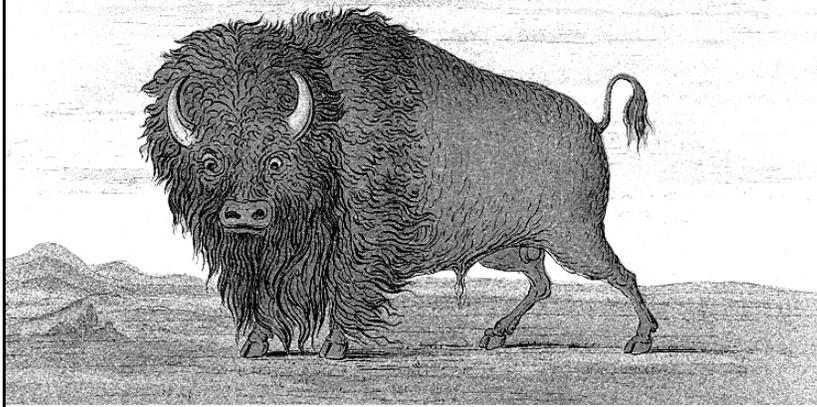


The Buffalo Film Seminars



Conversations about great films
with Diane Christian & Bruce Jackson

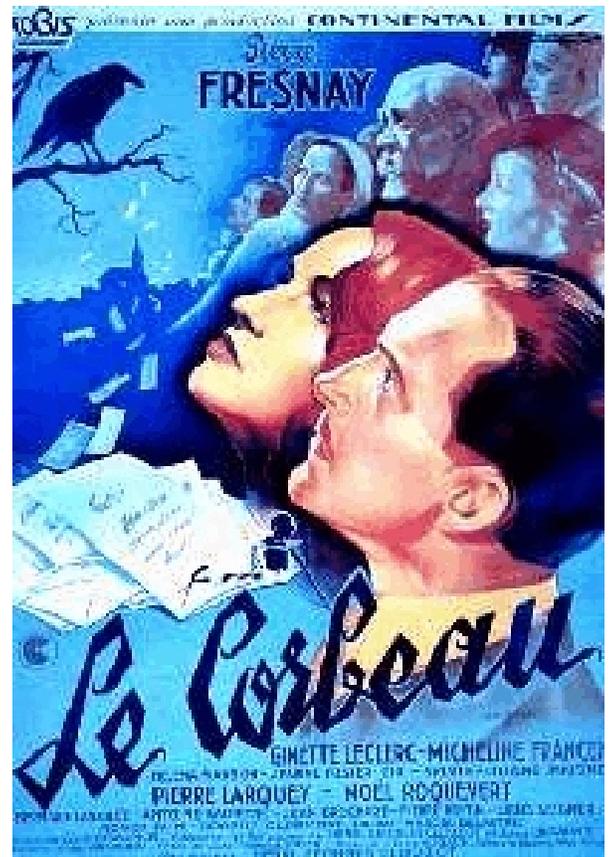
HENRI-GEORGES CLOUZOT (20 November 1907, Niort, Deux-Sèvres, France—12 January 1977, Paris, France) was, wrote Ginette Vincendeau, in the Encyclopedia of European Cinema, “one of the most controversial film-makers of the postwar period. Clouzot's early activities were devoted to writing. After an early short (*La Terre des Batignolles*, 1931), he began adapting thrillers in the 1940s, a genre he pursued throughout his career. The first was his debut feature *L'Assassin habite...au 21* (1942). *Le Corbeau* (1943, produced by the German-owned Continentale) turned him into both a celebrity and an object of scandal. Its vicious portrait of a strife-ridden small town was deemed ‘anti-French’ and Clouzot was suspended from the film industry in 1944. Ironically, historians now read the film as anti-German. Clouzot resumed film-making in 1947, shooting a small but significant and highly successful body of films epitomizing (with such directors as Yves Allégret) the French noir tradition. Most, like *Quai des Orfèvres* (1947) and *Les Diaboliques* (1955), combine tight, suspenseful crime narratives with critical depictions of bourgeois milieu. *Le Salaire de la peur / The Wages of Fear* (1953), the ultra-tense story of two men delivery a lorry-load of nitro-glycerine, was a triumph at home and abroad. Clouzot directed one of Brigitte Bardot's best films, *La Vérité* (1960). His films also include *Manon* (1949) and *Les Espions* (1957), and a documentary on Picasso, *Le Mystère Picasso* (1955). Ironically for a film-maker who wrote all his scripts and insisted that a director ‘be his own auteur,’ Clouzot suffered at the hands of New Wave critics, who saw him as a mere ‘metteur-en-scène’ and disliked the black misanthropy of his vision. A reassessment of his work is long overdue.”

PIERRE FRESNAY (4 April 1897, Paris—9 January 1975, Neuilly-sur-Seine, Hauts-de-Seine, Île-de-France, France, respiratory problems) appeared in 71 theatrical and TV films, the last of them "Le Jardinier" (1973). Outside of France he is best known for his performance as Captain de Boieldieu in Jean Renoir's *La Grande illusion* (1937).

from “The French Film During the Occupation” in *French Film*. Georges Sadoul. Falcon Press London 1953.

In September, 1939, war was declared, completely interrupting French film activity. Nearly all players, directors and technicians went into the Services; the majority of the studios were requisitioned by the military authorities and were converted into barracks and depots.

When Paris was occupied, Dr. Goebbels controlled all films in a France governed by Marshal Pétain. Productions henceforth had to submit to two censorships, the German one of the



LE CORBEAU/THE RAVEN (1943) 92 min.

Directed by Henri-Georges Clouzot
Screenplay and adaptation by Louis Chavance
& Henri-Georges Clouzot
Produced by René Montis and Raoul Ploquin
Original Music by Tony Aubin
Cinematography by Nicolas Hayer

Pierre Fresnay...Le docteur Rémy Germain
Ginette Leclerc...Denise Saillens
Micheline Francey...Laura Vorzet
Hélène Manson...Marie Corbin, l'infirmière
Jeanne Fusier-Gir...La mercière
Sylvie...La mère du cancéreux
Liliane Maigné...Rolande Saillens
Pierre Larquey...Michel Vorzet
Noël Roquevert...Saillens, la maître d'école
Bernard Lancret...Le substitut
Antoine Balpêtré...Le docteur Delorme

Propagandastaffel and that of Vichy, under presidency of writer Paul Morand, which had effect only in what was called the ‘free’ zone. These two bodies censored not only the finished films, but the scripts even before production began. No work could be started, therefore, without their consent.

Even in minute doses, propaganda was keenly resented by the sensitive French, who spontaneously boycotted German programmes.

Two hundred and twenty films were made in France during the four years of Occupation. Almost without exception,

French directors and film writers managed to avoid the pit-falls of collaboration, and the majority were even able to 'resist' actively.

From the beginning, the Occupation posed fundamental questions to film-makers regarding the conception and direction of their work. Consciously or not, they almost all realized that it was impossible to continue pre-war themes under such conditions. To teach, for example, that man should submit to fatalism was degrading at a time when resistance to the horrible fate hanging over their country was of prime importance. Other subjects had to be found.

Jean Renoir and René Clair had joined Julien Duvivier in Hollywood, where they found the characteristic, pre-war ideal couple, Jean Gabin and Michèle Morgan. To escape from the Gestapo, Jacques Feyder and his wife, Françoise Rosay, took refuge in Switzerland. Almost alone, Marcel Carné stayed in Paris. At the beginning of the Occupation his first production plan was symptomatically entitled *Les Evades de l'An 4000*. All sought escape from the unsavoury present in dreaming of other times, past or future.

Dr. Goebbels's Continental company did nothing to discourage this tendency. Since Hitler schemed to make Paris the Luna Park of National-Socialist Europe, it was considered advisable for France to specialize in films of comic or dramatic entertainment, planned to replace Hollywood productions on the screen.

In the clandestine Press, the whole-hearted success of *Le Ciel est à Vous* was a contrast to the unpopularity, on moral grounds, of the last big film produced by Dr. Goebbels's Continental, *Le Corbeau*.

René Chavance's script, written some time before the war, had been inspired by a then famous news item in France, the anonymous letters of Tulle. G. H. Clouzot, a specialist in detective films, saw in this script a very well-designed thriller. The Crow, the mysterious author of the anonymous letters, terrorizes a little town, and better even than in the most classical of detective plots, each character without exception can be genuinely suspected. To the absorbing interest of this involved story was added an exceptional skill in the direction of the film. Clouzot proved his admirable knowledge of his craft, and of his film classics; in some episodes the influence of other masters of screen technique was almost too evident.

Le Corbeau, with its deep pessimism, also followed pre-war trends. In Carné, or even Duvivier, if evil fate always had the upper hand, there did also exist men of good will. Chavance and Clouzot tried to show that there is evil sleeping in the heart of every individual, and therefore humanity is to be wholly condemned. In one of the major scenes (where the influence of German expressionism is clearly evident) a swinging lamp throws the players' faces alternately into light and then into shade—from Good to Evil.

Since the film was obviously set in the French provinces, Continental thought of using it for anti-French propaganda, and showed *Le Corbeau* in various European countries. French prestige was still high and, unfortunately for Dr. Goebbels, the results of this distribution fell far short of his hopes. The Swiss, the Czechs and everyone else, rejoiced to see a good French film whose artistic quality was so far superior to the decadent mediocrity of Hitler's productions.

After the Liberation, the military censorship banned *Le Corbeau*, and those responsible for it. The script-writer and

producer were evicted from the industry. These sanctions, which only lasted a short while, became the pretext for a campaign which idealized the martyred film as the summit of French art. This was, however, far from being a tribute to a remarkable genius. In fact, Clouzot, at a later date, suffered more from this overpraise than from the temporary suppression of his film.

from Criterion dvd interview with Bernard Tavernier about *Le Corbeau*

Tavernier made a documentary in 2002 *Laissez-Passer/Safe Passage* about the films of the French Nazi occupation period. He says *Le Corbeau* was attacked for what is now considered modern and complex. The conservatives attacked it for its dark view with mentions of freethinking and abortion. The left attacked it because it didn't portray the French as being heroic in their resistance. The film showed informing. Both sides attacked the film for showing what they didn't want to see and they attacked the film as therefore collaborationist, as "Hitler's eagle with raven feathers."

However, it took 25 years to reveal French complicity in Nazi deportations, especially of the Jews.

After the total humiliation of the French army the Nazis imposed collaboration. Goebbels restarted French cinema, saying this demonstrated 'new order freedom.' He believed in the tremendous power of film and wanted to use the industry for entertainment distraction.

Clouzot, son of a bookseller, a screenwriter, was put in charge of the screenplay department of Continental the French film studio opened by Goebbels. Clouzot was not pro-German; he protected Jews and according to those working for him he was never submissive. He began with *L'Assassin habite au 21/The Killer lives at 21*. [The film] demonstrated Clouzot's vivid dialogue, rich characterization and rather dark outlook.

Le Corbeau was based on a true 1923 incident of informing. Grevin, head of the studio fought against the project and thought it dangerous but *Le Corbeau* was released without censorship because Continental was German-sponsored. It wasn't forbidden but Grevin was against it and Goebbels was displeased because he wanted light work.

Clouzot was incredibly sharp on social context. The shooting was difficult and took place outside Paris, without much film. Clouzot was not agreeable. When his associates asked "are you well, are you happy this morning, Henri?" "Non" was the response.

After Liberation the film was forbidden and 7 directors were judged on collaboration—Clouzot among them.

Many wrote to support him including Jean Cocteau who said "his film is close to Maupassant and Zola and has a beauty of the best stage of Maupassant. Clouzot was judged by three people, two of them not very talented directors, one of whom hadn't seen the film. He was forbidden to work for life.

Sartre and de Beauvoir, René Clair, Marcel Carné and many intellectuals protested. They said it was true *Le Corbeau* was dark but it was a great work of art. There was a violent fight which led to a strange compromise. The prohibition that he couldn't work for life was changed to two years. Many asserted that far from collaborating, in fact Clouzot had "smuggled the subversive message."

The four years of Nazi Occupation were in fact good for French cinema. It was the beginning of auteur films. The newsreels of the period were shown with lights on so as not to be booed.

Clouzot said of *Le Corbeau* that it was “the first film where I did what I wanted.” He said the suspense hooked the audience like a fish and that the balance between dark and light, good and bad “comes from deep in my heart.”

The film was a smash hit but he was fired because the Nazis felt it discouraged people from writing letters. Radio London condemned him to death.

from World Film Directors V. I. Ed. John Wakeman. H.H. Wilson Co NY 1987 entry by Konstantin Bazarov

French director, scenarist and dramatist. Began study of law with a view to entering the French diplomatic service, abandoning this plan at the age of twenty to become a journalist. From 1927 to 1930 he worked for the daily newspaper *Paris-Midi*.

Clouzot began his film career in 1931 as a scriptwriter. That same year he directed a short picture, *Le Terreur des Batignolles*, and soon after he served as assistant director to Anatole Litvak and the German director E.A. Dupont. In 1932-1933 he worked in Berlin, preparing French versions of German movies. Clouzot was plagued all his life by ill health and in his late twenties spent four years in a Swiss sanatorium—an experience, it has been suggested, that contributed a great deal to the profound pessimism that characterizes his work.

Clouzot was one of the New Wave’s principal targets in their campaign against their predecessors....Indeed, he was everything the New Wave opposed—a meticulous director who prepared his work carefully in advance and insisted on complete control of every phase of its development. He is said to have been quite ruthless in his handling of actors, for example bullying one young actor to the verge of breakdown and the amiably informing him that this was exactly the effect he wanted on the screen. Simone Signoret said, “He is concerned with every detail, almost to an obsession. He cannot work in peace. He has to work in a

constant ambiance of crisis....He does not ask you to do things, he demands that you do things....Clouzot does not really respect actors. He claims he could make anyone act.” Rather surprisingly, perhaps, the high standard of performance he extracted from his actors tends to bear out this claim.

Clouzot said that for him “the great rule is to push the contrasts as far as they will go, the dramatic highlights being separated by ‘neutral zones.’ To move the spectator I always aim at emphasizing the chiaroscuro, opposing light and shade. It is for this reason that my films have been criticized as oversimplifications.” That criticism has indeed been made of his work, not only for the reason he gives but because of his willingness, especially in his later work, to go to any lengths to build up tension and suspense, even at the cost of distorting character. As Roy Armes has written, Clouzot’s work is characterized by “an extremely pessimistic view of the world, a ruthlessness and significant lack of humour. It is this latter that differentiates him most strongly from his only serious rival as master of the thriller genre—Alfred Hitchcock.”

from The St. James Film Directors Encyclopedia. Ed. Andrew Sarris. Visible Ink Press Detroit 1998, entry by Dudley Andrew

Le Corbeau was a shattering film, unquestionably hitting hard at the society of the war years. Retaining all the conventions of the thriller, Clouzot systematically exposed the physical and psychological grotesqueries of every character in the film. A grim picture of small-town mores, *Le Corbeau* was condemned by the Nazis and French patriots alike.

When the war ended Clouzot found himself barred from the industry for two years by the “purification committee,” an industry-appointed watchdog group that self-righteously judged complicity with the Germans. Clouzot’s crime was to have made films for a German-financed company. Though he was officially arraigned on charges of having maligned the French character and having demoralized the country during its dark hours. But even at this time many critics claimed that *Le Corbeau* was the only authentically engaged film made during the entire Occupation.

COMING UP IN THE BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS:

- February 15 John Huston, *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* 1948
- February 22 Vincente Minelli *An American in Paris* 1951
- March 1 Ingmar Bergman *Wild Strawberries* 1957
- March 8 Andrzej Wajda *Ashes and Diamonds* 1958
- March 22 David Lean *Lawrence of Arabia* 1962
- March 29 John Frankenheimer *The Manchurian Candidate* 1962
- April 5 Sergio Leone *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* 1966
- April 12 Robert Bresson *Lancelot of the Lake* 1974
- April 19 Larissa Shepitko *The Ascent* 1976
- April 26 Akira Kurosawa *Ran* 1985

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