



**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

#### Cast

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

**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 filmmakers of the postwar period. Clouzot's early activities were devoted to writing. After an early short (*La Terreur 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,



championed as an anti-Gestapo drama by Jean Cocteau and Jean Paul Sartre” (*Irish Times*). Clouzot resumed filmmaking 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 filmmaker 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.”

**NICOLAS HAYER** (Lucien-Nicolas Hayer, May 1, 1898 in Paris, France—d. October 29, 1978 in Saint-Laurent-

du-Var, Alpes-Maritimes, France) was the cinematographer for 92 films and TV shows, including 1964-1968 “Les cinq dernières minutes” (TV Series), 1966 “Anatole” (TV Movie), 1962 *Le Doulos*, 1962 *Dark Journey*, 1959 *The Sign of Leo*, 1959 *Two Men in Manhattan*, 1959 *The Little Professor*, 1957 *This Pretty World*, 1956 *Man and Child*, 1956 *Fidelio*, 1956 *Don Juan*, 1955 *Bel Ami*, 1954 *Hungarian Rhapsody*, 1953 *The Night Is Ours*, 1952 *The Little World of Don Camillo*, 1951 *Under the Paris Sky*, 1950 *A Man Walks in the City*, 1950 *Orpheus*, 1949 *Au grand balcon*, 1949 *Between Eleven and Midnight*, 1948 *La Chartreuse de Parme*, 1947 *Bethsabée*, 1946 *Panic*, 1945 *Girl with Grey Eyes*, 1943 *Le Corbeau: The Raven*, 1942 *L'âge d'or*, 1939 *Satan's Paradise*, 1939 *Sacred Woods*, 1939 *L'étrange nuit de Noël*, 1939 *Métropolitain*, 1938 *Golden Venus*, 1937 *Ma petite marquise*, 1937 *Double Crime in the Maginot Line*, 1936 *Heritage*, 1934 *Cartouche*, 1932 *Chair ardente*, 1932 *Riri et Nono chez les pursang* (Short).

**PIERRE FRESNAY** (b. Pierre Jules Louis Laudembach April 4, 1897, Paris, France—d. January 9, 1975, Neuilly-sur-Seine, Hauts-de-Seine, Île-de-France, France) acted in 83 titles, including 1973 “Le jardinier,” 1973 “Les écrivains,” 1971 “Père,” 1960 *The Thousandth Window*, 1959 *Les affreux*, 1957 *A Bomb for a Dictator*, 1955 *The Aristocrats*, 1955 *The Fugitives*, 1952 *Dr. Schweitzer*, 1949 *Just Out*, 1949 *Barry*, 1947 *Monsieur Vincent*, 1943 *Le Corbeau: The Raven*, 1942 *The Murderer Lives at Number 21*, 1938 *Three Waltzes*, 1937 *La bataille silencieuse*, 1937 *La Grande Illusion*, 1937 *Mademoiselle Docteur*, 1936 *César*, 1936 *Under Western Eyes*, 1934 *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, 1934 *La dame aux camélias*, 1932 *Fanny*, 1931 *Marius*, 1923 *Le petit Jacques*, 1922 *Mysteries of Paris*, 1921 *L'essor*, and 1916 *Quand meme*.

**GINETTE LECLERC** (b. February 9, 1912 – January 2, 1992) was a French film actress who appeared in nearly 90 films between 1932 and 1978. Her last TV appearance was in 1981. She is possibly best remembered for her roles in such films as *Le Corbeau* 1943, *The Baker's Wife* 1938, *Cab Number 13* 1948, and *Tropic of Cancer* 1970. She also acted on stage, including performances in Jean-Paul Sartre’s *No Exit*. “Many of her films were crime dramas, and she once described herself as the most murdered woman in French cinema. She continued to act during the German occupation in World War II. This prompted charges of

collaboration, and after the Allies liberated France, she was briefly imprisoned and banned from working for several months” (AP).



**“Clouzot, Henri-Georges” from *World Film Directors, V. I.* Ed. John Wakeman. The H.W. Wilson Co., NY, 1987. Entry by Kinstantin Bazarov.**

French director, and dramatist, was born in Niort (Deux-Sèvres) in the west of France. In his teens he entered the 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 Geronimi), 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 again 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 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 rotting 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 *coup 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 trail 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 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."



**Alan Williams: "Le Corbeau" (*Criterion Essays*, 2004)**

For most of its history, French cinema has undergone periodic upheavals characterized by massive changes in many areas—personnel, economics, typical

film style and content, and so on. The German occupation resulted in perhaps the most striking of these points of rupture. In personnel, some men and women retired or changed professions rather than work under fascist rule, while many others were cast out because of their “non-Aryan” origins. New people entered the industry or moved up in its hierarchy to fill the void; not surprisingly, they had some of the biggest problems during the “purification” that followed. While most filmmakers accused of collaboration with the enemy escaped with only public reprimands, a few received more extreme sanctions, including being banned from the industry for a period of up to several years. Henri-Georges Clouzot, director of *Le Corbeau*, was one such filmmaker; the



occupation brought him a long-term contract as a writer (and later as a writer and director) for Continental-Films, the notorious German-controlled, vertically integrated “major” that was the dominant force in the era’s cinematic production.

Continental’s head, Alfred Greven, seems to have thought of the company as a European version of MGM, with himself as an Aryan version of Louis B. Mayer. Though his brief from propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels ordered him to produce mindless trash for the French public, Greven wanted to make “quality” works of the sort typical of Hollywood studios, including some films of real artistic ambition. One of Continental’s specialties was the detective film, generally with a light, even comic tone. Many of these films starred Pierre Fresnay, the company’s biggest star, who, until *Le Corbeau*, often played detectives whose screen image was close to that of William Powell at MGM. Clouzot’s first film as a director for Continental, *L’Assassin habite au 21* (*The Murderer Lives at Number 21*, 1942), was one of these—a stylish mystery solved by Fresnay as a police inspector and Suzy Delair as his mistress (a very French variant on the MGM *Thin Man* series’ husband-and-wife team). In this comparatively conventional work, Clouzot already sought to go beyond the superficiality of the studio formula; the film has several disorienting scenes of virtuoso cinematic paranoia. In *Le Corbeau*, he went

much further, taking the standard ingredients of the Continental-Films detective movies and using them to make something darker and more complex—to make, in fact, the first classic French *film noir*.

Though the label *film noir* didn’t yet exist (it would be a postwar French invention), *Le Corbeau* is decidedly *noir* in its vision of the world. And though

none of the film’s individual stylistic and generic elements was new (most had surfaced in the “poetic realist” films of the late 1930s), Clouzot and screenwriter Louis Chavance’s specific combination of them was.

Much of the film’s style and content will be readily familiar to *noir* lovers everywhere. Though—unlike later examples of the genre—*Le Corbeau* has

comparatively few scenes set at night, this doesn’t prevent Clouzot from exploiting hard-edged compositions featuring stark contrasts between light and darkness (the last shot, for example, of the black figure going down the sunny street), dramatically exaggerated shadows (Vorzet’s figure on the stairway wall tips its hat to Germain and says good night), and even, at one dramatic high point, a bare light bulb swinging freely in a dark room—not, however, a police station or a cheap hotel, but a school classroom. Such *noir* elements are coupled in *Le Corbeau* with traits characteristic of works made under the occupation: the small town in the provinces, virtually cut off from the outside and serving as a microcosm of human society; the remarkable passages of subjective sound mixing; striking images of immobility, as when the congregation sits transfixed while a letter drops through a silent church.

Other aspects of the film are not so much specific to either the (nascent) genre nor to the occupation period, but rather to the director’s own ethos. Perhaps the most remarkable of these is the work’s sense of humor, covert though it may be in most instances. Although not calculated to produce outright laughter, amusing moments abound (sometimes bitterly, even despairingly funny ones). Witness Dr. Vorzet’s comments on psychiatrists’ conventions, or the dictation in the schoolroom (a droll, if rather nasty, parody of one of the mainstays of French educational practice), and,

above all, the texts of the anonymous letters that provide the film's mystery plot ("Give my regards to the Eternal Father," ends the one to the dying cancer patient). A major source of humor is the loving attention Clouzot and Chavance give to the French class system. The bourgeoisie (primarily, the doctors) come in for the most ribbing, of course, but the petite bourgeoisie (the hypocritical shopkeeper who won't let her daughter see Dr. Germain) and the lower classes (the worker who doffs his hat at the funeral procession) fare little better.

But probably the most unusual aspect of the film, generically, historically, and in the context of Clouzot's work, is the way in which it stages a properly philosophical debate about the effects of the German occupation. For clearly, as many observers have noted, the anonymous letters that plague the town of St. Robin create a situation much like that of France under the occupation. Dr. Vorzet makes this parallel all but explicit when he speaks of the corruption of moral values brought on by the letters. For example, he says Dr. Germain will spy on his mistress if he gets the chance, and he is almost immediately proved right. But this point of view is only one of two competing ideas in the film about what is happening in the town (and, by extension, in France under the occupation). In opposition to the psychiatrist Vorzet, the brain surgeon Germain says that "sometimes, evil is necessary," and that he, and presumably others in the town, will emerge from the ordeal stronger, even better. He also is proven right when he manages, near the end of the ordeal, to break out of his bitter isolation.

Those who have denounced the film as nihilistic have assumed that it endorses the Vorzet position, conveniently forgetting that the conclusion discredits him completely, even though he has been telling "the truth" throughout. But Germain fares little better: not only does he succumb to the moral corruption around him, as Vorzet predicted, he also fails to solve the mystery. And so, oddly enough, the film may be read as implicitly rejecting both Germain and Vorzet's views of the letters, and hence the occupation. Instead, *Le Corbeau* puts its faith in women—not all women, by any means, but those who have suffered (like Denise, from her deformity, and the cancer patient's mother, from the death of her son). This is a work, after all, in which the first people we see are old women grieving, and the last image is of the avenging mother walking away down the street. In this respect, too, *Le Corbeau* is very much a film of its time, a period when the very size of women's roles, their symbolic weight, and their moral significance were much greater

than they had been before, or would be for some time afterwards. It seems doubtful that Clouzot, the French cinema's great misanthrope, would have consciously held that Suffering Womanhood represented a viable moral or philosophical alternative to the positions of Vorzet and Germain. Probably his covert appeal to women as figures of both knowledge and redemption represented, as it did for so many filmmakers during the occupation, an almost visceral grasping for light in the darkness, and for hope at a time of deepest despair.



### Daniel Witkin: "The Nazi-Era Thriller That Got Its Director Banned From Filmmaking" (*Forward*, 2018)

Among its various achievements, the 1943 thriller "[Le Corbeau](#)" (or "[The Raven](#)") earned its director, Henri-Georges Clouzot, a lifetime ban from filmmaking. Clouzot had made his caustic movie during the height of the Nazi occupation of France for a German-controlled production company called Continental Films, which had been created by Joseph Goebbels to pacify French audiences with a series of films to be "lightweight, empty and, if possible, stupid."

"Le Corbeau" was, decidedly, none of the above, but despite its significant commercial success, everyone from the French communists to the Gestapo decried the film. After the war, the Gaullist government declared it "anti-French" and slapped Clouzot with a lifetime exile from filmmaking. Owing to the protests of prominent artists and intellectuals including Jean-Paul Sartre and Jean Cocteau as well as the moderating effects of passing time, the sentence was reduced to two years, with the future director of "[The Wages of Fear](#)" and "[Les Diaboliques](#)" receiving a stay of execution, really, without exoneration, vindication, or catharsis.

This befits the tenor of the film, in which no character emerges as entirely good or evil, innocent or guilty. Though the backlash against "Le Corbeau" certainly seems unjustified in retrospect, Clouzot himself was not exactly an irreproachable victim. He accepted a job as the head of the script department at Continental, whose German head Alfred Greven had retained some degree of artistic ambition, a promising

though tainted gig that put Clouzot in position to direct his successful first feature, the comic thriller “The Murderer Lives at No. 21” (1942) and then “Le Corbeau.” An understandable decision if not exactly an inspiring one, it was the sort of murky, pragmatic compromise that the inhabitants of occupied Europe contended with on an everyday basis.

“Le Corbeau” opens onto the sunny French small town of St. Robin, replete with a quaint chapel and cows milling about in an idyllic field, but most of the film takes place in stark shades of gray. Clouzot and his cinematographer Nicolas Hayer, who would later work with Cocteau and Jean-Pierre Melville, cast their characters in layers of darkness, obscuring their true natures and intentions. Although the term had yet to be invented, we’re in the realm of film noir, a moniker coined by Clouzot’s countrymen to retrospectively describe American crime films reflecting a sensibility darkened by the war and featuring chiaroscuro stylings courtesy of a wave of immigrant technicians, largely from Central Europe. With its angular, expressionist shadows and blatantly psychological use of light, “Le Corbeau” feels almost, well, German.

The eponymous Raven is an anonymous author of poison pen letters professing to expose the secrets of St. Robin’s citizens, specifically targeting our hero, handsome village physician Dr. Germain (Pierre Fresnay). Specifically, Germain’s penemy accuses him of performing abortions and carrying out an affair with Laura (Micheline Francey), a comely social worker, whose older psychologist husband Dr. Vorzet nonetheless assists Germain with avuncular cheer. As the letters start to have real consequences, the townspeople attempt to hunt down the mysterious writer, but also start to consider getting rid of Germain as an equally effective and certainly easier alternative to actually finding the culprit. In the meantime, everyone remains a suspect, from the limping beauty (Ginette Leclerc) in the neighboring flat who seduces our protagonist to Laura’s spinsterish sister, a notably unfriendly nurse (Hélène Manson). Even the 14-year old

girl who lives in Germain’s building finds is not above suspicion.

As a portrait of the town and, by extension, a society, the film is decidedly unflattering. Small town French life is revealed to contain everything from abortion to adultery, atheism to drug trafficking. Even the sanctity of the postal service is violated. And yet film finds the moral shortcomings of the characters elsewhere, their true vices emerging as pettiness and cowardice, dishonesty and an amorphous yet vicious persecutory streak.

Because of this, “Le Corbeau” has garnered the reputation of being a rather misanthropic film. Despite the severity of its vision, however, it’s not necessarily lacking in sympathy. Rather, as the perspective moves amongst the wide array of characters, the film’s sympathies continuously shift as well. Suspected of being the Raven, Manson’s nurse flees through the town’s medieval streets, her nunnish uniform unfolding in the wind like damning wings, while Leclerc’s embittered floozy may have some wisdom of her own to impart to the good doctor. The cumulative effect is emotionally dizzying, and imparts a sort of wariness, a foreboding sense of inevitable betrayal. This extends to Germain, our hero, handsome and principled, who nonetheless doesn’t seem to treat people very well. As his apollonian struggle for the truth intensifies and his sense of victimization increases, he begins to come off as inflexible, judgmental, cold. In the midst of a heated argument, his lover categorizes him as “what’s most dismal and alien in life: A bourgeois.”

Owing to its preoccupation with large-scale social dynamics, “Le Corbeau” makes for an attractive and flexible allegory. First and foremost, there’s the film’s relationship to its own time and place. Though the occupation is carefully excluded from the film, it speaks powerfully to its moment, when neighbors would anonymously write to the Gestapo accusing each other of being Jews, communists, or members of some other persecuted or subversive group. Similarly, it’s not difficult to see echoes of its paranoia and cynicism in other excesses of midcentury state power, from the Stalinist terror to the anti-Communist crusades of US Senator Joseph McCarthy.





As history circles back on itself, as it disconcertingly is wont to do, “Le Corbeau” can be made to speak to our time as well. The informers of Clouzot’s era are of a piece with the ICE collaborators of our own, which is to say, unspeakable. More broadly, the film eerily captures the sense of universal persecution that has taken hold across much of society, in which the most powerful man in the country declares himself to be the object of a witch-hunt. The dynamics it depicts are also somewhat reminiscent of what’s come to be known as the “call-out culture,” which everyone seems to agree is certainly not ideal, but which not unjustifiably tends to inspire more ambivalence on a case-by-case basis. After all, it tends to be a better look, as a rule, to stand on the side of the accusers than with the accused.

“Le Corbeau” lacks villains on the scale of a Trump, Stalin, or Pétain. Instead its subjects are people who, without exactly covering themselves in glory, make it from one day to the next. As such, it speaks both to its own context and ours, as well as any other time and place in which such people constitute the clear majority – in all likelihood, all of them. In such a grey and shadowy world, the resolution we desire is usually elusive. As such, even when the Raven is finally unmasked, a fair order is not quite restored; and denied the real thing, both the townspeople and the audience will have to make do with a simulacrum of justice.



**Tony Williams: “Le Corbeau” (Senses of Cinema 2011)**

As Alan Williams notes, “*Le Corbeau* is an essential work for world film history, if only because its meanings are still being debated” (1). Filmed during the Occupation by the German controlled Continental Films Company, whose head likened himself to an Aryan

version of Louis B. Mayer, the unit sought to make quality films rather than Gallic versions of the “mindless entertainment” Goebbels envisaged for the French market. Henri-Georges Clouzot’s first film for this company, *L’Assassin habite au 21* (1942) was a French variant on the MGM “Thin Man” series starring Pierre Fresnay, combining cinematic lighting associated with now unavailable MGM and Paramount Hollywood films with visual elements foreshadowing post-war French film noir seen in Marcel Carné and Jacques Prevert’s *Les Portes de la nuit* (1946). Unsurprisingly, Williams describes *Le Corbeau* as “the first classic French film noir” (2).

During and after its release, *Le Corbeau* managed to offend both the Left and Right. Attacked by the Resistance for its demeaning portrayal of the French character and by Vichy critics for undermining family life, Catholic values, and the sanctity of marriage, Clouzot and leading actors Pierre Fresnay and Ginette Leclerc fell victim to the postwar cultural cleansing of the *épuration* purge organised by the Comité de libération du cinéma français (3). While the actors suffered brief terms of imprisonment, Clouzot was initially banned from the profession. Debate over Clouzot’s supposed guilt raged during 1947 in correspondence between Henri Jeanson and resistance hero Joseph Kessel, author of *L’Armée des ombres* (Jean-Pierre’s Melville film version was released in 1969) (4). It continues today in articles by critics either condemning the film for its Fascist tendencies or noting subversive motifs that escaped Occupation censorship (5).

As Evelyn Ehrlich recognises, the issue of whether Occupation films may be read as either pro-Vichy (unless they are blatantly propagandist) or pro-Resistance is highly problematic. Direct causal connections are impossible to detect and directors often hid behind the formal beauty of their *mise-en-scene* and the elegant construction of their screenplays as if to draw a curtain between their ideas and anyone in the audience who might be offended by those ideas. Censorship did not determine the new styles and subjects that emerged in the 1940s; rather it helped promote a tendency that was already gaining currency. (6)

This stylistic tendency not only characterised the “cinema of quality” that became the “bête noire” of the 1950s *Cahiers du Cinéma* critics but also an Occupation filmic aesthetic that Edward Baron Turk defines as involving “static pictorialism and psychological regression”, as seen in Marcel Carné’s *Les Visiteurs du*

*soir* [1942])” (7). However, although “psychological regression” appears in *Le Corbeau*, articulated according to non-Aryan values of Freudian discourse, the film itself does not display the static pictorialism of many Occupation productions. Instead, *Le Corbeau* offers a mixture of cinematic styles ranging from appropriated classical MGM and Paramount Hollywood-style cinematography to elements of German Expressionism and proto-French film noir. Williams describes conflicting visual styles in *Le Corbeau* involving camera movement and the depiction of the look between characters almost “as if there is a constant war going on to control the visual field, between the film’s unseen narrator and its characters” (8). This is an appropriate definition for a film involving surveillance, suspicion, and paranoia within occupied territory. No need exists to depict either Germans or Vichy authorities. They exist outside a text containing its own version of surveillance, one involving tensions that destabilise those who think they are in control.

The film’s visual style and characterisation are crucial towards understanding that

ambiguity may not be a convenient cloak behind which director and screenwriter chose to hide but essential to depicting the complex nature of existence within an occupied country and how this may affect its inhabitants. Ehrlich notes that despite the fact that *Le Corbeau* was the most controversial film of this time its style resembled the dominant contemporary trend: “The film’s atmosphere, its sense of self-enclosure and isolation from the world are typical of the ‘isolationist’ tendency of the French school.” (9) Yet, this enclosure may be part of the film’s critical interrogation.

Unlike *Les Visteurs du soir*, *Le Corbeau* is characterised by its use of a mobile camera presenting the viewer with an opportunity for a flexible mode of spectatorship denied to the fictional characters. Beginning with the caption, “A small town, here and everywhere”, it opens with a long shot before the camera pans left to reveal the rural town of St. Robin. After dissolving to an arch, the camera cranes past further arches, stopping at a church in the background before entering gates that “creak open” and show a



cemetery. This opening scene significantly depicts the mood of claustrophobia and death-filled existence that the film explores before it reaches its final shot showing Dr Germain (Pierre Fresnay) opening the windows of a study containing the body of the poison-pen author to reveal children playing in the street and the departing figure of the avenger clad in a dark costume resembling both a raven and a nun. Despite Vichy censorship, the film indirectly critiques a stagnant world dominated by patriarchy and Catholic ritual – canted-angle German expressionist shots of an innocent victim pursued by a mob show are one such visual example of this. Clouzot films the funeral procession by alternating between high-angle shots of a camera objectively observing the procession and low-angle shots placing the camera in

the “subjective” position of the poison pen letter that mourners deliberately ignore fearing its contaminating influence (before a child picks it up). The letter circulates at the funeral service leading to the “rush-to-judgment” attitude of observers emotionally manipulated by the deliberately articulated stentorian tones of a pompous Vichy military official foreshadowing the

oppressive sound of Dr Vorzet’s tapping pencil and ticking watch later in the film.

As Marie (Helena Manson) flees, a sound montage of church choir and mob chanting intermingles before she is arrested by the police outside her small room in a manner evoking the actions of the Gestapo. Another, not-so-innocent, victim is bundled inside a sanatorium van towards the end of the film. Although *Le Corbeau* has often been seen as an attack on informing by letter during the Occupation, other features of the film also evoke the era as seen in the debate between the moral relativism of Dr Vorzet (Pierre Larquey) and Germain involving the ominous presence of a globe signifying Nazi plans for world domination and a swinging light bulb. This light not only intermittently casts them in opposing areas of light and darkness but also undermines Germain’s bourgeois values of moral certitude. The woman sent to trap Germain into agreeing to an illegal abortion refuses to be “an informer” while guilty Rolande (Liliane Maigne) spies on everyone, her bouncing ball linked with that thrown at Germain by

malevolent schoolchildren earlier in the film. Aged women glare at a young girl who attempts suicide after an anonymous letter claims she is illegitimate. Having committed a “mortal sin”, she may expect no sympathy from these rural occupants of Vichy France.

Denise (Ginette Leclerc), the supposedly obvious “femme fatale” of *Le Corbeau*, condemns the film’s supposed hero, Dr Germain, in the following terms: “You may be right doctor. But I feel sorry for you. You are what is saddest and strangest... a bourgeois.” Later influenced by another poison pen letter, Germain fears that he may be the father of a “degenerate child”. But a close-up of Denise not only undermines his contamination by Nazi-Vichy racial values but also his misreading of a supposed “slut”.

As Judith Mayne observes, appearances in this film are deceptive and “the woman who looks like a Vichy poster for womanhood” acts like a lunatic while her supposedly guilty and sexually repressed sister-in-law becomes the victim of mob rule. By contrast, in one of the most revealing close-ups in the film, Denise asks Germain to look into her eyes so that he can directly perceive that she is not a guilty woman. As opposed to scenes in the film showing people looking at each other and the point-of-view image showing Rolande spying on Germain through the key-hole of his door, this shot argues for the importance of direct perception rather than indirect, prejudicial, misperception.

Like Rupert in *Rope* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1948), Germain is a compromised hero. His bourgeois values reinforce the stagnant, conformist world of St. Robin. He eventually faces an adversary articulating and acting out perverted interpretations of Nietzsche believing that he is beyond good and evil. Germain finally understands that “evil is necessary” if only to confront a dark world. But, unlike in *Rope*, his act of opening the window does not bring the kind of relief associated with fresh air or of outside sounds overcoming a claustrophobic interior. Instead, we see children playing freely and the retreating figure of the avenger. Children are now outside school and free from its restrictions. Although this may suggest

that youth represents the hope of the future, as articulated by Marc Bloch in his analysis of the fall of his nation due to the crippling forces of intellectual stagnation and tradition, the film’s final scene is not so clear-cut (10). It reflects the ambiguity of the entire film where issues cannot be resolved in black-and-white terms. The world of childhood is as contaminated as its adult counterpart. Precocious, larcenous, adolescent Rolande spies on Denise and Germain. Vorzet even suggests that Germain may take her for his mistress, a



suggestion the good doctor never rejects. An “innocent schoolchild” denies seeing the poison pen letter Germain seeks in the schoolyard. When he leaves, she withdraws it from her underwear and immediately devours its contents.

Neither explicitly pro- nor anti-Resistance, *Le Corbeau* is a film of deliberate moral and visual ambiguity. This is due less to Clouzot’s supposed duplicitous artistic evasiveness and refusal to take sides and more to the recognition of the dark motivations affecting human beings in occupied territories (a situation those of us who have never experienced it can never really comprehend). The film implicitly criticises the oppressive moral codes of not only the Vichy regime but also the judgmental values of future liberators eager to condemn those who would fall below a certain moral standard, especially those females subsequently accused of “horizontal collaboration” such as Arletty and the more unfortunate Mirielle Balin of *Pépé le Moko* (Julien Duvivier, 1937). In what film of this era (and beyond) would one find a sympathetic portrayal of a supposedly “guilty woman” such as Leclerc’s “femme fatale” who not only seduces the supposed hero of this drama but attempts to abort her unborn child? Denise’s first appearance in the film designates her as a sexually free woman. Like abortion, such overt displays of female sexuality were criminalised under the Vichy “family values” law of 15 February 1942 (11). St. Robin is certainly no idyllic “little fatherland” for the rural ideology of Petain’s New Moral Order as *Le Corbeau* clearly reveals on its director’s own terms.

### THE SPRING 2022 BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS #44:

All films in the series but two (*Notorious* and *The Power of the Dog*) are available from Criterion or Netflix: **c** after a title indicates it is available on Criterion, **p**=Amazon Prime, **p\$**=Amazon Prime with an extra \$4 fee. *The Power of the Dog* is available, for now, only on Netflix. *Notorious* is available on FlixFilm (low-resolution versions are free on YouTube and Tubi.). All four subscription services let you cancel at any time, so you should have access to all 24 films for well under \$100. *The Gunfighter* is on Amazon Prime and, in low rez, free on Tubi. Nine of the films—all with “UB” after the title—are available free to anyone with a UB email account via the UB Library’s Swank and Kanopy portals. Five films are available only on non-UB streaming services: *Le Corbeau*, *The Gunfighter*, *Naked*, *Salesman* and *The Power of the Dog*. (The Swank titles will be available at UB’s Library for a year; the Kanopy titles for 3 years.)

- Feb 1: 1921 Victor Sjöström, *The Phantom Carriage* c UB-Kanopy  
 Feb 8: 1934 Frank Capra *It Happened One Night* c p\$ UB-Swank  
 Feb 15: 1941 John Huston *The Maltese Falcon* p\$ UB-Swank  
 Feb 22: 1943 Henri-Georges Clouzot *Le Corbeau* c  
 Mar 1: 1946 Alfred Hitchcock *Notorious* FlixFling, YouTube, UB-Swank, Tubi (free)  
 Mar 8: 1950 Henry King, *The Gunfighter* p\$, Tubi (free)  
 Mar 15: 1958 Orson Welles *Touch of Evil* p\$ UB-Swank  
 Mar 29: 1962 Yasujiro Ozu *An Autumn Afternoon* c p\$b UB Kanopy  
 Apr 5: 1973 Federico Fellini *Amarcord* c p\$ UB Kanopy  
 Apr 12: 1993 Mike Leigh *Naked* c  
 Apr 19: 2002 Phillip Noyce *Rabbit-Proof Fence* p\$ UB-Kanopy  
 Apr 26: 2016 Asghar Farhadi *Salesman* p  
 May 3: 2021: Jane Campion *The Power of the Dog* NETFLIX  
 May 10: 2011 Martin Scorsese *Hugo* p\$ UB-Kanopy

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