

THE BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS

CONVERSATIONS ABOUT GREAT FILMS WITH BRUCE JACKSON & DIANE CHRISTIAN
PRESENTED BY THE UNIVERSITY AT BUFFALO AND THE MARKET ARCADE FILM AND
ARTS CENTER

OCTOBER 16, 2001 (IV:7):

THE WAGES OF FEAR/LE SALAIRE DE LA PEUR (1953)

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 milieux. *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 Vierge* (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.”

YVES MONTAND (Ivo Livi, 13 October 1921, Monsummano Alto, Tuscany, Italy—9 November 1991, Senlis, Oise, France, heart attack) appeared in 7 films before this one, but this one made him a star. He died while filming *IP5: L'île aux pachydermes* (1992). “After his anti-fascist parents fled his homeland to avoid the wrath of Mussolini,” wrote Hal Ericks in *All Movie Guide*, “Montand grew up in the less fashionable sections of Marseilles, where he supported himself as a dock worker. He was discovered in 1944 by singer Edith Piaf, the first of Montand's many celebrity lovers. After working in Piaf's nightclub act and appearing with her in the 1946 film *Star Without Light*, Montand gained stature as a solo actor/singer, proving his dramatic mettle in Georges Clouzot's *The Wages of Fear* (1955). In 1951, Montand married actress Simone Signoret, a union that lasted until her death in 1985. Though he tended to keep his leftist politics out of his public appearances during the first half of his career, Montand was finally able to espouse his views in films via his many performances in the works of director Costa-Gavras, particularly *Z* (1968), *The Confession* (1970) and *State of Siege* (1973). The actor enjoyed a career renaissance as a character player in the 1980s. Universally honored as one of the greatest entertainers of his era (an assessment with which he heartily concurred), Yves Montand died

LE SALAIRE DE LA PEUR (1953, ~141 minutes)

Yves Montand Mario
Charles Vanel Jo
Peter van Eyck.... Bimba
Antonio Centa Camp Chief
Luis De Lima Bernardo
Jo Dest Smerloff
Dar o Moreno Hernandez
William Tubbs Bill O'Brien
V ra Clouzot Linda
Folco Lulli Luigi

Directed by **Henri-Georges Clouzot**
Written by **Henri-Georges Clouzot**
and **J r me G ronimi**

Based on the novel by **Georges Arnaud**

Produced by **Henri-Georges Clouzot**
and **Louis Wipf**

Original music by **Georges Auric**
Cinematographer **Armand Thirard**
Film Editors **Madeleine Gug,**
Etiennette Muse and **Henri Rust**

Production Companies: CICC,
Filmsonor [fr], Fono Roma [it], Vera
Films

at age 70, a scant few years after becoming a father for the first time." Some of his other films were *Manon des sources* 1986 (*Manon of the Spring*), *Paris br le-t-il?* (1966, *Is Paris Burning?*), *La Guerre est finie* (1966, *The War is Over*), *Le Joli mai* (1963) and *Sanctuary* (1961, an adaptation of Faulkner's novel in which he plays Candy, the Popeye character, who winds up marrying Temple Drake. If you know the novel you know what I'm thinking and if you don't, it's too silly to explain.)

CHARLES VANEL (21 August 1892, Rennes, Ille-et-Vilaine, France—15 April 1989, Cannes, Alpes-Maritimes, France) was "An actor from the age of 16, when he appeared in a Parisian production of *Hamlet*, Charles Vanel made his screen bow in the 1912 film *Jim Crow*. He would eventually enjoy the longest movie career of any French actor, toting up well over 200 starring appearances. He was frequently seen in the films of screenwriter Jacques de Baroncelli; he also turned director on two occasions, helming 1929's *Dans la Nuit* and 1935's *Le Coup de Minuit*. His popularity diminished during the war years, but he was able to stage a comeback as a member of director Henri-Georges Clouzot's 'stock company'. He made only one appearance in a Hollywood production, playing a key role in Hitchcock's *To Catch a Thief*. The recipient of a lifetime achievement award at the 1970 Cannes Film Festival, Charles Vanel retired in 1982, only to making another wholly unexpected comeback at the age of 85." Hal Erickson, *All Movie Guide*

PETER VAN EYCK (Götz von Eick, 16 July 1911, Steinwehr, Pommern, Germany—15 July 1969, Zurich, Switzerland, (blood infection) last appeared as a German general in *The Bridge at Remagen* 1969. He was, wrote Leonard Maltin, "The very epitome of the Teutonic-Terror type, Van Eyck started playing Nazis on-screen in 1943—the year he became an American citizen. A former musician who'd left his native land when Hitler came to power in the early 1930s, he was familiar to American moviegoers throughout the war years, and then afterward to international audiences in a plethora of films made on both sides of the Atlantic. Van Eyck was most effective (even when not playing Nazis) as cold-blooded, impassive heavies. Among his more notable performances: as one of the drivers of the nitro-filled trucks in *The Wages of Fear* (1952), the reincarnated villain in Fritz Lang's remake of his own 1932 classic *The Thousand Eyes of Dr. Mabuse*

(1960), and in the leading role of *The Brain* (1965), a surprisingly good remake of *Donovan's Brain*." Some of his other films are *Action in the North Atlantic* 1943, *The Desert Fox* 1951, *Night People* 1954, *Tarzan's Hidden Jungle* 1955, *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold* 1965, and *Shalako* 1968.

V RA CLOUZOT (c. 1914, Brazil—15 December 1960, Paris) appeared in only two other films, both directed by her husband: *Les Espions* 1957 and *Les Diaboliques* 1955.

ARMAND THIRARD (25 October 1899, Mantes, Yvelines, France—12 November 1973, Colombes, Hauts-de-Seine, France) photographed more than a hundred films, beginning with *L'Homme l'hispano* (1926) and ending with *Le Cerveau* (1969 *The Brain*). Only a few of his films are well known in the US, most notably, *...And God Created Woman* (1956) and *Les Diaboliques*.

FRAN OIS TRUFFAUT (*Correspondence 1945-1984*. Ed. By Gilles Jacob & Claude de Givray, Farrar, Straus & Giroux NY 1990):

They ought to give a medal to that guy who's got the courage to tell real stories with characters, twists and turns and last-minute reversals. Now, I don't envisage putting my finger in this particular pie, as I'm incapable of filming power relationships between men. Perhaps because I was an only son. . . Thanks to that, I enjoy watching them and adore Clouzot's films."

JOHN SIMON (*Reverse Angle A Decade of American Films*. NY 1982. Crown):

"It requires enormous arrogance to remake a classic film like Henri-Georges Clouzot's *The Wages of Fear* (1953), which in its own melodramatic way was quite brilliant, as a specimen of gross and unintelligent commercialism, and then dedicate it to the memory of Clouzot. But that is precisely what William Friedkin has done, and, by way of further dishonesty, he entitled the whole mess *Sorcerer*, after the name painted on a truck, so that the gullible folk who fell for *The Exorcist* should fall farther yet into believing this to be a sequel to that egregious piece of goods.

A genuine tribute to Clouzot would be the re-release of his film in the uncut version, never shown commercially in this country. Based on a novel by Georges Arnaud, this was, first of all, an impassioned indictment of strangulating poverty in a Latin American country fostered by the collusion of United States business interests and domestic dictatorship. Out of this arose the story of four desperate men who undertake to convey a hypersensitive shipment of nitroglycerin in two battered trucks across impossible terrain in return for money to get them out of the country. The film was a banner achievement in atmosphere and suspense, and, in the light of subsequent history—in Chile, for instance—would have added meaning for the present time.

JAMES BERARDINELLI (review):

Legendary filmmaker Henri-Georges Clouzot has often been referred to as the "French Hitchcock." Indeed, Clouzot is best known for his 1955 movie, *Diabolique*, which is widely regarded as one of the most surprising and disturbing psychological thrillers of all time. (Hitchcock reportedly made *Psycho* in an attempt to top *Diabolique*.) Yet, as chilling and effective as *Diabolique* is, it stands a small notch down from Clouzot's 1953 effort, *Wages of Fear*. Based on the novel by Georges Arnaud, *Wages of Fear* is the kind of motion picture for which commonplace phrases like "white-knuckle tension ride" have been coined....

Even though Clouzot's name has often been linked to Hitchcock's (the two were intense rivals), *Wages of Fear* arguably has as much synergy with John Huston's *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* as with anything penned or directed by the universally renowned master of suspense. Although there is a psychological element to *Wages of Fear*, this is primarily a visceral thriller. It's aimed more at the pit of the stomach than at the head. To be sure, the film has a smart, savvy script and Clouzot toys with a variety of thematic material, but, in the end, the purpose of *Wages of Fear* is to keep viewers on the edges of their seats. And the mechanism for this is constantly building tension, not unexpected plot twists or contortions.

When Clouzot made *Wages of Fear* in 1953, he had already developed an international reputation, although his world-wide fame was not yet what it would become with the release of *Diabolique*. In addition to his suspense films, Clouzot is also remembered for 1956's *The Mystery of Picasso*, a documentary that depicts Pablo Picasso painting for the camera and explaining the creative process. Nevertheless, even though French film critic-turned-director Jean-Luc Godard praised *The Mystery of Picasso* while summarily dismissing the rest of Clouzot's work, films like *Diabolique* and *Wages of Fear* have unquestionably stood the test of time. In fact, both have been re-made.

When *Wages of Fear* was initially released in the '50s, certain "anti-American" scenes were cut from U.S. versions of the print. The movie portrays an American oil company (modeled after Standard Oil) as being ruthless, amoral, and money-grubbing. The corporation hires four down-on-their-luck individuals to transport the nitroglycerine because, if the men don't make it, no one will miss them and there will be no messy union problems. It's important to note that Clouzot does not openly criticize Americans or the American lifestyle (something that would have been risky less than a decade after the end of World War II), but American big business practices.

Watching a restored version of the film nearly 50 years later, this aspect seems neither offensive nor hard-hitting; in fact, if anything, it adds to *Wages of Fear's* believability. And, by today's standards, Clouzot's approach is barely tough enough to be considered cynical. Recent movies like *Erin Brockovich* have made *Wages of Fear* look like a soft peddler of similar issues.

...There are those who would argue that the setup runs too long, but a careful examination of the first hour indicates how important it is to the success of the rest of the film. In order for the journey to be more than a meaningless string of action/adventure set pieces, we need the grounding that the Las Piedras scenes provide. And, for the transposition of Jo and Mario's relative positions to have any meaning, it's necessary to provide the audience with the foundation of their relationship. Plus, from the simple perspective of atmosphere building and character development, Clouzot shows great economy in what he accomplishes in only 60 minutes.

Ultimately, we come to understand the characters and their relationships, but Clouzot doesn't invite us to respect or sympathize with them. They are, after all, risking their lives for nothing more worthwhile than money. They are courageous, but for all the wrong reasons, and this is behavior that Clouzot does not find noble. Today, when movies often display greed as one of the primary motivators of human activity, the idea of four men wagering life against money is not shocking or dishonorable. But, in the wake of World War II, when so many lives had been lost for a cause, it was a different matter.

It has been said that all French movies must have subtexts, and if that's an unwritten rule, then Clouzot does not violate it. *Wages of Fear* has an existential viewpoint that sees Fate as a joker and Death as a force that respects neither age, health, morality, nor bravery. The Grim Reaper hangs over each of the four protagonists throughout the entire film, and there is a sense that one can

only challenge Death so many times before He picks up the gauntlet. The final scene hammers home Clouzot's point with forceful, biting irony. (This is the kind of ending that could never be seen in a modern-day Hollywood release because it would anger audiences by violating their comfort level.)

Wages of Fear has influenced movies as diverse as *The Wild Bunch* and *Speed*. William Friedkin, the respected director of *The French Connection* and *The Exorcist*, remade *Wages of Fear* in the mid-'70s under the unlikely name of *Sorcerer* (with Roy Scheider headlining an international cast, and most of the filming done on location). As far as remakes go, this one is exceptionally well-made, although more attention is paid to the technical aspects of the production than to character interaction. Released in 1977, shortly after Clouzot's death, *Sorcerer* was dedicated to the man who initially brought the story to the screen.

Wages of Fear made Yves Montand into a viable dramatic leading man. Before Clouzot cast him as Mario, Montand was known primarily as a singer/dancer, but *Wages of Fear* afforded him the opportunity to display a greater range. His performance is not deep, but he has the rugged good looks and the screen presence to place Mario in the forefront. In the wake of this movie, Montand went on to have a long and successful motion picture career which was capped off by numerous critical plaudits for his work in *Jean de Florette*.

The real acting star is veteran Charles Vanel, who invests Jo with a complexity not apparent in any of the other three leads. Vanel, who appeared in more than 100 films between the 1920s and the 1980s, plays both halves of Jo - the cool gangster and the fearful coward - with equal aplomb, and makes the transformation believable. His performance in *Wages of Fear* earned him an award at the 1953 Cannes Film Festival. Vanel would work three more times with Clouzot, as Inspector Fichet in *Diabolique*, then later in 1960's *The Truth* and 1968's *Female Prisoner* (Clouzot's last feature).

Throughout the past five decades, *Wages of Fear* has been available in several different cuts, from the full, 144-minute edition to the selectively trimmed American release. Without exception, each version has been hailed by critics for its style, depth, and power to thrill. Even Hitchcock, at the height of his powers, was hard-pressed to duplicate

the one-two punch of Clouzot's *Wages of Fear* and *Diabolique*. *Wages of Fear* is available on home video (including an excellent DVD transfer by Criterion), but, given the opportunity, this is a movie to be seen on a large screen. There, the mastery of composition and breathless excitement come most vividly to life.

ROGER EBERT (review 3/6/92): One thing that establishes "The Wages of Fear" as a film from the early 1950s, and not from today, is its attitude toward happy endings. Modern Hollywood thrillers cannot end in tragedy for its heroes, because the studios won't allow it. "The Wages of Fear" is completely free to let anything happen to any of its characters, and if all four are not dead when the nitro reaches the blazing oil well, it may be because Clouzot is even more deeply ironic than we expect. The last scene, where a homebound truck is intercut with a celebration while a Strauss waltz plays on the radio, is a reminder of how much Hollywood has traded away by insisting on the childishness of the obligatory happy ending.

MOVIES, MOVIES, MOVIES

Join us next week for Robert Mitchum, Shelley Winters, and Lillian Gish in Charles Laughton's masterpiece of suspense, *Night of the Hunter* (1955). Roger Ebert calls this "One of the greatest of all American films" and Tim Dirks says it is "a truly compelling and terrifying masterpiece thriller." It's the only film the great Charles Laughton ever directed. He wrote it too, though James Agee got the sole screenwriting credit. Selected for the National Film Registry.

HELP WANTED FOR SPRING '02

We're planning the spring 2002 series of Buffalo Film Seminars, our fifth group of great movies. We'll begin with another silent classic, Monta Bell's *Man, Woman and Sin* (1927), starring John Gilbert and Jeanne Eagels, and, as is now our tradition, we'll have live musical accompaniment. Some of the other films we're thinking about are Stanley Kubrick's *Barry Lyndon*, Jim Jarmusch's *Dead Man*, John Boorman's *Point Blank*, John Mackenzie's *The Long Good Friday* (you think *Rocky* has a memorable meatlocker scene?), and a double-bill consisting of F.W. Murnau's *Nosferatu* and E. Elias Merhige's *Shadow of the Vampire* (why didn't we schedule that toothy duet for October 30? Because Jen Lam only suggested it two days ago). None of those is definite yet because we won't pick any until we've looked through a long list and found a group of 14 films that work well in concert. For that, we ask your help. Please let us know the titles of films you'd like to see in Buffalo Film Seminars V. Eight of the films in the current series were suggested by members of the BFS audience. (Go to the BFS website for a complete list of films shown since we began in spring 2000.)

AN ALTERNATIVE TO BURLY GUYS IN FLASHY COLORS....

You think you're going to be transported to emotional plateaus watching burly guys in flashy colors run around and bump into one another for two hours? There's better stuff going on at the Market Arcade Sunday afternoon. And you can watch the burly guys bump Monday night. Every Sunday at 3:00 p.m., the Market Arcade offers a different great film in its Sunday Classics series, curated by M. Faust. Next Sunday it's Catherine Deneuve in Jacques's Demy's delightful musical love story *Umbrellas of Cherbourg*. For a complete schedule with descriptions of each film visit the Sunday Classics web site:

<http://www.sundayclassics.com>.

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