with her. It never fails to illicit a gasp from any audience watching it.

As the story unfolds, we begin to see that although Dominique is initially presented as unlikeable, she is in fact quite tragic and vulnerable, and that Gilbert, introduced to us at first as an innocent, serious-minded young musician, is a cold-hearted narcissist incapable of trust. We are given this understanding through the efforts of the defence lawyer, Guérin (Charles Vanel), against the simplistic accusations of the prosecution (Paul Meurisse). His common sense rebuttals bring “the truth” into focus.



With this film, Clouzot seemed to be very much on the side of youth and new ideas, which was ironic since all the young directors of the nouvelle vague, aside from Truffaut, would condemn the classical style of filmmaking used here, as outdated. The ending is, in its own way, as brutal as anything that he concocted for his thrillers.

When you're in love, nothing you do is dirty. When you're not, everything is.
– Josée, *La Prisonnière*

Clouzot’s swan song was *La Prisonnière* (1968), a curious excursion into voyeurism and emotional game-playing, exploring a love triangle involving Gilbert, a kinetic artist (Bernard Fresson), Josée, a film editor (Elisabeth Wiener) and Stanislas, a photographer/gallery owner (Laurent Terzieff). This was the only film Clouzot made entirely in colour, although he had been planning to shoot *L’Enfer* in a combination of B&W and colour to differentiate reality from lurid fantasy.

La Prisonnière is pure Clouzot thematically – a jealous wife is driven into the arms of a control freak photographer (something of a self-portrait for Clouzot) whose private library of S&M pictures both attracts and repels her. The film is shot quite classically for the most part, until it erupts into a long psychedelic sequence towards the end. At the opposite extreme it includes one spectacular, almost parodic scene by the seashore that looks like something out of a Sunday supplement.

⁹ Quoted in Jeffrey Robinson, *Two Lives*, Simon and Schuster, London, 1994, p. 102.

¹⁰ David Thomson, *A Biographical Dictionary of Film*, Andre Deutsch Ltd, London, 1994, pp. 135–136.

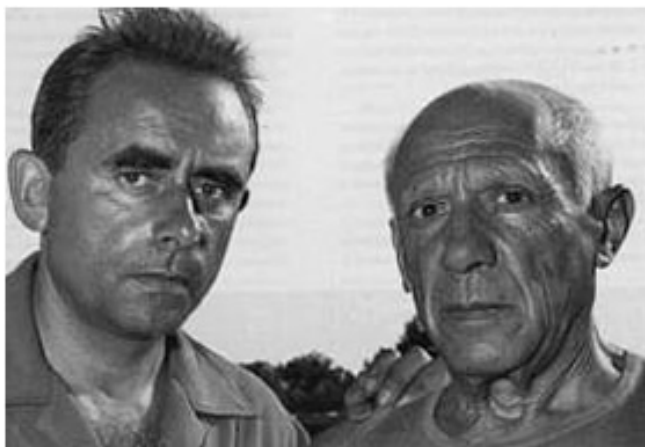
Although bleak, the film is not unsympathetic in its exploration of the three characters' motivations. Josée has been betrayed by her ambitious husband Gilbert. Lonely and under-appreciated, she makes the initial moves towards Stanislas, who is at first reluctant, due to his friendship with her husband, but succumbs when he sees her interest in his S&M photographs. Incapable of having a normal reciprocal relationship, he abandons her when he discovers she has fallen in love with him. Gilbert is then thrown into confusion when he discovers the truth about the affair, and the two men thrash around attempting to resolve the mess, while Josée, in despair, drives her car into the path of a train. They are all equally responsible for the outcome that sees Josée in hospital, calling out Stanislas' name, with her husband by her bedside. This ending seems to echo another quintessentially 1960s film, Richard Lester's *Petulia* (1968).

It would have been fascinating to see how Clouzot would have responded to the new permissiveness in what was allowed on screen, but after this he would restrict his work to television documentaries of orchestral performances, conducted by Herbert von Karajan, who ironically had also been associated with the Nazi regime.

Hitchcock wanted to explore the new sexual frankness with *Kaleidoscope–Frenzy* (a rapist/murderer on the loose in San Francisco) but the film was never produced due to its content of perversion and violence. It had parallels with *La Prisonnière* in its intended use of pop art imagery. Universal head Lou Wasserman believed it would damage the studio's reputation irreparably. Instead Hitchcock went on to make *Frenzy* (1972). Its one horrifyingly explicit murder scene is directed with such relish that it still leaves a bad taste in the mouth over 30 years later. While Hitchcock was pandering to his own worst instincts, Clouzot had gone to ground.

In 1976 Truffaut sent Clouzot a letter pleading, "Why not go back to work? Why not shout 'Action?'"¹¹ It never happened and he died a year later at the age of 70, shamefully under-appreciated in his own country. In the years since, however, Clouzot's reputation has been somewhat restored and we can see his legacy for what it is – a priceless collection of masterfully made films including the progenitor of the modern psychological thriller.

Sadly, at the time of writing, there is no existing English language volume solely dedicated to Clouzot. Perhaps this omission is due to the way he has been largely misunderstood. Seen as a whole, what first springs to mind about Clouzot's films is their cruelty and cynicism, but this director was nothing if not contradictory, and if you dig deeper they also contain little touches of tenderness, either in the form of unconventional relationships, or in the candid way he views his characters' flaws. Thomson describes Clouzot's work as a "cinema of total disenchantment."¹² In his mind "good means light and bad means night", but he has neglected to look into the twilight world that Clouzot inhabited, a place where good and evil coexist. In this place we have room for humanity and empathy as well as despair and nihilism. It is a world very much like our own.



¹¹ Thomson, pp. 135–136.

¹² Danielsen, p. 116.

Selected Filmography

As Director

- **La Terreur des Batignolles** (1931) short; also Writer
- **Tout pour l'amour** (Joe May with Clouzot, 1937) also Co-writer
- **L'Assassin habite au 21** (The Assassin Lives At 21) (1942) also Co-writer
- **Le Corbeau** (The Raven) (1943) also Co-writer
- **Quai des Orfèvres** (Quay of the Goldsmiths) (1947) also Co-writer
- **Manon** (1948) also Co-writer
- "Le Retour de Jean" episode in **Retour à la vie** (The Return To Life) (1949) also Co-writer
- **Miquette et sa mère** (Miquette And Her Mother) (1950) also Co-writer
- **Le Salaire de la peur** (The Wages Of Fear) (1953) also Co-writer
- **Les Diaboliques** (The Fiends) (1955) also Co-writer
- **Le Mystère Picasso** (The Picasso Mystery) (1956)
- **Les Espions** (The Spies) (1958) also Co-writer
- **La Vérité** (The Truth) (1960) also Co-writer
- **La Prisonnière** (Woman In Chains) (1968) also Co-writer
- **Messa de Requiem** (1969) made for television

As Writer

- **Je serai seule après minuit** (Jacques de Baroncelli, 1931)
- **Le Chanteur inconnu** (The Unknown Singer) (Viktor Tourjansky, 1931)
- **Ma Cousine de Varsovie** (Carmine Gallone, 1931)
- **Un Soir de rafle** (Dragnet Night) (Carmine Gallone, 1931)
- **Le Roi des palaces** (King Of Hotels) (Carmine Gallone, 1932)
- **Niebla** (Benito Perojo, 1932)
- **Faut-il les marier?** (Should We Wed Them?) (Pierre Billon and Carl Lamac, 1932)
- **Le Dernier choc** (The Last Blow) (Jacques de Baroncelli, 1932)
- **La Chanson d'une nuit** (Pierre Colombier and Anatole Litvak, 1932)
- **Château de rêve** (Dream Castle) (Géza von Bolváry, 1933)
- **Le Révolté** (The Rebel) (Léon Mathot, 1938)
- **Le Monde tremblera** (The World Will Shake) (Richard Pottier, 1939)
- **Le Duel** (Pierre Fresnay, 1939)
- **Le Dernier des six** (The Last One Of Six) (Georges Lacombe, 1941)
- **Les Inconnus dans la maison** (Strangers in the House) (Henri Decoin, 1941)

Review/Film; Clouzot's '*Wages of Fear*,' Version Complete

Eric D. Snyder • November 11, 2016

Article sourced from Mental Floss: <http://mentalfloss.com/article/88501/12-facts-about-breaking-waves>

Seldom have the exquisite pain and pleasure of motion-picture suspense been mixed with quite the intoxicating effects that Henri-Georges Clouzot achieves in his 1953 classic, "The Wages of Fear" ("Le Salaire de la Peur").

The film, being released in this country for the first time in its entirety, opens today at Film Forum 2, where it may well run forever.

No other show in town can match "The Wages of Fear" for the purely gut sensations it prompts, the kind that make you laugh out loud as the heart threatens to go on permanent hold. Yet "The Wages of Fear" is a lot more than a spectacular roller-coaster ride. It's about courage as well as fear, about the impulse to persevere in the face of apparent futility.

"The Wages of Fear" is also a 1950's time capsule, the contents of which reflect French attitudes toward everything from Sartre's existentialism to America's post-World War II hegemony. No wonder that William Friedkin's 1977 remake, titled "Sorcerer," seemed so wan: it didn't have an attitude. The Clouzot original is not only one of the most breathtaking thrillers ever made but also a film that is grounded in attitude.

For its initial American release in 1955, the film's distributors toned down (and sometimes pared away entirely) everything they thought might offend American audiences in the Eisenhower era. The running time was thus collapsed to 105 minutes from 148, which is the version on the Film Forum screen.

The excised Clouzot attitude now looks pretty tame but, in the early 50's there were many who might have taken "The Wages of Fear" to be inflammatory.

The setting is Las Piedras, a small sun-baked village in a parched Latin American petroleum republic where the rule of law is that of the United States-owned Southern Oil Company. SOC, as it's called, is a corporate giant that controls the lives of the peasants as well as those of the European drifters who have come to Las Piedras looking for easy money.

For all of its sincerely expressed social concerns, though, "The Wages of Fear" is far less interested in the plight of the peasants than it is in the handful of stranded Europeans, who are broke and without hope of work. For them, there is no exit.

This is the somber frame for the melodrama that follows when fire breaks out in an oilfield 300 miles away. The local SOC foreman seeks four volunteers to drive two trucks loaded with nitroglycerine to the oilfield.

The pay: \$2,000 each, which is a fortune to these guys. It's also chicken feed in the circumstances. Ounce for ounce, the liquid nitroglycerine is far more powerful than dynamite, and it is notoriously unstable, especially when transported in ancient trucks without shock absorbers on rutted roads across rock-hard deserts, around hair-pin mountain turns and through dank, muddy jungles.

Four men accept the challenge. Mario (Yves Montand) is a cheerfully ruthless young opportunist from Corsica. Jo (Charles Vanel) is an aging Parisian con artist without a sou but with a great deal of bogus style. Luigi (Folco Lulli) is Italian, good-hearted, sentimental and devoted to Mario until Mario switches his affections to Jo. Bimba (Peter van Eyck) is German and a loner.

After the scene- and character-setting sequences that open the film, the last 90 minutes are devoted to this perilous journey, one of the most remarkable examples of nonstop movie wizardry ever seen. The threat of violence is so constant that fear becomes almost serene, until the violence erupts. Like Hitchcock at his best, Clouzot manages to keep topping himself until the film's very last frame.

Like Hitchcock, too, each of the characters is fully revealed in terms of the action. There is no need for lengthy exposition or for flashbacks when the contemporary events are so vivid and rich.

Of the four drivers, Jo is both the most persuasive and most sorrowful as, in mid-trip, his nerves give out and he turns to jelly. The old fraud has lived too long not to understand the stakes. Mr. Vanel, who will be remembered as the skeptical police inspector in Hitchcock's "To Catch a Thief," gives the performance of his career.

Mr. Montand, at the beginning of his career, is splendid as the sort of guy for whom attitude is a consciously adopted style. He's all swagger and self-assurance, though still not fully formed, which is one of the reasons he attaches himself to the more worldly Jo early on. It's their relationship that gives the film its human heart.

It should be noted that the version of "The Wages of Fear" at the Film Forum is not actually a rediscovered one, since the complete film has always existed in France. It is, rather, the original French version equipped with new English subtitles in a pristine print.

The restored material fills in a lot of odd ellipses that existed in the 1955 American version. Time's passage has dimmed most of its political shock value. Clouzot's view of corporate America's heedlessness is less bold than can now be found on public television several times a week.

The hints of homosexuality, which were said to have been cut for the American release, are so discreet that I'm not at all sure they are really there. Maybe you have to be particularly literate in 50's film makers' shorthand to appreciate those references.

Today's audiences may also be unimpressed by Clouzot's attempt to pass off the Camargue, in southeastern France, as a Latin American petroleum republic. Even dressed up with a few palm trees and some dark-skinned extras, Las Piedras looks suspiciously like metropolitan France.

Yet these are minor reservations. "The Wages of Fear" is a big, masterly movie that works from the outside in. It joyfully scares the living hell out of you as it reveals something about the human condition.

Clouzot (1907-1977) made only 11 features, including "Le Corbeau" ("The Raven") in 1943 and "Diabolique" in 1955. It might be time for a retrospective.

The Wages of Fear

Directed by Henri-Georges Clouzot; screenplay (French with English subtitles) by M. G. Clouzot and Jerome Geronimi; original novel by Georges Arnaud; director of photography, Armand Thirard; edited by Henri Rust, Madeleine Gug and E. Muse; music by Georges Auric; production designer, Rene Renoux; produced by Louie Wipf; released by Kino International. At Film Forum 2, 209 West Houston Street, Manhattan. Running time: 148 minutes. This film has no rating.

Mario – Yves Montand; Jo – Charles Vanel; Linda – Vera Clouzot; Luigi – Folco Lulli;

Bimba – Peter van Eyck; O'Brien – William Tubbs

The Wages of Fear

Murray Pomerance • November 2011

Article sourced from *Senses of Cinema*: <http://sensesofcinema.com/2011/cteq/the-wages-of-fear-2/>

“Let me tell you the story”, Henri-Georges Clouzot appears to be offering in *Le Salaire de la peur* (*The Wages of Fear*, 1953), “of four strange men. Four lonely men, and their intertwined fate.” Not friends as much as comrades, not comrades as much as fellow slaves, not slaves as much as desperados, they have been selected to face peril for a high reward by the Southern Oil Company (a handy sobriquet for the Standard Oil Company of New York), which has an oil operation going in the wild mountains of Mexico, where has erupted a wildcat fire. Needed is a massive shipment of nitroglycerine – two truckloads full, so that one truckload can act as security against the hazardous loss of the second – an exceptionally volatile and syrupy liquid that can be used to produce the explosion that will bring tranquility again. From the remote Mexican village of Los Piedras, a village as lost in space and time as the Plaza that is the center and maintaining frame of Tennessee Williams’ haunting *Camino Real*, two pairs of men will depart in matching vehicles, racing to their goal yet forced by the exigencies of chemistry and geography to travel at no more than a snail’s pace, lest the nitro, sensitive to pressure and spontaneous disturbance and as powerful an explosive substance as one can find outside of atomic physics, be jostled into an “action” that will destroy, at once, the whole space and story of the film. We virtually squint at the scorching black-and-white cinematography by Armand Thirard, and breathe through a pace that is at first languid and soporific, then suddenly charged by urgency, and finally, for a very long time indeed, inexorable in its pressing slowness. This is the grandfather of “slow cinema”, a film in which each grinding shift of a gear, each spin of a truck’s wheel in mud or oil, the striking of a match against a cigarette pack, the strain of a man’s neck muscles to contain himself, the lifting of a tire over stones on a bleached stone-littered road tossed randomly with saguaro and high-tension lines and soft dust, carries us simultaneously closer to the SOC oilfields, which linger at an unfathomable distance across the sun-dried hills and further from safety, safety which qualified that zone in which one likes to imagine one lived before entering upon this voyage to hell.

The men are both obvious and inscrutable, thus entirely real. Bimba (Peter Van Eyck) is a Dutch (yet utterly Germanic) idol, pallid as the horizon, as efficient as a machine, and a man who acts as though without motive, only purpose. His partner Luigi (Folco Lulli) is a nostalgic buffoon, easygoing, indolent, matter-of-fact, emerged, it would seem, from a Mascagni opera, and unsurprisingly locked in a daydream of being somewhere else. These two occupy the lead vehicle, locked on an improbable highway merely one lane wide. Beside and behind them as they travel we see (mostly through rear projections) spreading flatlands or plunging cliffs, looming mountains covered with stones, a sort of limitless collection of horizons. In the other truck are the anxious old coward Jo (Charles Vanel, in a performance that would win him the Best Actor award at Cannes) and his

boisterous, dominating, hyper-energetic, impatient partner Mario (Yves Montand), the only man who seems utterly bent of surviving the journey, if in this torturous film we can speak honestly of survival.

I wish to focus on one moment in the film, not because it encapsulates all of the action or harmonises all of the motifs but because it suggests ways in which film itself meets its limits, ways in which Clouzot invented cinematic possibility in the face of *le néant*, nothingness. Having negotiated long stretches of the taxing route, and mastered a perilous hundred-and-eighty-degree turn – to accomplish which they had to back the heavy truck off the road onto a rotting cantilevered wooden platform – Luigi and Bimba are suddenly confronted by a massive boulder blocking their way. On Bimba’s command, and hesitant, even recalcitrant, Luigi takes a crowbar to make a three-foot-long channel in the top of it, while Bimba fetches the nitro and transfers some to his thermos. Luigi finished, Bimba strips a palm frond, then slowly, drop by drop, pours a small quantity of the extremely viscous explosive down the stem and into the hole. He rigs a sledgehammer on a metal tripod and fuses it, sending his partner, and the other two drivers (who have come up behind) to back up the trucks and protect themselves. He lights the fuse. The explosion devastates the boulder, but also sends a myriad smaller stones racing down the hillside and all of the men must hold their breaths for fear the truckloads of nitro will be set off. Finally there is silence, blissful silence. Bimba and Luigi drive on, Bimba now rather cavalierly lathering his face and shaving with the help of a piece of polished metal suspended from his visor. Jo and Mario keep happily to the rear, permit the first truck to disappear. At the wheel, Mario is nibbling a sandwich. Beside him, Jo is daydreaming about having a drink in a Paris bistro, and rolling himself a smoke.

“Roll me one”, says Mario.

We hear the grinding sound of the truck’s gears, the even hum of the motor straining itself to throw the road behind. A macro-close shot of the hands of Jo, his open cigarette paper, the loose tobacco strewn on it. Jo starts to sing a song about French tobacco. “Know that one?...” “No, but you’re off-key.” “That”, says Jo, “is because my conscience is clear”. Another macro shot. But this time, from somewhere ineffably far off, there is a thudding and very brief *poomf* sound, and at the same time, centering the screen, Jo’s loose tobacco flies leftward off the cigarette paper as though some hungry maw is sucking at it from off-camera. After a half-second, a momentary – and blinding – flash of white light spreads across the truck’s cabin. They stop. It is only too obvious what has happened. Moving forward we see, over the edge of the road, a bulging plume of gray smoke billowing upward from the beyond. Bimba and Luigi are no more.

It is this rather delicate presentation of the explosion that intrigues me, the muffled *poomf*, the flying but fragile strands of tobacco, the fragmenting but also immeasurably swift flashing of the film. The smoke is an afterthought, a telltale proof, but not the thing itself. The smoke is an endnote to what we already know we have experienced, the climactic upheaval that culminates the long liturgical chain of preparations and cautions ironically negating a legion shots of grinding gears, wheels in the dirt, nitro

containers jostling in the backs of the trucks, faces in desperate strain, heat-smoked hillsides, and so on. It is an explosion by default.

While cinema is filled in general with “explosive” moments in which personalities, having collided against one another or endured the pressure of one another’s presence beyond some limit of tolerance, flow or erupt beyond a felt and acknowledged social boundary of propriety, actual physical explosions are rare, thus more entertaining and captivating – especially utile, indeed, for action finales. It was typical in 1960s James Bond films for the villain’s laboratory/lair to be exploded, the destruction typically viewed through Bond’s eyes from a safe distance (he bobs on turquoise waters in a rubber raft with Ursula Andress, for example). Even earlier, the Disney production of *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* (Richard Fleischer, 1954) culminated in the explosion of Captain Nemo’s island hideaway. But it was only in the late 1970s, when high-speed camera techniques combined with meticulous model building and pyrotechnical expertise, that the “fireball explosion” we now regard as conventional was possible in filming. If we go back to Cecil B. DeMille’s *The Greatest Show on Earth* (1952), for example, we do not find in the legendary and cataclysmic train crash sequence any explosions at all. Nor do we see a foreshadowing of the spreading, enveloping, outwardly pouring explosion typified boldly in the conclusion of Michelangelo Antonioni’s *Zabriskie Point* (1970, and shot through the use of multiple cameras, not special effects), George Lucas’ *Star Wars* (1977), or in the destruction of a galactic nature sanctuary that climaxes Douglas Trumbull’s *Silent Running* (1972). By the time of James Cameron’s *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991) a rotund and three-dimensional effect had become possible for an imagined playground explosion produced through the use of high-key lighting, multiple urban miniatures, and digital composition effects to enhance flying debris, this sort of effect reprised in countless action films afterward, including, among many other examples, Stephen Hopkins’ *Blown Away* (1994), Sam Raimi’s *Darkman* (1990), Renny Harlin’s *The Long Kiss Goodnight* (1996), and the Wachowskis’ *The Matrix Reloaded* (2003), in which a truck collision turns into a fireball explosion, rendered through a slickly edited combination of pyrotechnic, miniature, and character close-up shots. Roland Emmerich’s *Independence Day* (1996) featured a number of architectural explosions, effected through miniatures and controlled pyrotechnical effects. There is a huge explosion in Michael Bay’s *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen* (2009) – as, typically, in most films made by him: filmed in Long Beach, an oil tanker rig generates a real fireball in collision with a second vehicle, all this produced by stunt personnel under tightly choreographed traffic conditions and later digitally augmented for the release print. As well, many of these explosions literally “motivate” the plot, since they provide the spring power whereby our hero, thrown away from the blast, manages to attach himself to a narratively important object or foothold.

What is fascinating about all of these later explosions, both as instantiations and as models of technical and aesthetic possibility, is their repleteness as screen presentations, the sense they convey that one can experience visually, at least for an instant, the entirety of an explosion as it occurs in real-

time. The fireball, indeed, signifies the presence in dramatic space of an ontologically prior actuality, one that by its magnitude and obliterating power outranks – just as it outshines – events, personae, and informative objects in its surround. The explosion *that we see is the thing to be seen*. Many of the paintings of John Martin (1789-1854), especially “The Destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah” (1852), foreshadow this cinematic technique. But in *Le Salaire de la peur*, Clouzot both anticipates these relatively rude and relatively inaccurate constructions and trumps them, first by producing a preamble to explosive eventuality that grindingly and haltingly proceeds toward the inevitable future through stolid (and, for the viewer, typically demanding) exercises in defence, protection, caution, and delicacy; and then by offering the culminating moment itself as a mere breath, the puff that dislodges already unstable tobacco from the surface of an already unstable tissue of rolling paper in a coward’s trepidacious hand. For any viewer who has been breathing through this film, the abbreviated strike upon the eardrum and the flying shreds of tobacco are the explosion itself, with the lightflash and the eventual curling column of querulous smoke only a blunt and unrewarding echo.

Nabokov writes of an orange suddenly fallen to the ground producing the distinctive sound of a *thump*. Early in the morning of 7 July 2005, I was at Tavistock Square in London when the bomb went off. Nothing at all to see, but a resonant and perfectly spherical *thump* to assault the ears and riddle the intelligence. People running with their arms in the air, silence. Clouzot had it right: explosion is essentially silent in its most pithy annihilation, a matter for the imagination. The fireball is a dream.

Le Salaire de la peur/The Wages of Fear (1953 France 131 mins)

Prod Co: Vera Films **Prod:** Raymond Borderie **Dir:** Henri-Georges Clouzot **Scr:** Henri-Georges Clouzot, Jerome Geronimi, adapted from the novel *Le Salaire de la peur* by Georges Arnaud **Phot:** Armand Thirard **Ed:** Madeleine Gug, Henri Rust **Art Dir:** René Renoux **Mus:** Georges Auric

Cast: Yves Montand, Charles Vanel, Peter van Eyck, Folco Lulli, Véra Clouzot, William Tubbs