French film is a suspenseful thriller

By Oliver Spivey
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**Henri-Georges Clouzot's* Wages of Fear (1953) is one of the most nerve-jangling, suspenseful movies I have ever encountered.

It has moments that rival and even surpass the best to be found in all of Alfred Hitchcock’s work, and an depiction of human greed and evilness and greed is second to none. Clouzot was an uncompromising director of French thrillers and is often touted as the French Hitchcock, who was one of his contemporaries.

But rather than did Hitchcock even complete his films with anything approaching the pessimistic finales to be found in Clouzot’s work. Even director Billy Wilder, known for his frequent immersions into humanity’s dark underbelly, usually reassured audiences with an anti-pataphysically put Hollywood ending (unless we’re talking about that savage film noir *Ace in the Hole* [1951]).

I saw Clouzot’s terrifyingly diabolique *Diabolique* (1955) some years ago as a movie considered his masterpiece. As good as that one is, I’m afraid it cannot surpass Wages of Fear in terms of sheer suspense or magnificence. Those who mists out there may want to proceed with caution when attempting to screen this one.

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Clouzot, adapting his screenplay from a novel by Georges Arnaud, begins his story by introducing us to an international coterie of down-and-out drifters in a small Central American village. They spend days of sweaty drudgery toiling and loathing about the local saloon, awaiting any opportunity to make a quick buck.

Right outside the village is a ruthless American oil company that hires temporary help for the company; in the meantime Clouzot enjoys our attention to character development and detail.

We meet Mario (Yves Montand), a handsome drifter with a devil-may-care grin who has the local smuggler (Yves Clouzot) wrapped around his finger like a puppy (literally). There’s also Martha (Vanel), a tough, well-dressed petty crook down on his luck; Luigi (Folco Lulli), Mario’s hard-working roommate, and Bimba (Peter Van Eyck), a quiet German with a shadowy past who, by way of implication, may very well have been a member of the SS. The first half hour or more of the film is devoted to establishing these men, their behavior and temperaments.

Later, these characters are under the strain of being hired to drive an oil tanker loaded with nitrogen gas to a far-off city. If they go too fast, they can explode; if they go too slow, they can explode as well. The journey portion of the movie is a series of suspenseful set pieces in which the viewer’s expectation of an explosion is constantly delayed, making for some remarkable nail-biting moments.

One sequence takes place with one of the trucks losing traction on a roving wooden platform jutting out over some rocky terrain. Bimba decides to blow the rock to smithereens with some of the nitro from the truck in order to make sure they can’t explode, but one of the workers has a moment. The most memorable sequence of the movie, however, is one in which Clouzot—bless his cynical little heart—has Mario run over Jo’s leg while stuck in a pool of oil. Mario later claims he had no choice, Jo being in his way. But we can see that Jo has a little greed for his paltry paycheck. That is all Jo’s joi de vivre.

Clouzot’s final ironic twist, however, is one in which Jo’s ever-present fire is snuffed out by his own charge—this elevates the film above a mere anti-capitalist screed, transforming it into a portrait of an entire nation gone wrong.

I challenge anyone to find a recent film that captures even a sliver of the kind of suspense generated by *Wages of Fear*.

There are a few to be found, but so many recent thrillers are nothing more than exercises in routine unoriginality.

If you want to see what a genuine action-thriller can accomplish, here’s your movie.