

HENRI-GEORGES CLOUZOT

By Marc Svetov
Special to the *Sentinel*

Henri-Georges Clouzot (1907-1977) is the greatest European film noir director, followed only by Jean-Pierre Melville. In comparison to Melville's highly stylized, ultra cool crime films, Clouzot's depiction of the human condition is far deeper in its expression. He reached down into areas of the human soul usually sealed off, leaving viewers unsettled and unnerved. Though Clouzot's oeuvre of noir masterpieces was small, comprising just four films he both scripted and directed, they belong to the canon of first-rank *films noir*.

Clouzot was born in the provincial town of Niort in 1907—a place that may have furnished him with the requisite insight and basic observations for reinventing small town life in *Le Corbeau* (1943). His father was a bookseller. Clouzot initially attempted to enter the French naval service as a young man, but was rejected due to poor eyesight; he tried his hand at the diplomatic corps, but failed there as well, having insufficient funds to finance his career and education.

He had writing talent, was attracted to the world of theater, and met a few people through his girlfriend, a young actress who in the late 1920s worked in music halls and revues. She introduced Clouzot to some entertainment producers in the French capital. Soon he was creating song revues for music hall performances, graduating to screenplays in the early 1930s. He worked on various minor films and hooked up with film producer Adolphe Osso, who employed him to write film scripts. He sent the fledgling scriptwriter to Berlin, where he labored on French-German co-productions at Babelsberg, including a French-language film by Anatole Litvak.

Clouzot later explained that he made a point to view classic German films of that era, in particular ones by F.W. Murnau and Fritz Lang. German Expressionist films made a rich and lasting impression on him. There was a French film colony living and working in the city, including Jean Gabin, Arletty and many others. They lived in the same hotel on the Kurfürstendamm. Accompanying French journalist Joseph Kessel through underground haunts in Berlin for a report on German criminal gangs, Clouzot got hit in the face with a broken bottle, leaving him with a permanent scar above his lip.

He remained in Germany until 1934, witnessing the Nazis seizure of power, including long, torch-lit parades through the nocturnal streets. He claimed later he was kicked out due to his friendships with Jews in the film industry—namely French film producers Pierre Lazareff and Osso.

He returned to Paris and found a niche writing lyrics for cabaret shows and light operettas. He also established a working relationship with noted French stage—and occasional film—actor Louis Jouvet. However, Clouzot came down with pulmonary tuber-



culosis and spent four years in a sanatorium in Switzerland, reading, writing, musing, waiting; he had always been a devourer of books, literature as well as crime fiction. Building on this huge store of knowledge, he learned what makes a story tick—and what does not work—during these long years, with the fear of death always lurking in the background.

Upon his recovery, he eagerly returned to Paris in 1938 and got back to work. Actor Pierre Fresnay took Clouzot under his wing and promoted the young man as a screenwriter. Fresnay would play the leading role in Clouzot's first work as a director, *The Murderer Lives at No. 21* (1942), a crime film reminiscent of *The Thin Man*.

Coming of Age

Le Corbeau (1943) was a scandal when it was released. The film dealt with a French provincial town plagued with poison pen letters sent by an anonymous writer who calls him or herself *Le Corbeau* (the Raven). The script was based on an actual case in Tulle twenty years earlier. The letter-writer knows the town's secrets, and is especially vicious toward Dr. Germain (Pierre Fresnay), accusing him of affairs and of being an abortionist. The film opens with a long shot of an iron gate to the town's graveyard being slowly swung open: first, we see graves, then the town.

These poisonous missives are obscene in part, alleging corruption, adultery, medical malpractice, going to outright lies, especially regarding Germain. Everybody suspects everybody else. The town's dignitaries are powerless to do anything. A nurse is nearly lynched by a mob believing her to be the guilty let-

ter-writer. The psychiatrist and distinguished citizen Dr. Vorzet (Pierre Larquey) holds the town's inhabitants captive in a schoolroom for hours to make an analysis of their handwriting. Ultimately, Dr. Germain discovers who the true culprit is. The end of the film is reminiscent—a memory by Clouzot, perhaps—of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919) as the force behind the conspiracy turns out to be the main figure of authority.

From the outset, Nazi occupiers had encouraged the French population to denounce “saboteurs”; these anonymous denunciations, once received by the Germans, were handled by the domestic police or by the Germans themselves. According to historians, over *three million* such letters were written by French citizens to the Gestapo's *Wehrmacht* commandant in Paris, revealing the hiding-places of Jews or denouncing others: neighbors, colleagues, family members. Among the examples preserved, it appears that fifty percent of the letter-writers were motivated by money—a reward was offered by the Germans and Vichy French authorities. Forty percent were written for political reasons; ten percent out of hatred and vengeance.

“That balance between dark and light, black and white, between good and evil, comes from deep in my heart,” Clouzot said. “The German authorities complained that it discouraged people from writing anonymous letters. ... Informing was very useful. I was promptly fired.” As though illustrating this principle, there is a key scene in *Le Corbeau* where Drs. Germain and Vorzet discuss the nature of good and evil, of light and darkness. A light bulb swings back and forth above their heads, showing them either in deep shadow or an illuminating brightness. Vorzet asks Germain if he knows where evil and darkness



Micheline Francey and Pierre Fresnay in *Le Corbeau*



begin and end, where the boundaries lie? These are platitudes, yes, but thanks to the artful lighting, odd angles and constantly movement between light and dark, it's truly unforgettable.

Le Corbeau is a deeply disturbing film. The all-pervasive tone of dread, suspicion and paranoia transforms the quaint little town into a purgatory in which certainties and trust have evaporated. The townspeople thrash in a web of deceit that will ensnare even Dr. Germain, the sanest of them all. When Vorzet tells Dr. Germain that he'll also end up suspecting everyone and opening their letters, it does come to pass. Germain illegally opens other people's letters in order to uncover the Raven.

Clouzot, like his contemporary, writer Louis-Ferdinand Céline, has been viewed as a pessimist, even a misanthrope; actually, both, in a despairing way, show great compassion and fondness and even empathy for their characters. At the time, Clouzot succeeded in agitating his compatriots—the French Left saw *Le Corbeau* as a calumny of France, portraying as a nation of informers and blackguards, which was akin to the picture Nazi propaganda painted of a decadent and degenerate France. The French Right saw the film as a satire of church, family, patriotism. The

Germans accused Clouzot of undermining the useful practice of letter-writing to the authorities. As with Céline, Clouzot, while being himself a collaborator, could please no one; that was likely due to the power and potency of his art. He seemed capable of exasperating all and sundry, even undermining himself.

There is no doubt Clouzot was an opportunist working for the Germans, like many other French filmmakers of the time. Two companies existed for the production of French film: the *Comité d'organisation de l'industrie cinématographique* (COIC), under the aegis of Raoul Ploquin of the Vichy government; and Continental Films, headed by the German Alfred Greven, a producer and Nazi official sent to Paris by Goebbels to head the film company. Greven had acted as the former head of Ufa for a brief time in 1939. Clouzot himself sympathized, in part, with the Nazi ideology—he later admitted as much during testimony before a French “purging” committee attending to his case of collaboration in 1944: “Clouzot replies that he is sympathetic toward the social side of National Socialism because he is above all anti-capitalist and can see in it a possible solution to the struggle against capitalism.”

Clouzot had accepted the job as head of the

script department at Continental Films during those years. As Claude Vermorel wrote, “He was a guy who wanted to practice his profession, he was satisfied that the Germans furnished him with a chance. That’s legitimate, but it doesn’t go very far. Clouzot’s mistake is this: not having considered that a German boss was a different boss than others.” Whereas many Jewish and/or anti-fascist directors and actors had fled France and worked in Hollywood—among them Jean Renoir, René Clair, Julien Duvivier, Jean Gabin, Michèle Morgan, Simone Simon, Marcel Dalio—the bigger part of the French film industry also collaborated, and there was even a flowering of French film-making during the German occupation. *Le Corbeau* was the most famous and notorious of the French films made during the occupation, and Clouzot was singled out to be persecuted by the liberation purging committee; although he was a scapegoat, he was certainly no innocent.

Post-war: Invoking a Noir World

Quai des Orfèvres (1947), a police procedural, is situated in postwar Paris; its script, written by Clouzot and Jean Ferry, was based on a detective novel. Clouzot would take a literary template and transform it utterly, inventing characters, enlarging some aspects while eliminating others. His strength in script-writing is character delineation, capturing in a thumbnail sketch both the person and their place in society.

Like many film noir heroines, Jenny Lamour (Suzy Delair), the film’s main character, is a night club singer and an object of desire for the people surrounding her. A single-minded young lady, she employs her considerable sex appeal to further her career. In one area she is adamant, though: she will sleep only with her husband, mild and meek Maurice (Bernard Blier), with whom she has a steamy, not at all matrimonial-like relationship. This is more than hinted at by the way he looks at her and by furtive, voyeuristic camera shots through the window of their cozy apartment.

Dora (Simone Regnant), Jenny’s friend and photographer, who has a studio in the same courtyard, is also in love with her, but is unable to speak about her feelings. Clouzot portrays Dora as an independent, dignified, sympathetic woman. Her unrequited yearning for Jenny is one of the few lesbian loves expressed openly—or at all—in film noir. When the hunchbacked sexual pervert Brinson (Charles Dullin), a film producer who lusts after Jenny, is murdered, Dora and Maurice tell lies to protect Jenny, and Jenny tells lies to protect herself.



Suzy Delair in *Quai des Orfèvres*

Inspector Antoine (Louis Jovet), who investigates the case, sees through their informal conspiracy—their mutual silence was not coordinated—soon enough. Jovet delivers a wondrous portrait of the policeman: gruff, cynical but tender, certainly fair. He is shown with his adoptive son brought back from the colonies; Antoine is touchingly solicitous and worried about the boy all during the murder investigation.

Clouzot stages an immense amount of “business” on in the background, commenting on the action. During a scene in which Inspector Antoine is casually interrogating Jenny and her husband Maurice, a Romanian Gypsy band is practicing at top volume in the restaurant where Jenny works. The cacophony seems to symbolize how raw Jenny and Maurice’s nerves are. As Maurice is interrogated for the murder of Brignon, another cop nearby shows a fishing rod to a colleague, saying: “With this, you can catch pike”—a clear metaphor for the foreground action. And it hints at the underlying Hitchcockian aesthetics of Clouzot’s work. “The dramatic core [of the film] is the suspense, the best way to get through to viewers without them reacting. They’ll put up with the rest because the suspense has them hooked like a fish,” was how Clouzot himself described it.

Toward the end, Inspector Antoine affectionately and wistfully remarks to Dora: “We are two of a kind. When it comes to women, we’ll never have a chance.” He likes her; and throughout the film, he is partly exasperated, partly amused by this set of unusual “criminals.” The viewer is likewise left with an intangible liking for the main protagonists; Strange to say of a noir, I suppose.

That there is another side to the policeman’s work, however, is made clear when Maurice is curious about another criminal. When he asks what the man has been arrested for, Antoine replies coldly, “You don’t want to know. That’s another world.”

From Demimonde to Existentialism

Clouzot’s existential masterpiece *The Wages of Fear* (1953), an adventure noir, is a study of human beings struggling to survive—pitiful ants striving to drag along burdens, which are far beyond their capacity to carry. The opening scene tells much: we see cockroaches being tortured for play by a naked



Yves Montand and Charles Vanel in *Wages of Fear*

Central American child; the insects are tied together with string.

The film’s plot is centered around four drivers, paid \$2,000 each, to haul two loads of extremely volatile nitroglycerin by truck over perilous roads in some South American country. The contractor is an American oil company, and the nitro is to be used putting out a raging fire in a well at 300 miles’ remove.

The drivers, inhabitants of the village of Las Piedras, are losers, tramps, from Europe: two Frenchmen, one German and an Italian. They have gotten stranded in a Central American town—the reason why is never explained. Mario (Yves Montand) and Jo (Charles Vanel) are co-drivers of the larger heavy-duty truck. All of them die—horribly—during the journey, except for Mario, the main character. One feels a horrible sadness throughout the film. Everything seems so futile, and we feel so much for them; we admire them; it is the sheer glory of human

endeavor—the struggle encompassed in naked survival against great odds.

The supporting performances rendered Peter Van Eyck and Folco Lulli (Bimba and Luigi, respectively), are superb. The scene in which Van Eyck is preparing to blow up a 50-ton boulder blocking the road by using some of the nitro from the jerry cans is a *tour de force*: at the last minute, prior to pouring the explosive into the rock crevice, we watch him—it is only a small detail—as he makes fatalistically what is either the sign of the cross or simply crossing his fingers over the hole; the intensity of the situation, beads of sweat visible on Bimba’s face, is utterly breathtaking.

The American oil executive O’Brien (played by William Tubbs) is execrable as a person—a satirical portrait of Americans exploiting oil reserves in a developing country—yet Clouzot never makes him into a complete villain. We see O’Brien trying to protect Jo, asking him not to volunteer for the deadly mission. We learn that O’Brien and Jo had been buddies a couple decades before—perhaps during Prohibition days, running bootleg liquor; it is never explained, only hinted at.

Later, when Mario and Jo are driving together, Jo—a good thirty years older than Mario—complains about how easy Mario has it, while Jo is dying every moment and fearing everything that could go wrong. Fear—and its counter, courage—are coin of the realm in this tale. Even though Jo is a coward, we feel the older man’s humiliation, while Mario pursues his course recklessly, relentlessly—even running over Jo’s leg in the oil pond, a scene both hideous and piteous. Jo dies in the truck cab, leaning on Mario as he drives, and Mario is saddened by the older man’s death, even though he has tortured, maligned and abused him. Mario had told him, as Jo tried to run away: “Don’t you understand it yet? I need you.”

It is this depiction of paradoxical behavior that makes the film so extraordinary. There are so many breathtaking and “true” scenes—like when Mario’s vehicle is poised over the edge of the creaky, rotten wooden bridge at the hairpin curve on the highway, after Jo has abandoned him. He says to himself: “What a situation!” It truly *is* a ghastly situation, one in which the viewer sees no escape at all, and courage is the only option. *The Wages of Fear* puts you through the ringer; one feels for themselves the anxiety, despair, fear and ecstasy of the four drivers.



Clouzot on location directing the classic *Wages of Fear*

Existentialism was in the air at that time, particularly in postwar Europe. After Jo has been gravely injured, Jo and Mario are seen talking in the cab. They reminisce about a certain street in Paris. It had a pharmacy in it; then there was a fence. Vanel asks—as though he really wants to know it—what was beyond the fence, something, he says, he always wanted to know. Montand says, “There is nothing.”

A little later, Jo is dying—his lower leg severed below the knee—and he is raving in a fever owing to the wound. Jo says he is thinking about that fence; suddenly, he opens his eyes very wide—his face is smeared with oil, so the whites of his eyes are stark—and says, “There’s nothing!”

Like other artists who were not religious but dealt with religious questions, Clouzot, a professing Catholic, created art permeated with a many-sided humanity, a combination of cruelty and compassion.

He was gifted with a feel for the dark psychology of humans, mixing good and evil in equal doses in his characters. He remained explicit in his humanity despite the links with nihilism that have been ascribed to him.

Channeling Hitchcock

Clouzot’s fourth noir is *Les Diaboliques* (1955). It features Clouzot’s wife Vera and Simone Signoret in the main roles of Christina Delassalle and Nicole Horner, the wife and mistress, respectively of, Michel Delassalle (played by Paul Meurisse). The ladies plan and appear to carry out this miscreant’s murder. They drown him in a bathtub, after drugging him. A perfect crime? Not when the body disappears.

Diaboliques has a surprise ending—Clouzot asked that viewers not divulge the twist—and is a very well constructed thriller; it is not as convincing

and on the same high level as his other three noirs. Clouzot’s films always have a story that is somewhat outlandish, but the director places it in such a realistic, plausible setting, guides his actors so cunningly, and directs with such power, one doesn’t notice until afterward how absurd the situations actually are. With *Diaboliques*, we have a taste of the manipulative, the Hitchcockian, in too great a degree, with a concomitant lack of believability. The satanic opening music says it all. This is the weakest of his four noirs.

The critics and filmmakers of *Cahiers du cinéma* in the late 1950s and ’60s considered Clouzot passé, a part of “grandpa’s cinema” they wanted discarded. Unfortunately, Clouzot was influenced by the unjust criticism and tried to make “arty” films in the last years of his life. The New Wave critics revised their opinion of him in later years, and several paid him homage after his death in 1977. ■

NO TIME TO BE SENTIMENTAL

Clouzot’s *Manon* and the Excesses of *l’Amour Fou*

By Ted Whipple
Special to the *Sentinel*

In what could be considered Clouzot’s fifth film noir, *Manon* (1949), the director transposes Abbe Prevost’s 18th century story of fatal attraction, *L’histoire du Chevalier des Grieux et de Manon Lescaut*, to the devastated landscape of the Occupation’s final days.

Using the familiar noir flashback structure, Clouzot starts in the middle of things, with the discovery of two stowaways hiding amongst Jewish refugees on a ship headed to Palestine. Wanted by the law and pleading for mercy from the captain, who intends to surrender them to the authorities in Alexandria, the couple’s story is revealed in flashbacks that set the stage for a feverish final act.

The paranoia and social tension of provincial life during the Petain era that Clouzot plumbs in *Le Corbeau* has now exploded. Shaven-headed women accused of being “friendly” with the enemy are paraded half-naked before a retributive mob. Young Manon (Cécile Aubry) would be their next victim, but she seduces Robert (Michel Auclair), the young Resistance fighter who would have taken her to trial.

As an air raid devastates what’s left of the church that has been their hideout, the couple flees to Paris to be taken in by Manon’s brother Leon (Serge Reggiani), a black marketeer in the city’s underworld. Unlike the noble rustic he plays three years later in *Casque d’Or*; done in by his ethical code, Reggiani’s character here has nothing on his mind but Darwinian survival in a war-torn world. Leon rationalizes that women are whores at heart, and exudes amused contempt for his sister’s sap of a lover. He wastes no time in pimping Manon, and later arranging her marriage to a wealthy, clueless American. When Manon hesitates to comply, he scolds her: “This is no time to be sentimental.”

But Robert’s “sentiment” runs deeper and proves more powerful than Leon’s shrewd survivalism. In a comical scene, Robert follows Manon to learn that she works not in a modeling agency but a *maison close* where he’s mistakenly taken for an impetuous customer by an aging madam. “Love at first sight?” she asks. “How sweet, how romantic.” On discovering her mistake, she vents to the receptionist “Quel bordel!,” a double-entendre typically used to express “what a mess!”

Robert rages and spits in Manon’s face, but moments later he’s at her knees imploring forgiveness. Manon explains she cannot live the hapless provincial life of her late mother. Robert vows he will become more like Leon and do whatever it takes. When Robert balks at making love to

Manon while still in such tainted surroundings, Manon asserts that when one’s truly in love, nothing is dirty.

For Manon is a *femme enfant*, with enough self-awareness to exploit her childlike looks but not enough intelligence to set her own course. Robert sees her vulnerability as a kind of innocence that impels him not only to forgive, but to want her even more. Only his intervention can reset the path that Manon and her brother have put in motion, but that trajectory stays ineluctably beyond anyone’s control.

Manon is a tightly paced vehicle that propels its characters from the country to the city and finally to the desert. Armand Thirard’s cinematography is every bit as darkly mesmerizing as his work in *La Salaire du Peur* (*The Wages of Fear*), *Quai des Orfèvres*, *Les Diaboliques*, *L’Assassin Habite au 21*, and the underappreciated 1960 film *La Verite*—to which *Manon* is perhaps closest, due to Clouzot’s casting of the previously unknown 17-year old Aubry, a sylph-like bombshell who anticipates Bardot by more than a decade.

Noirish images linger: the bombed out Normandy town and the funeral procession of the local hostages shot by the Germans in retreat; the childlike chase/play among the ruins of the church when Manon first attempts to flee Robert’s custody; the nocturnal boat scene where Manon hovers outside Robert’s jail cell window in a rainy downpour; the train sequence that tracks Manon’s fight through a hostile crowd to find Robert; and a stunning desert sequence filled with unsparing sun and sand littered with carcasses.

Where the original *Manon Lescaut* had provided fodder for opera and could have easily been a melodramatic tale of *l’amour fou* in the hands of right-winger Claude Autant-Lara, here Clouzot makes a film that feels closer to noir than anything else. As an outsider who had alienated both the left and the right, Clouzot shows the big picture—the social context that propels this doomed couple into making a series of relentlessly bad moves. “Paradise is too far,” Manon says. For Clouzot, “liberation” may have felt just as distant.

Manon aired in 2009 on TV5-Monde, the French channel available to American cable subscribers that comes closest to our PBS (sans pledge breaks), graced with expertly nuanced English subtitles by Edouard Blinn of TV5-Quebec. For those who only know Clouzot by his quartet of noir classics, *Manon* will be a revelation. ■



Cécile Aubry as Manon