Produced and directed by Henri-Georges Clouzot
Based on the novel Celle qui n’était plus by Pierre Boileau and Thomas Narcejac
Screenplay by Jérôme Géronimi, Henri-Georges Clouzot, Frédéric Grendel and René Masson
Original Music by Georges Van Parys
Cinematography by Georges Van Parys
Film Editing by Madeleine Gug

Simone Signoret ...Nicole Horner
Véra Clouzot ...Christina Delassalle
Paul Meurisse ...Michel Delassalle
Charles Vanel ...Alfred Fichet, le commissaire
Jean Brochard ...Plantiveau, le concierge
Pierre Larquey ...M.Drain, professeur

HENRI-GEORGES CLOUZOT (November 20, 1907, Niort, Deux-Sèvres, Poitou-Charentes, France—January 12, 1977, Paris, France) has 34 writing and 18 directing credits. Some of his films were La Prisonnière/Woman in Chains (1968), Messa da Requiem von Giuseppe Verdi/Giuseppe Verdi: Requiem (1967), L’Enfer (1964), La Vérité/The Truth (1960), Les Espions/The Spies (1957), Le Mystère Picasso/The Mystery of Picasso (1956), Les Diaboliques/Diabolique (1955), Le salaire de la peur/The Wages of Fear (1953), Miquette et sa mère (1950), Le voyage en Brésil (1950), Retour à la vie/Return to Life (1949), Manon (1949), Quai des Orfèvres (1947), Le Corbeau/The Raven (1943), L’Assassin habite... au 21/The Murderer Lives at Number 21 (1942), Tout pour l’amour (1933), Caprice de princesse (1933), and La terreur des Battignolles (1931).


VÉRA CLOUZOT (December 30, 1913, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil—December 15, 1960, Paris, France) appeared in only three films, all directed by her husband: Les Espions/The Spies (1957), Les Diaboliques/The Devils (1955), and Le Salaire de la peur/The Wages of Fear (1953).

PAUL MEURISSE (December 21, 1912, Dunkerque, Nord, Nord-Pas-de-Calais, France—January 19, 1979, Neuilly-sur-Seine, Hauts-de-Seine, France) has 67 acting credits, some of which are Le Gitan/The Gypsy (1975), L’Éducation amoureuse de Valentin/The Education in Love of Valentin (1975), Les Suspects/The Suspects (1974), Doucement les basses/Easy Down There! (1971), L’Armée des ombres/Army of Shadows (1969), Le Deuxième soufflé/Second Breathe (1966), La Grosse caisse/The

CHARLES VANEL (August 21, 1892, Rennes, Ille-et-Vilaine, France—April 15, 1989, Cannes, Alpes-Maritimes, France) has 177 acting credits, some of which are Les Saisons du plaisir (1988), Si le soleil ne revenait pas/If the Sun Never Returns (1987), Le Chemin perdu/The Lost Way (1980), Alice ou la dernière fugue/Alice or the Last Escapade (1977), Nuit d’or/Golden Night (1976), Par le sang des autres/By the Blood of Others (1974), Camorra/Gang War in Naples (1972), Ballade pour un chien/Ballad for a Dog (1969), Du rififi à Tokyo/Rififi in Tokyo (1963), On route à deux (1960), La Vérité/The Truth (1960), Le Piège/Any Man’s Woman (1958), Les Suspects/The Suspects (1957), La Mort en ce jardin/Death in the Garden (1956), To Catch a Thief (1955), Les Diaboliques/The Devils (1955), Maddalena (1954), Le Salaire de la peur/The Wages of Fear (1953), Malaise (1952), L’Ultima sentenza (1951), In nome della legge/In the Name of the Law (1949), Le Diable souffle/Woman of Evil (1947), La Brigade sauvage/Savage Brigade (1939), S.O.S. Sahara (1939), Police mondaine (1937), Michel Strogoff (1935), Le Grand jeu (1934), Au bout du monde (1934), Les Misérables (1934), Gitanes (1932), L’Arlesienne (1930), Waterloo (1929), Die Apachen von Paris (1927), Martyre (1926), Nitchevo (1926), L’Orphelin du cirque en guerre/Babette Goes to War (1925), In the Spider’s Web (1924), Le Vol (1923), and Jim Crow (1910)

ARMAND THIRARD (October 25, 1889, Mantes, Yvelines, Île-de-France, France—November 12, 1973, Colombes, Hauts-de-Seine, Île-de-France, France) has 124 cinematographer credits, some of which are Le Bataille de San Sebastian/Guns for San Sebastian (1968), Messa da requiem von Giuseppe Verdi/Giuseppe Verdi: Requiem (1967), Soleil noir/Black Sun (1966), La Fabuleuse aventure de Marco Polo/Marco the Magnificent (1965), Les Petits chats/Wild Roots of Love (1965), Lemmy pour les dames/Ladies’ Man (1962), Les Menteurs/The Liars (1961), Les Trois mousquetaires: La vengeance de Milady/Vengeance of the Three Musketeers (1961), Goodbye Again (1961), La Vérité/The Truth (1960), Babette s’en va-t-en guerre/Babette Goes to War (1959), Sois belle et tais-toi/Be Beautiful But Shut Up (1958), Trois jours à vivre/Three Days to Live (1957), Et Dieu... créa la femme/And God Created Woman (1956), Voici le temps des assassins.../Deadlier Than the Male (1956), Maddaïselle de Paris (1955), Les Diaboliques/The Devils (1955), L’Ennemi public no 1/The Most Wanted Man (1953), Un acte d’amour/Act of Love (1953), Le Salaire de la peur/The Wages of Fear (1953), Les Belles de nuit/Beauties of the Night (1952), Le Paradis des pilotes perdu/The Hell of Lost Pilots (1949), Manon (1949), Quai des Orfèvres/Quay of the Goldsmiths (1947), La Symphonie pastorale (1946), La Fille du diable (1946), L’Assassin habite... au 21/The Murderer Lives at Number 21 (1942), L’Assassinat du Père Noël/The Killing of Santa Claus (1941), Volpone (1941), Le Patriote/The Mad Emperor (1938), Nuits de feu/The Living Corpse (1937), Un déjeuner de soleil/A Picnic on the Grass (1937), La Peur (1936), Mayerling (1936), L’Équipage/Flight Into Darkness (1935), La Maison dans la dune/The House on the Dune (1934), Le Petit roi/The Little King (1933), Le Bal (1931), La Divine croisière (1929), L’Agonie de Jérusalem (1927), Le Mystère de la tour Eiffel (1927), and L’Homme à l’Hispano (1926).


French director, and dramatist, was born in Niort (Deux-Sèvres) in the west of France. In his teens he entered he naval academy at Brest, but on graduation he was rejected by the navy itself because of poor sight. He then began the study of law with a view to entering the French diplomatic service, abandoning his plans 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 de Batignolles, and soon after he served as an 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. Apart from this interruption, he spent most of the ten years from 1931 to 1941 as a scenarist, writing or collaborating on scripts for films directed by Carmine Gallone, Pierre Fresnay, and Georges Lacombe, among others. During the same period Clouzot wrote a number of plays, two or three of which have been staged, and an opera libretto.

Fresnay starred in the first feature Clouzot directed, L’Assassin habite au 21 (The Killer Lives at 21, 1942), based on a thriller by S.A. Steeman. Clouzot wrote his own scenario (as he generally did, often in collaboration with Jean Ferry or Jérôme Géronimi), and the result was found competent but unexceptional. It was followed by Le Corbeau (The Crow, 1943) which remains one of Clouzot’s finest films, though it almost ended his career. An absorbing mystery story about a poison-pen campaign, it is also a brilliant if malicious study of life in a small provincial town. Every one of the principal characters is shown to be tainted in some way by evil or corruption, and any one of them might be the dreaded Crow—a fact that is powerfully dramatized in the famous scene in which a swinging lamp alternately illuminates and darkens the faces of the suspects. In an interview with Paul Schrader Clouzot said that his films were always inspired by an image and cited Le Corbeau as an example. Years before, having fallen while skiing, he became aware of the way the shadows were moving back and forth over the snow and searched thereafter for a story in which he could use this strange visual effect.

Since Le Corbeau was made during the German occupation, it was produced perforce by the Nazi stooge company Continental. Goebbels thought he saw propaganda value in its
savage portrait of French decadence and distributed it widely in occupied Europe (where it was much admired). In fact the script—for once not written by Clouzot but by Louis Chavance—had been written before the war and was based on well-publicized events that had actually taken place in Tulle. After the Liberation, nevertheless, the military censors banned the film, and Clouzot was unable to work gain until 1947.

He reestablished his reputation with Quai des Orfèvres, based on another Steeman detective novel—the title refers to the French equivalent of Scotland Yard. The story centers on an unscrupulous young singer (Suzy Delair) and her devoted husband Maurice (Bernard Blier) who find themselves implicated in the murder of a rich old lecher. There is a Maigret-like detective, brilliantly played by Louis Jouvet at his most sardonic, and a script (by Clouzot and Jean Ferry) that is both witty and subtle (as in the scene where a statement given at the Quai des Orfèvres by the sensitive young husband’s seems quite false when it is translated into police jargon). The background of shabby police offices and seedy music-halls is captured with a haunting realism that owes a great deal to the skill of Clouzot’s favorite cameraman, Armand Thirard. Some critics were disturbed by the brutality of the film’s unblinking portrayal of the young husband’s suicide attempt, but Quai des Orfèvres received the Director’s Prize at the 1947 Venice Film Festival. Two years later Clouzot collected the Grand Prix for his next picture, Manon.

Clouzot based Manon on the Abbé Prévost’s classic novel, Manon Lescaut, but updated it as a harsh indictment or moral chaos in the aftermath of World War II. Manon, played by the sixteen-year-old Cécile Aubry, prostitutes herself and corrupts Robert, her young lover (Michel Auclair), turning a Resistance fighter into a blackmarketeer. She tells him that “nothing is disgusting when two people love each other: and their strange love is evidently real; when Robert, on the run for murder, joins the illegal Jewish immigration to Palestine, she unhesitatingly accompanies him and they go to their deaths in the desert. It seemed to Roy Armes that the “multiplicity of settings does in some way detract from the impact of the film, which is more diffuse and less gripping than most of Clouzot’s work.”

Miquette et sa mère (Miquette and Her Mother, 1949), adapted from a vaudeville farce, is a minor and unsatisfactory piece, in spite of a cast that includes Jouvet, Bourvil, and Danièle Delorme. Clouzot was married in 1950 and turned down several attractive assignments to go off with his young wife Véra to her native Brazil. They hoped to make a film—“La Voyage au Brésil”—which was to be an account of Clouzot’s discovery of that country. The project was never realized because of production difficulties, but Clouzot’s stay in Brazil was not wasted: he wrote a book about the country (Le Cheval des Dieux), and his two years there stood him in good stead when he came to build the sets and to create an appropriate atmosphere for his next picture.

This was Le Salaire de la Peur (The Wages of Fear, 1953), the most admired and profitable of all his films. It opens in a squalid little town in Central America, and the first half of the film introduces us to the European criminals, failures, and assorted riffraff who remain in this hellhole because they lack the means to move on. They are unexpectedly offered a chance of escape when the exploitative American oil company that owns the town discovers that it contains the nitroglycerin needed to extinguish an oil-well fire three hundred miles away. The only way that this highly volatile cargo can be transported is over the terrible local roads, and the oil company is prepared to pay four men two thousand dollars a head to attempt the journey in two trucks. Competition for this suicidal assignment is keen and indeed murderous, but the four are eventually selected and the journey begins.

This ordeal occupies the film’s remorselessly suspenseful second half. The nitroglycerin is liable to explode at the slightest jolt, and the road leads through swamps and jungles, over mountains and roving bridges. The fearless ex-Nazi Bimba (Peter Van Eyck) and the amiable Italian Luigi, apparently the most efficient team, are blown up when their success seems assured. The other two are both Frenchmen: Mario (Yves Montand) and Jo (Charles Vanel). Jo, the older man is at first the dominant member of the team, but he cracks under strains of the journey; roles are finally reversed when Mario (to save his own skin) drives the great truck over Jo’s leg. One of the rare glimpses of human warmth follows in the camaraderie that unexpectedly develops between the dying Jo and his murderer. Mario delivers the explosive, wins the reward and a hero’s welcome, but dies on the jubilant return journey when his truck crashes over a precipice, its sirens screaming in the wilderness over the end titles.

Clouzot disliked the uncertainty of location work, and The Wages of Fear was filmed mostly on sets constructed near Nîmes, cunningly photographed by Thirard. It received the Grand Prix at Cannes in 1953, but not before one French critic had called it “an atheistic film” and another had described it as a piece of communist propaganda—an attack on American capitalism disguised as an adventure film. What was almost universally agreed was that in its mastery of techniques of suspense, the picture was unsurpassed. John Weightman wrote that it depicted “a world of material necessity and pure appetites, roughly organized according to virile codes. But what are these codes but a futile gesture in the face of the unknown?...And it is a particularly fine touch, I think, to make the exhausted Mario, a temporary hero, stagger out of the lorry into the glare of the burning oil-well. The blaze represents the senseless energy of the universe, which man can harness in little ways—Mario’s achievement will allow the engineers to put out this particular fire—but which will reassert itself against man in the long run.” To Adam Garbicz and Jacek Klinowski, the film is the acme of French film noir, “a brilliant adventure thriller which combines Existentialist contexts with social criticism.”

The Wages of Fear represents the high point in Clouzot’s work. Les Diaboliques (The Fiends, 1955), was admired for the almost contemptuous skill with which the director manipulates, terrifies, and shocks his audience, but it provoked none of the serious philosophical discussion that greeted its predecessor (except that some critics angrily rejected the film’s unrelievedly
pessimistic view of human nature). It is set in a shabby provincial private school run by a sadistic bully (Paul Meurisse). Véra Clouzot, who had played a small part in The Wages of Fear, appears as the headmaster’s ailing wife, who is persuaded by his mistress (Simone Signoret) to join in a plot to murder him. The plan works, but the headmaster’s body disappears from the school swimming pool, and the mystery deepens after a boy claims to have seen the man alive. The twist at the end is truly shocking—both as a coupl de théâtre and as a revelation of human perfidy.

A very different kind of film followed. In Le Mystère Picasso (The Mystery of Picasso, 1956) we are allowed to watch Pablo Picasso in the act of creation, sketching and painting on a translucent screen, mugging amiably for the camera, exploring an idea, dropping it in favor of some new inspiration, retracing his steps, pressing forward to completion. This unique, technically adventurous, and life-affirming movie owes a great deal to the color photograph of Claude Renoir and to Georges Auric’s expressive music. Les Espions (The Spies, 1957) is by contrast a perfunctory thriller, uneasily mixing brutality and farce in an adaptation of a novel by Egon Hostovsky. Such interest as it has derives from Clouzot’s careful realization of the provincial town in which it is set and an international cast that includes Peter Ustinov, Curt Jurgens, Sam Jaffe, Martita Hunt, and Véra Clouzot.

Véra Clouzot was one of her husband’s several collaborators on the script of La Vérité (Truth, 1960), which, like Manon, is a not unsympathetic study of youthful amorality. Dominique (Brigitte Bardot) is on trial for the murder of her lover, but the truth comes out not in the professional histrionics of the rival advocates but in flashbacks that pointedly contrast their ringing moral certainties with Dominique’s shiftless world of Latin Quarter coffee bars. There are echoes here of the incomprehension with which Maurice’s statement was received by the police in Quai des Orfèvres, and the gulf between the establishment and its victims and rebels evidently engaged Clouzot deeply. All the same, his handling of the theme in La Vérité struck some critics as pedestrian and at times clumsy. The filming moreover was attended by scandal and eventually by tragedy. Both Véra Clouzot and Brigitte Bardot’s husband became ill, and gossips attributed this to a liaison between the star and the director (who denied that his influence over Bardot was anything other than professional and aesthetic). After a public brawl between her husband and her costar (Sami Frey), Bardot attempted suicide. Véra Clouzot died the same year, at the age of thirty-nine. Soon after Clouzot married Inez de Gonzales, an Argentinian thirty years his junior.

La Vérité was to be Clouzot’s last feature film for eight years. Ill health had already forced him to relinquish an earlier script, Si tous les gars du monde, to another director, Christian-Jaque. In 1964, after many months of preparation, Clouzot began filming “L’Enfer” (Hell), an ambitious study of jealousy which had to be abandoned a few days after shooting began when the director suffered a heart attack. Apart from some television films recording notable performances of such works as Verdi’s Requiem and Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony, he made no more pictures until La Prisonnière (The Prisoner) in 1967-1968. A story about a painter’s wife (Elisabeth Wiener) corrupted by a perverted photographer (Laurent Terzieff), it has been dubbed into English as Woman in Chains. The film had a moderately respectful reception, especially for the long nightmare sequence at the end, in which Clouzot experiments with a surreal montage of pop art and sexual symbols.

Clouzot was one of the New Wave’s principal targets in their campaign against their predecessors, and he made no more movies. Indeed he was everything the New Wave opposed—a meticulous director who prepared his work very carefully in advance and insisted on complete control over 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 then amiably informing him that this was exactly the effect that 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 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.”

Fiona Watson: Darkness Visible (Senses of Cinema). For the full article, with all its citations, go to http://archive.sensesofcinema.com/contents/directors/05/clouzot.html#10

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 sanatorium 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.” 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 Neubabelschlag 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 Inconnes dans la maison [1941]) and it was in Germany that he acquired a taste for the work of Fritz Lang, whose unfailing 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 Orfèves, 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 Orfèves has Maurice Martineau's (Bernard Blier) potentially murderous jealousy of his partner Marguerite Chauffonier (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 wife with Nicole (Simone Signoret); in La Vérité, Dominique (Brigitte Bardot) is driven to murder by Gilbert Tellier's (Samy 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 habité au 21

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 Wenceslas 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. Steeman 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 POVs 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.” 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.

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

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 Français (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.”

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 blowzy 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 Maitre – 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 Lescault, Manon

Leonard Mosely 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.” It's hard to disagree, especially since the central character seems little more then a sluttish opportunist, yet she has an almost likeable passion and zest for life. As Clouzot was himself, Manon is accused of 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.

Manon

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.”

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 snarling 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.” 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.” 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

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

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 heightened 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” (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 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.” 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”. 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

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.

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 an 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'?” 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”. 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.
COMING UP IN BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS XIV:
Feb 10 Jack Clayton THE INNOCENTS 1961
Feb 17 Akira Kurosawa HIGH AND LOW/TENGO KU TO JIGOKU 1963
Feb 24 Ján Kadar & Elmar Klos THE SHOP ON MAIN STREET/OBCHOD NA KORZE 1966
March 3 Jean-Pierre Melville LE CERCLE ROUGE 1970
March 17 Robert Altman, THE LONG GOODBYE, 1973
March 24 Andrei Tarkovsky: NOSTALGHIA 1983
March 31 Larisa Shepitko THE ASCENT/VOSKHOZHDENIYE 1977
April 7 Warren Beatty REDS 1981
April 14 32 SHORT FILMS ABOUT GLENN GOULD
April 21 Pedro Almodóvar ALL ABOUT MY MOTHER/TODO SOBRE MI MADRE 1999

3 X 3 @ AKAG
THURSDAY EVENINGS AT THE ALBRIGHT-KNOX

The Albright-Knox Art Gallery will present an international film series on Thursday evenings beginning in February 5. Entitled 3 X 3 @ AKAG, this new series is being organized and presented by University at Buffalo professors Bruce Jackson and Diane Christian and will feature three films by three distinguished international film directors each month: Jean Renoir (1894–1979) in February, Federico Fellini (1920–1993) in March, and Yasujirō Ozu (1903–1963) in April. Screenings are free with Gallery admission and will begin at 7:30 pm in the Gallery auditorium. Prior to the film each week, Jackson and Christian will introduce the film and briefly discuss the filmmaker’s career and historical influence. After the screening, they will join the audience in a discussion of the film, the filmmaker, and the impact of both on world cinema and other arts. The scheduled films are:

**FEBRUARY – FEATURED DIRECTOR: JEAN RENOIR**
February 5 – Grand Illusion, 1937
February 12 – La Bête Humaine, 1938

**MARCH – FEATURED DIRECTOR: FEDERICO FELLINI**
March 5 – I Vitelloni, 1953
March 19 – 8½, 1963
March 26 – Juliet of the Spirits, 1965

**APRIL – FEATURED DIRECTOR: YASUJIRÔ OZU**
April 9 – Late Spring, 1949
April 16 – Tokyo Story, 1953
April 23 – Floating Weeds, 1959

The series is a collaborative project between the Albright-Knox Art Gallery and the University at Buffalo and is supported, in part, by the UB Humanities Institute and the Capen Chair in American Culture.

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....for cast and crew info on any film: http://imdb.com/

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