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Susan Hayward, *Les Diaboliques*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2005. vii + 118 pp. Diagrams, still shots, notes, credits, filmography and select bibliography. \$35.00 U.S. (cl.). ISBN 0-252-03089-3; \$15.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 0-252-07330-4.

Review by Thibaut Schilt, Bucknell University.

Although the film career of French master of suspense Henri-Georges Clouzot (1907-1977) has had its share of critical and popular successes, including the comedic whodunit *L'Assassin habite au 21* (1942), the controversial murder mystery *Le Corbeau* (1943), the crime drama *Quai des Orfèvres* (1947), and the edge-of-your-seat action adventure *Le Salaire de la peur* (1953), his noir thriller *Les Diaboliques* (1955) arguably marks the pinnacle of his craft. As Fiona Watson has noted, the film contains “all his characteristic elements, the microcosm of the school, the dispassionate view of the murder plot and the twist in the tail...with everything working as a symbiotic whole.”[1] Clouzot followed up with a surprising, critically-acclaimed documentary on Pablo Picasso (*Le Mystère Picasso*, 1956) and, although he went on to make three additional feature films—a fourth one, *L'enfer*, had to be aborted because of the director's poor health, and was eventually directed by Claude Chabrol in 1994 under the same title—his post-*Diaboliques* career (perhaps unfairly) failed to receive the same attention as his pre-new wave achievements. And even though some have criticized Clouzot for excessively manipulating his audience in *Les Diaboliques* and for building an unlikely plot which resembles a pyramid that dangerously sits on its tip, as one critic put it,[2] it is nevertheless difficult to deny that the film's ending is one of the most shocking in cinematic history.

It seems highly appropriate, then, that an entire monograph (to my knowledge, the first of its kind in any language) be dedicated to this *tour de force* of 1950s French cinema, a period still deemed inferior to the preceding and following decades (Occupation cinema and the *Nouvelle Vague*, respectively) because of the ongoing influence of the *politique des auteurs* and its denunciation of the over-literary, uncinematic *qualité française*—also known as *cinéma de papa*. Susan Hayward's and other critics' relatively recent renewed critical interest in the decade (particularly, in Hayward's case, films starring Simone Signoret)[3] aims to rectify the persisting idea initiated by François Truffaut and taken up by his acolytes in *Cahiers du cinéma* that outside the influence of a few *auteurs* (which included Jean Renoir, Jacques Tati, Jean Cocteau and a few others and often *excluded* Clouzot), 1950s Gallic cinema exuded mediocrity.[4]

Susan Hayward's *Les Diaboliques* offers far more than a mere renegotiation of our (skewed) perception of the decade and a reaffirmation of the solid place Clouzot occupies within the post-war French film industry (a position he had lost at the time of his death in the late 1970s), particularly as master of the thriller/*polar* genre. The prolific film scholar's study is part of the recent and excellent “French Film Guides” series, published by I. B. Tauris in the United Kingdom and the University of Illinois Press in the United States. Edited by renowned film critic Ginette Vincendeau, the series offers “authoritative and entertaining guides to some of the most significant titles [of French cinema], from the silent era to the early twenty-first century” (p. ii).[5] It aims to seduce students, teachers, and lovers of French cinema alike and offers not only an extensively-researched study, but also “the author's distinctive, sometimes provocative perspective on each film” (p. ii).

Hayward's study is nothing if not provocative. Like most of the other titles in the series, it includes a synopsis, an introduction (which provides an overview of Clouzot's career), a section on the film's

production contexts, a chapter on plot structure and shot composition, an account of its French and international critical reception and three meticulous sequence analyses. Unlike other “French Film Guides,” the latter appear in the body of the text as opposed to an appendix. In addition, and this is where Hayward’s insightful perspective particularly comes through, she discusses *Les Diaboliques* as an “unsettled text” (p. 41), and wonders if the film is *noir*, queer, political, or all of the above. Finally, Hayward provides, not without humor, convincing evidence that the latest (American) remake of Clouzot’s film titled *Diabolique* (directed by Jeremiah Chechik in 1996) pales in comparison to the original. The book concludes with a short section in which she calls Clouzot a “phenomenological auteur” (p. 111) because of his cinema’s powerful relationship with inanimate objects and reaffirms his status as “assuredly one of the great film directors of the twentieth century” (p. 113).

In the first chapter, “Production contexts,” Hayward discusses the way in which Clouzot successfully secured the rights to adapt the novel on which *Les Diaboliques* is based, Pierre Boileau’s and Thomas Narcejac’s 1952 *Celle qui n’était plus*, thus beating Alfred Hitchcock to the punch (the British filmmaker eventually adapted the same authors’ *D’entre les morts*, which became *Vertigo* in 1958). Clouzot made a significant change to the novel which is crucial to Hayward’s argument. He “completely inverted the sexual dynamics and heterosexualised the original text” (p. 15). Indeed, she explains, “[i]n the novel, it is the two women—Lucienne the doctor, and Mireille the wife—who are in reality planning to do away with the husband, Ravinel” (p. 14). The secret of the book is that the two women are lesbian lovers who, by faking Mireille’s death, manage to terrorize the husband into committing suicide. In Clouzot’s version, the situation is reversed: Michel (the husband, played by Paul Meurisse) and Nicole (the mistress, played by Simone Signoret) fake Michel’s death in order to push Christina (the wife, played by Clouzot’s own spouse, Vera) to die of a heart attack. Their scheme is not revealed until the very end, but the heterosexual resolution of the story is undermined by their being caught red-handed by the retired police inspector Fichet.

Despite the “inversion,” Hayward maintains (echoing an article by Judith Mayne on the film’s lesbian plot)[6] that the homosexual element in Clouzot’s film does not get completely erased. If anything, the two women interact much more than in the original story. She reveals that the filmmaker revised the story, not because of “the homophobic nature of the period, or because of concerns about censorship” (p. 15), but because he wanted to give Vera Clouzot the main female role (which would have been impossible had the novel’s plot been kept intact). This apparently trivial modification to the original machination (substituting one character for another because of casting preferences) had consequences that profoundly set Clouzot’s text apart from that of Boileau and Narcejac. Control is wrested away from the women characters, and the apparent female dominance, Hayward asserts, is but a “simulacrum” (p. 31), whereas “in the original novel, female dominance is not undermined” (p. 32). Secondly, in addition to (or perhaps as a consequence of) a possible queer reading of the Nicole/Christina relationship, Michel’s character becomes feminized, and even occupies (along with Nicole) the place of the *femme fatale*!

The author combines persuasive discussions of the film’s gender and sexual politics with impressively rigorous technical analysis. One of numerous examples comes in chapter three (“Texts and Intertexts”), in which she insists that the overwhelming advantage given to Vera Clouzot’s character in terms of solo shot distribution (121, including sixty close-ups and medium close-ups versus a total of seventy two for Signoret/Nicole and forty four for Meurisse/Michel) as well as speech distribution (Christina utters more words than Nicole) contribute, among other elements, to a significant disruption of the power relations at play in traditional *film noir*, leading her to call the film generically “mould-breaking” (p. 43). The result is a partial evacuation of Nicole as the potential *femme fatale* and a significant queering of the text, as further signaled by the substantive number of two-shots of the women together (pp. 44–51). If Clouzot never seems to have commented on the film’s homosexual intertext, he had complained about his inability to make politically-pregnant films about France’s colonial situation because of ferocious

ensorship. Given the context of the film's release (during the Algerian war and immediately after Clouzot's thwarted attempt to make a film about Indochina), Hayward suggests that *Les Diaboliques* subtly comments on France's current and past "dirtiness" by displaying (or displacing) its contemptible practices within the film's (safe, because not overtly political) context: rape, "clean torture" (Michel's drowning), [7] intense surveillance, lies, covert activities and so on. So to the previously posed question "what kind of a film is this—noir, queer, political?" Hayward replies: "transgressive and transcendent film noir" (p. 60).

The fourth chapter, "Sequence Analysis," seems particularly suitable for classroom use, especially in upper-level cinema courses that pay close attention to the articulation of the film text. Because of its perceptiveness, it will also be of great interest to film scholars. The author carefully examines three episodes: the establishing sequence during which the three protagonists are introduced to the spectator, the fake murder sequence in Nicole's apartment in Niort (Clouzot's home town), and the events that lead to Christina's death. The goal here is to assess the "difference in characterization" between Nicole, Michel, and Christina, "comment upon their performance as actors and, finally, examine more closely how camera work and *mise en scène* function...to enhance performance, underline the atmosphere or convey a specific sense of space" (p. 63). It is through these analyses that students will get a sense of the intricate mechanisms at play in the art of the cinema (Clouzot being an extreme example in terms of cinematic complexity), and, if they are not already fervid cinephiles, Hayward's enthusiastic descriptions will certainly not fail to convert them.

To conclude, I wish to point out that Susan Hayward's monograph on Clouzot's 1955 masterpiece is especially important, since, as Watson remarks, "there is no existing English language volume solely dedicated to Clouzot." [8] One can only hope that her enlightening study of *Les Diaboliques* will inspire other critics to embark on this much needed endeavor in the wake of the thirtieth anniversary of Clouzot's death.

NOTES

[1] Fiona Watson, "Great Directors: Henri-Georges Clouzot," *Senses of Cinema*, <http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/directors/05/clouzot.htm>, May 2005.

[2] Philippe Pilard, H-G. Clouzot (Paris: Editions Seghers, 1969). On page 34, Pilard writes: "[L]e dénouement du film n'est pas en soi un poids suffisant pour ré-équilibrer l'ensemble...Petit à petit, Clouzot a construit sa pyramide, mais le spectateur découvre à la fin qu'elle est posée sur la pointe...L'ironie du propos est escamotée, étouffée, anihilée: la machine dramatique a enfoncé une porte ouverte."

[3] Hayward recently published a book on the beloved French actress titled *Simone Signoret: The Star as Cultural Sign* (New York: Continuum, 2004) and an article titled "Signoret's Star Persona and Redressing the Costume Drama: Jacques Becker's *Casque d'Or* (1952)," *Studies in French Cinema* 4.1(2004):15-28.

[4] For the pivotal essay that started the controversy and influenced decades of film criticism, see François Truffaut, "Une Certaine tendance du cinéma français," *Cahiers du cinéma* 31(1954):15-29.

[5] The other three books in the series, all published in 2005, are *Alphaville* (Chris Darke), *La Haine* (Ginette Vincendeau) and *La Reine Margot* (Julianne Pidduck). Forthcoming titles include *Casque d'or*

(Sarah Leahy), *Cléo de 5 à 7* (Valerie Orpen), *La Grande illusion* (Martin O'Shaughnessy), *A bout de souffle* (Ramone Fotiade) and a few others.

[6] Judith Mayne, "Inversion and Lesbian Plot in Henri-Georges Clouzot's *Les Diaboliques*," *Framed: Lesbians, Feminists, and Media Culture* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), pp. 41-64.

[7] In this context, Michel's drowning episode is eerily reminiscent of the torture sequence in the bathtub in Jean-Luc Godard's censored film on the Algerian war *Le Petit soldat* (eventually released in 1963 after a two-year ban).

[8] See note one for reference to Watson's article. For a French-language book on Clouzot's entire career, see José-Louis Bocquet and Marc Godin, *Henri-Georges Clouzot cinéaste* (Paris: Editions La Sirène, 1993). An additional "French Film Guide" on Clouzot's *Le Corbeau*, written by Judith Mayne, is due to come out in the near future.

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