

La Verite (1960) Henri-George Clouzot

P Michell, 2017

Clouzot often thought of as the French Alfred Hitchcock. This film appears different from his more famous films like *La Diaboliques* (1955).

Though somewhat dated, this film compliments 'Contempt', made just three years later. Both showcase Brigitte Bardot. The latter by new wave director, Jean-Luc Godard, this by Old Wave director, Clouzot. A sort of European Rashomon .

Bardot known equally for her performance on screen and more famously, her private life. Both becoming somewhat entangled in *La Verite*.

Some have argued that it fortells the 1968 Paris uprisings. Certainly highlights university students' lifestyle. (Clouzot's view ... anyway) Based on papers below almost impossible to separate the film from its time.

Most of these notes concentrate on Clouzot.

Synopsis:

Dominique Marceau is on trial for the murder of Gilbert Tellier. The counsels duel relentlessly, elaborating explanations for why the pretty, idle and fickle girl killed the talented and ambitious conductor freshly graduated from the conservatory. Was it passion, vengeance, desperation, an accident? The acquaintances of Gilbert testify, as well as Dominique's former lovers, and her sister, Annie, the studious violin player engaged to Gilbert. The evidence they give progressively paints a more finely-shaded picture of the personalities of Dominique and Gilbert, and of their relationship, than the eloquent and convincing justifications of the counsels.

—*Eduardo Casais*

Henri George Clouzot – co writer & director -

Sadoul describes him:

“The greatest French specialist in thrillers, sometimes incorporating neurotic tensions and always violence; made his name after the war with the suspenseful effects of his films, his meticulous creation of atmosphere, use of actors, effective style, and a certain taste for visual experiment.”

In Los Angeles, Redcat presented c2010 - 'H G Clouzot and the Aesthetics of the Sixties: Reflections on *La Verite*' curated by Martha Kirszenbaum & Bernice Reyneaut.:

Included these Harvard Film Archive's notes:

“A pivotal and divisive figure of Forties and Fifties French cinema, **Henri-Georges Clouzot** (1907-1977) made his name as a daring iconoclast through a series of hugely influential, often controversial, films whose stylistic audacity, off-beat humor and stinging critique of bourgeois society were far ahead of their time. Clouzot's remarkable talent with mystery and thriller narratives earned him the unfortunate yet inevitable sobriquet of the “French Hitchcock” despite the two directors' notably different approach to suspense and despite Clouzot's profound influence upon Hitchcock, with *Les Diaboliques* (1955), for example, openly acknowledged as a model for *Psycho* (1960). The phenomenal and lasting success of *Les Diaboliques* and Clouzot's other best-known film, the gripping action epic *The Wages of Fear* (1953), continue to overshadow the larger arc of his risk-embracing career and major contributions to cinema. Still little known outside of France, Clouzot's other films are only gradually being rediscovered, slowly giving way to a fuller understanding of a fiercely original artist able like none other to masterfully intertwine adrenaline-igniting entertainment, trenchant political satire, ribald comedy and heartfelt tragedy.

Clouzot's film career began as a screenwriter in the early 1930s. He divided his time between France and Germany and eventually settled briefly in Berlin where he also worked as an assistant to directors E.A. Dupont and Anatole Litvak. While in Germany, Clouzot became enamored with the brooding, shadowy Weimar cinema whose masters F.W. Murnau and Fritz Lang would exert an especially lasting influence. Frequently infirm, Clouzot was debilitated by a four year struggle with pleurisy, an experience which clearly fueled the obsessively recurring motifs of illness and death in his films and which left him hungry to seize the directorial reins for himself. Soon after he left the sanatorium Clouzot's Berlin connections secured him a job at the German-run production company Continental, newly established in Vichy France, where he wrote some of his finest early screenplays before directing his debut film, the stylish whodunit, *L'Assassin habite au 21* (1942). Next came Clouzot's celebrated, scandalous and still contested second film, *Le Corbeau* (1943), a caustic study of deceit and embittered provinciality set in small town France during the German occupation. Released to uneasy acclaim at the height of the Vichy era, *Le Corbeau* unleashed a wave of attacks after the war targeting Clouzot's supposedly "anti-French" Fascist sympathies and eventually leading to a two-year forced suspension of all directorial activities, despite the film's clearly anti-Pétain message. *Le Corbeau* also set in motion a chronic pattern of misinterpretation that plagued Clouzot's films and reputation for years to come, one that lingers even today.

Upon release from his creative "house arrest" Clouzot staged a remarkable return with a series of commercial and critical successes led by his dazzling and raucous *comédie humaine*, *Quai des Orfèvres* (1947), and his controversial ode to *amour fou*, *Manon* (1948). Together these seminal films revealed the unusual marriage of sharp

realism and eerie, oneiric imagery that would remain signatures of Clouzot's cinema. A tireless perfectionist notorious for tyrannically ruling over his sets, Clouzot often went to unexpected extremes to craft every aspect of his films, giving special attention to the meticulously detailed and atmospheric sets that so vividly evoked the dank, largely interior world explored by his films. Behind many of the extraordinary performances prominent throughout the films hovered the threat of Clouzot's unreasonable realist creed which demanded, for example, that the actors actually eat the putrid fish served in the seedy boarding school in *Les Diaboliques*, or that Charles Vanel sink neck deep into a pit of crude oil in *The Wages of Fear*. Such unyielding and extreme ambition brought Clouzot both meteoric success as well as the ill fortune that cursed ultimately aborted dream projects, including an abandoned documentary about Latin American voodoo ritual and the infamous *L'Enfer*, a legendary "lost" film recently recovered, in spellbinding fragments, in a fascinating documentary by Serge Bromberg and Roxandra Medrea (2009).

Clouzot's films are renowned yet frequently critiqued for their unsparingly dark and unglamorous vision of a fallen world. Generalized claims are often made for Clouzot's pessimistic misanthropy, a simplification that overlooks the insistent, paradoxical humanism of his desperately struggling anti-heroes and the graphic realism used to depict the lower realms they inhabit. Vivid documents of the French experience of WW2 and its aftermath, Clouzot's films unfold almost entirely within the type of unsavory settings more often associated with contemporary American film noir – dingy garret studios and scruffy dance halls, decrepit insane asylums and squalid backwater towns. However, the dilapidated and dangerous world of Clouzot's films also contains a strangely enduring and even nostalgic side, crystallized in the films' small moments and objects – the Paris metro ticket saved by Yves Montand in *The Wages of Fear*, the simple Christmas gifts in *Quai des Orfèvres*. Featuring some of the great French actors of the postwar period – Bernard Blier, Pierre Fresnay, Louis Jouvet, Paul Meurisse, Simone Signoret, Charles Vanel – Clouzot's films offer intense and meticulously three-dimensional, almost Balzacian, character studies; crafting rich, at times deeply moving, portraits of human frailty and desire.

Twitching and uncomfortable, Clouzot's impatient anti-heroes are "human, all too human," to borrow a proto-existentialist phrase appropriate to the films' overarching depiction of life as an arduous struggle against irrational forces. A cynical and darkly comic counterpoint to the realist tendencies of postwar European film, Clouzot's occupy a crucial place between the poetic symbolism of Thirties French cinema and the innovations of the *nouvelle vague* filmmakers – even though the latter accused him of being "irrelevant" and grouped him together with the so-called "cinéma de papa" of the old guard that they adamantly repudiated. With *La Vérité* Clouzot responded to their accusations and cast youth idol Brigitte Bardot in one of her most popular roles as a restless *Rive Gauche* bohemian who falls dangerously in love with a self-absorbed and elitist composer. The extended

courtroom drama that unfolds across the film's second half can be understood as a bold attempt to scrutinize the contemporary youth scene in order to understand the aims and morality of the Sixties generation.

Excerpt from Senses of Cinema on Clouzot;

“... 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.” (9) 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” (10). 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*

Rest of this very good article on Clouzot is here. Sadly as of the time 2005, there was no book in English on Clouzot.

<http://sensesofcinema.com/2005/great-directors/clouzot/>

Trivia:

[Jean-Paul Belmondo](#), [Jean-Pierre Cassel](#) and [Jean Louis Trintignant](#) were all considered for the lead role - Trintignant was Bardot's choice - before Clouzot decided to go with Sami Frey.^[3]

Philippe Leroy-Beaulieu, one of the male leads, was fired during shooting. Leroy-Beaulieu then sued the producer for damages of 300,000 francs. Charrier had a nervous breakdown and was hospitalised for two months. [Vera Clouzot](#) had a nervous breakdown in July. In August Clouzot had a heart attack and filming was suspended for a week.^[4] Also Bardot's secretary of four years sold secrets about her to the press.

During filming, Bardot had an affair with Sami Frey which resulting in her breaking up with her then husband Jacques Charrier. In September 1960 Bardot had an argument with Charrier and then attempted suicide by slashing her wrist. (Charrier had earlier attempted suicide himself.)

In the words of the *New York Times* "probably no film in recent years - at least in France - has been subjected to so much advance attention. Two years in the planning, six months in the shooting, sets sealed to the press, and all culminating in the suicide attempt of the drama's star, Brigitte Bardot. The public had been told that Clouzot was turning B.B. into a real actress."^[7]

The film was a massive box office hit in France, Bardot's biggest ever success at the box office^[1] and the third most popular film of the year (after [Ben Hur](#) and [Le Bossou](#)).^[8]

The *Los Angeles Times* called the film "an amazing picture, a tour de force from all concerned. It is at once immoral, amoral and strangely moral."^[9]

Wikipedia – La Verite

Review:

Just a masterpiece, like any Clouzot's work

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It appears that the outstanding director Henri-George Clouzot was unable to make movies short of being masterpieces. "La Verite" may be defined as the "European

"Rashomon", and, well aware that my opinion will be considered a sacrilege, I venture to say that Clouzot's film is even better than Kurosawa's celebrated masterpiece. In fact, the essence of both "Rashomon" and "La Verite" lies in the quest of the truth of a story, reconstructed through a sequence of flash-backs.

"La Verite" narrates the trial of the breathtakingly-beautiful-sexy lost girl Dominique (Brigitte Bardot), for the murder of her former boy-friend Gilbert (Samy Frey). Everybody (Dominique herself, her former friends and various lovers, her enemies, notably her own sister, as well as lawyers and prosecutors) states his own version of the facts, but what is the actual truth? To simplify the question: is Dominique just a ruthless killer, or was she a weak, enamored girl, victim of Gilbert's selfishness and bullying? As always in Clouzot's movies, "La Verite" is extremely intense, packed with a profound and uncompromising psychological study. The almost obsessive pace of events gives no break to both the characters and the audience. The script is first-rate, with plenty of cynical sense of humor, in spite of the dramatic facts told.

Brigitte Bardot was a great actress, endowed with an outstanding talent. A careful viewer could easily get it even from BB's performances in minor movies, like, say "Mademoiselle Pigalle". Here, under the sound direction of a genius like Clouzot, she is just sensational in a highly dramatic role. Of course, also the acting by the remainder of the cast is excellent, especially, needless to say, by the legends Charles Vanel and Paul Meurisse, as the two lawyers.

Possibly, the main credit of this fantastic movie lies in a gelid, sarcastic, misanthropic representation of human society. Arguably, this is the trade-mark of Clouzot's style, together with suspense, which here is present but not exasperated like in his other works. The world of the adults is wholly despicable, permeated as they are with hypocrisy, with prejudice and fear, especially in sexual matters, and with sickening cynicism, as masterly represented by the lawyer Paul Meurisse.

However, the youngsters are no better than the adults. They are just fatuous, selfish, conceited loafers, only able to utter pseudo-intellectual chats. As a matter of fact, when Dominique finds herself in dire straits, none of her young friends moves a finger to help her. And Dominique often appears even worse than the others. From some point of view, she might be considered a totally negative character.

So, what's the point of Clouzot? I think that's not an issue. He just shows what he sees; that's the style and the aim of one of the greatest artists in the history of cinema.

"La Verite" is a total masterpiece. It is impossible to be disappointed. Highly recommended.