Wages of Fear / La Saliere de la Peur (1953) Henri George Clouzot

P Michell, 2019

The Wages of Fear (French: ***Le salaire de la peur***) is a 1953 French-Italian thriller film starring Yves Montand, and based on the 1950 French novel *Le salaire de la peur* (lit. "The Salary of Fear") by Georges Arnaud. When an oil well owned by an American company catches fire, the company hires four European men, down on their luck, to drive two trucks over mountain dirt roads, loaded with nitroglycerine needed to extinguish the flames. The film brought Clouzot international fame—winning both the Golden Bear and the Palme d'Or at the 1953 Berlin Film Festival and Cannes Film Festival, respectively—and allowed him to direct *Les Diaboliques*. In France, it was the 4th highest-grossing film of the year with a total of 6,944,306 admissions. (Wikpiedia)

Cast: Yves Montand, Charles Vanel, Peter Van Eyck, William Tubbs, Vera Clouzot, Folco Lulli **Director:** Henri-Georges Clouzot **Screenwriter:** Henri-Georges Clouzot, Jerome Geronimi

153 / 148 mins. B&W. 4x3. Note: This the first full screening you have seen since release in a censored (minus 22 mins) version. Restoration in 2017.

Reception

The Wages of Fear was critically hailed upon its original release. Bosley Crowther of *The New York Times* wrote "The excitement derives entirely from the awareness of nitroglycerine and the gingerly, breathless handling of it. You sit there waiting for the theatre to explode."[3] The film was also a hit with the public gaining 6,944,306 Admissions in France where it was the 4th highest earning film of the year.

In 1982, Pauline Kael called it "an existential thriller—the most original and shocking French melodrama of the 50s. ... When you can be blown up at any moment only a fool believes that character determines fate. ... If this isn't a parable of man's position in the modern world, it's at least an illustration of it. ... The violence ... is used to force a vision of human existence.

In 1992, Roger Ebert stated that "The film's extended suspense sequences deserve a place among the great stretches of cinema." Leonard Maltin awarded the film 3 1/2 out of 4 stars,calling it a "marvelously gritty and extremely suspenseful epic". In 2010, the film was ranked #9 in *Empire* magazines "The 100 Best Films Of World Cinema." It currently holds a 100% approval rating on the website Rotten Tomatoes aggregated from 41 reviews.

A film of some historical significance as it was a foreign film which, without being dubbed, was widely released in Great Britain. In the early 50s, it was held that British audiences would not stand for a subtitled film, and foreign films rarely got beyond the big

cities except through specialized outlets such as film societies. However, this film was a huge box-office hit, and led to a brief period when other subtitled films were given a general release in British cinemas. None did anything like as well at the box-office and the trend quickly petered out. It was pointed out that large sections of "The Wages Of Fear" contain no dialogue at all, and that many lines of dialogue are in English as there are several American characters - perhaps these may have been factors in the film's success.

Henri George Clouzot (Director) (Script)
Sadoul (1965, 1972):

The greatest French specialist in thrillers, sometimes incorporating neurotic tensions and always violence; made his name after WWII with suspenseful effects of his films, his meticulous creation of atmosphere, use of actors, effective style and a certain taste of visual experiment. Began his career as a scriptwriter with Anatol Litvak in Germany (1932-3). Then was in a sanatorium (1934-8).

Other notable films – Les Diaboliques (1955), Le Mystere Picasso (1956) [documentary] La verite (1960) ,

"… this an epic whose main theme is courage. And the opposite." Clouzot

Trivia

Filming began on 27 August 1951 and was scheduled to run for nine weeks. Numerous problems plagued the production, however. The south of France had an unusually rainy season that year, causing vehicles to bog down, cranes to fall over and sets to be ruined. Director Henri-Georges Clouzotbroke his ankle. Véra Clouzot fell ill. The production was 50 million francs over budget. By the end of November, only half the film was completed. With the days growing short from winter, production shut down for six months. The second half of the film was finally completed in the summer of 1952.

Henri-Georges Clouzot originally planned on shooting the film in Spain, but Yves Montand refused to work in Spain as long as fascist dictator Francisco Franco was in power. Filming took place instead in the south of France, near Saint-Gilles, in the Camargue. The village seen in the film was built from scratch.

Accusations of anti-Americanism led to the US censor cutting several key scenes from the film.

This was the film debut of Véra Clouzot. She was the wife of director Henri-Georges Clouzot. She acted in only three films, all for her husband.

Jean Gabin refused the role that eventually went to Charles Vanel because he didn't think his fans would pay to see him play a "coward".

Yves Montand's first dramatic role.

Alfred Hitchcock considered Clouzot a very serious rival for the title of Master of Suspense, and Psycho(1960) was put into production because Hitchcock specifically intended to outdo Les diaboliques(1955).

He beat Alfred Hitchcock in buying the rights to "Les Diaboliques" with a margin of just a few hours. He filmed it as Les diaboliques (1955).

Historical Cinema - Clouzot,s uncle Henri, the proprietor of a Paris art museum the Galliera, put together what is considered the first exhibition on the art of the cinema, with equipment, designs, scripts, and costumes, in May of 1924.

Reviews:

Pierre Kanst (Quoted in Sadoul)
A drama of failure, a tragedy about the absurdity of blind industry. Its mesmeric development towards the cionclusion is perhaps what moves us on first seeing it. The double twist at the end surprises us as unnecessary but this ending is inseparable for the total design.

(From someone with no history of the film):
A completely novel plot. Happened upon this on late night TV about 10 years ago. Thought I had seen all the best of the classics and then this came on. "Where have you been all my life?" was the overwhelming question. What an incredibly beautiful and stark movie at the same time. Absolutely unprecedented. Everything about it--especially the cinematography (check out the scene with the turnabout for the trucks) is superior. If you care about plot, allegory, intelligent directing and acting, this is one which is second to none. Nitroglycerine being transported across the Venezuelan countryside. . .who comes up with this stuff? The remake (Sorcerer) is decent, but doesn't even come close. Outstanding flick.

Jonathan Dawson, Senses of Cinema, Nov 2011, Issue 61
“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 in *Le Salaire de la peur* (*The Wages of Fear*)

The Wages of Fear is a 1953 French *film noir*-style road movie-cum-thriller, directed by Henri-Georges Clouzot, starring rising film star and singer Yves Montand, and based on a rather macho 1950 novel by Georges Arnaud. The film lifted Clouzot’s status from a rather shady figure of postwar French cinema, with some unresolved wartime connections (he worked for the German owned French studio Constellation) to a leading figure of late “classic” French Cinema – before the *nouvelle vague* broke and changed everything forever!

The Wages of Fear immediately attracted massive international attention and was widely influential: *Violent Road* (aka *Hell's Highway*), directed by Howard W. Koch in 1958, and *Sorcerer*, directed by William Friedkin in 1977 (ironically, the year Clouzot died), were American sort-of remakes that utterly failed to reach the tense brilliance and visual muscle of the Clouzot original, a work that brought him international recognition, and immediately landed him the gig of directing his most successful thriller: *Les Diaboliques* (1955).

This place is a dump. The movie opens with a series of shots of a deadbeat South American town sweating in the deadly heat, clearly at the end of some road to nowhere. A small boy is toying with some tethered insects, a drunken fight breaks out, the scenes of mounting tension and casual brutality tighten the sense of a sweating stick of dynamite about to go off – which of course, it is. The scent of sweat is palpable, not unlike that found in the opening montage of John Sturges' *The Magnificent Seven* (1960) a few years later. Slackers lounge around the local bar, working the occasional odd job, and the camera lazily moves in on Mario, a drifter played by Montand as a good time boy at the end of the line; charismatic, but a real burnt out case.

These manly street games are suddenly interrupted as a plane zooms low over the main street (a terrific shot in anyone's cinema), before landing at the rundown airport on the edge of town. Down the rickety stairway swaggers Jo (Charles Vanel, soon to be the creepy cop in *Les Diaboliques*), apparently some big shot crim in an equally big Stetson, who strikes up a friendship with Mario. This is the central relationship of the movie – not the doomed love affair between Linda (played by Vera Clouzot in the only female role in the entire film) and and Mario – as this is above all a movie about the "things between men".

Suddenly, there's a real disaster as an oil well, owned by the big *Yanqui* company SOC, goes up in a fireball, killing and injuring numerous people. The oil bosses (in hindsight, perhaps a surrogate for the notorious United Fruit Company operating in South America at the time with CIA support) will pay big money for someone to drive in the highly unstable nitro-glycerine needed to snuff out the deadly roaring fire. Of course, Mario, Jo, and their fellow travellers (Peter Van Eyck as the Dutchman Bimba and Folco Lulli as the fridge shaped and homesick Italian Luigi) line up for the suicidal gig – the blazing well is about a day's drive away over some of the most treacherous roads imaginable. The company wants two trucks to double the odds, and drivers with no family around to create problems or demand insurance payouts!

Now the film is really underway, segueing from sweltering village scenes to those of tightly ratcheted tension. In a series of brilliantly choreographed and filmed vignettes, Clouzot and his cinematographer, Armand Thirard, assume utter control of the mounting scenes of danger. Across the film, Mario and Jo gradually reverse roles, with the tough old crim losing his dominance and Mario growing in macho confidence as the odds against them mount exponentially at every twist of the increasingly deadly, crumbling roads.

The action scenes are as good as any shot until the digital age and the trucks themselves become characters, as did the old Leyland Badger in John Heyer's marvellous documentary *The Back of Beyond*, released a year later (1954), and set in an equally hostile outback Australia.

One sequence sums up the power of this great film and is itself unforgettable – unless you blink and miss it. Jo rolls out a cigarette when suddenly the tobacco seems to fly off the paper. Why? The scene and its payoff is one of the great moments in cinema metaphor – and imagination.

As novelist Dennis Lehane (*Gone, Baby, Gone* and *Mystic River*) noted after first seeing the movie in 1991:
[N]othing could have prepared me for the seismic assault of it. Here is a film that stands alone as the purest exercise in cinematic tension ever carved into celluloid, a work of art so viscerally nerve-racking that one fears a misplaced whisper from the audience could cause the screen to explode. (1)

Not that every critic and commentator, then and now, were without reservations as to the power and intent of the movie. In 1955 *Time* called it "a picture that is surely one of the most evil ever made" (2) and others at the time charged that *The Wages of Fear* was virulently anti-American. As director Karel Reisz pointed out in a 1991 *Film Comment* article, the film *is* "anti-American", but only insofar as it is "unselectively and impartially anti-everything" (3).

Clouzot is not only Alfred Hitchcock's equal (in *The Wages of Fear* and *Les Diaboliques*) in creating atmosphere and tension but brings a swagger and brute virility to the *mise en scène* that few films in the history of cinema have equalled and Hitchcock himself certainly would never have even attempted!

Endnotes:
Dennis Lehane, "The Wages of Fear: No Exit", essay included in the DVD booklet of *The Wages of Fear*, The Criterion Collection, New York, 2009.
"The Wages of Fear", *Time* 21 February 1955.
Dan Yakir, "Clouzot: The Wages of Film", *Film Comment* vol. 17, no. 6, November–December 1981, pp. 38–39.

Bud Wilkins – Slant magazine
6 Dec 2011

Less than 10 years after director Henri-Georges Clouzot had suffered state-sanctioned banishment from making films due to the public indignation provoked by his acrid wartime drama *Le Corbeau*, the taut 1953 action film *The Wages of Fear* established his place in world cinema, securing critical and economic clout sufficient for Clouzot to

produce his Hitchcock-rivaling masterwork *Diabolique*. Like Hitch, Clouzot has often been judged a cold, technical director, and it's certainly true that *The Wages of Fear* contains tension-fraught stretches of "pure cinema" that probably gave even the Master cold sweats, but darkly humorous political satire directed at incipient global capitalism and a ballsy existentialism also suffuse Clouzot's film. "Man is nothing else," wrote Jean-Paul Sartre, arguing the necessity of political commitment, "than the sum of his actions." Given the film's bitterly ironic ending, it would seem that Clouzot, for his part, wasn't so sure that the sum ever exceeds zero.

The film's opening scenes depict children torturing insects recreationally and the local populace stewing in their own indolent juices, setting the wryly disillusioned tone and paving the way, among others, for Sam Peckinpah's equally nihilistic *The Wild Bunch*. Parboiled by the South American sun, the godforsaken town of Las Piedras serves as a particularly hellish human cul-de-sac, where a motley band of multinational good-for-nothings has washed up like so much flotsam. The arrival of Jo (Charles Vanel), a fugitive from justice who blusters his way into a role as big spender at the local cantina, sets the story in motion when Mario (Yves Montand), a French Corsican ne'er-do-well, throws over his roommate Luigi (Folco Lulli) to spend all his free time with Jo.

The rivalry for Mario's affection comes to a head when Luigi calls Jo to accounts in the midst of a rowdy evening at the cantina. Cinematographer Armand Thirard's expressionist-inflected lighting scheme throws bold black bars across the crowded room and the camera indulges in proto-Leone macro close-ups of the two men's faces as they attempt to stare each other down. Violence hovers at the edge of the frame, ready to burst forth at a moment's notice. When Jo pulls a gun on Luigi, the latter claims Jo wouldn't act as tough without it, so Jo hands it over. Luigi crumbles; jealous and possessive as he may be, he lacks that killer instinct. Disgraced and disconsolate, Luigi beats a hasty retreat like a spurned lover. Truth be told, Clouzot often suggests there's more than a homosocial affinity among the trio, and it's hardly surprising that these implications kicked up more fuss among various censorial bodies than the film's alleged anti-American content.

Without doubt, women are ancillary to the film's focus on macho self-determination in the face of insurmountable odds. The audience is introduced to the lone lady of note, servant girl Linda (played by Clouzot's wife Vera), scrubbing the floor on her hands and knees while the camera leers down her wide-open blouse, showing off the goods for the delectation of the male audience. Clouzot reportedly did everything he could to make a star out of the Brazilian-born actress, granting her the put-upon, heartsick lead in *Diabolique*, but that doesn't quite gloss her role here, in effect playing Mario's lapdog, sidling up to him on all fours for a placatory pat on the head.

The only ones having any luck in Las Piedras are the aloof American representatives of SOC (Southern Oil Company, a conveniently generic nom de greed)—that is, until one of their distant oil rigs explodes. Needing to transport two tons of nitroglycerin 300 miles over shoddy unpaved roads and treacherous switchbacks, SOC takes their recruitment to the people, neatly bypassing the pesky constraints of union bylaws. "Dangerous work,

high pay!” announces the want ad. Competition is stiff, as it were. Only real men, read *drivers*, need apply. Nerves and aptitude soon whittle the applicant pool down until only four remain. Divided into two teams by SOC rep Bill O’Brien (William Tubbs), Jo and Mario head out first, followed after a brief interval by Luigi and Dutch national Bimba (Peter van Eyck), an Aryan type whose father was hanged during the war by the Nazis. Scenes with O’Brien bear the brunt of the blame for the film’s reputed anti-Americanism. Gruff to the point of brusqueness, O’Brien betrays a callous, eminently businesslike attitude to death and injury, though, on the other hand, he stands up for the drivers, having known Jo since their “contraband days” back in the ‘30s. Less political than psychological, O’Brien is disenchanted, jaded. It’s not much to pin a full-scale, anti-imperialist indictment on.

Our ragtag quartet doesn’t hit the road until the film’s second hour, whereupon a series of breathtaking set pieces ensues, one more elaborate (and protracted) than the previous, as the trucks negotiate increasingly inhospitable terrain and Clouzot takes his time with every detail, tailgating at breakneck pace across uneven ground known as “the washboard,” navigating a partially constructed road extension that’s little more than rotten timber jutting out over a void, which quickly becomes a domino-fall of unintended consequences. Like the cantina confrontation, this sequence showcases Clouzot’s rapid-fire montage, breaking down a simple motion like Mario jumping from the platform onto the hillside into its constituent parts, a three-shot montage that ends with a knowing flourish as Mario kicks a spray of dirt into the camera lens.

More than the mechanics of their plight, Clouzot lavishes his attention on the always frangible equilibrium of the group dynamic, documenting with particularly pitiless clarity Jo’s devolution from swaggering man of the world to cringing coward, someone who hides behind a wall at a safe distance while Mario maneuvers the truck around the timber switchback. Jo’s breakdown continues when, overcoming the final obstacle, he must guide the truck with Mario behind the wheel across a widening pool of oil that resulted when Luigi and Bimba’s truck detonated. Jo’s exhortation “Whatever you do, don’t stop!” comes back to haunt him when he’s ensnared on submerged debris and then caught beneath the truck’s wheels, leaving his leg horribly mangled. The pain leaves him delirious. He fantasizes about his home in Paris, a locale Mario also knows well. “You remember that fence? What was on the other side?” Jo asks, to which Mario responds, “Nothing. A vacant lot.”

Already talk of boundaries and the beyond takes on loaded metaphorical weight. Rather than derive existential wisdom from actions that add up to something rational, Jo receives his terrible insight through subtraction, the elimination of everything that made him the man he once was. At the end, hallucinating outright, Jo sees his home again, the endless street, the fence, and the beyond. “There’s nothing!” he calls out as he dies, a singular refutation of one of humanity’s most abiding desires: that something of us survives this mortal coil.