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Judith Mayne, *Le Corbeau*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press/London: Tauris, 2007. x + 114 pp. Stills, notes, credits, filmography, bibliography, and index. \$20.00 US (pb). ISBN-13-978-0-252-07457-8.

Review by Christopher Lloyd, Durham University.

The publication of Judith Mayne's study of Clouzot's *Le Corbeau* coincides happily with the centenary of the director's birth in 1907 and is the second book on Clouzot to be published in the new series of French Film Guides edited by Ginette Vincendeau.[1] The book comprises a brief synopsis and introduction, followed by more substantial chapters on production contexts, the film itself (with sixteen helpful illustrations which are presumably captured from a DVD, since no source is acknowledged), and its reception. *Le Corbeau* was released in 1943 and its notoriety is due both to its provocative subject matter and the political and cultural circumstances of the Occupation period.

The film is set in a small French town in the mid-twentieth century, whose inhabitants are plagued by a series of anonymous letters signed by the pen name of *le corbeau* (the crow or raven). As local dignitaries are accused of various crimes and misdemeanors (such as practicing abortion, adultery and embezzlement), suspicion falls on a newcomer, Dr Germain, and various women who are his associates. After Germain has been ostracized, a nurse has been falsely accused and arrested, and a cancer patient has committed suicide when a letter reveals his illness to be incurable, one of Germain's senior colleagues is finally exposed as the main culprit and murdered by the cancer patient's mother. Since most of the letter-writer's accusations appear to be true, the film also exposes the venality, hypocrisy and cynicism of the notables who run the town.

Although there is no overt reference to the war or to France's defeat by the Germans or to the collaborationist political regime of Marshal Pétain, it is not difficult to see barely disguised parallels in the film's satirical barbs with life under Occupation. For instance, writing anonymous letters denouncing one's neighbors and colleagues to the authorities became something of a national pastime in occupied France, with several million letters being sent and the practice continuing after the Liberation, when alleged collaborators became the target.[2] Moreover, the authoritarian moralizing of the Vichy regime, extolling the supposedly unifying virtues of fatherland, family and labor, proved to be a sham. It meant in reality allowing the Germans to pillage the nation's resources, to persecute and murder ethnic and religious minorities and ideological adversaries, and to deport hundreds of thousands of workers as conscript laborers. And just as the psychiatrist who leads the investigation in *Le Corbeau* proves eventually to be the main source of evil, so too the patriarchal leader Pétain who had been proclaimed the nation's savior was eventually tried and convicted of treason.

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, the painful truths about guilt and the failure of authority which Clouzot and his co-writer Louis Chavance anatomize did not find favor with the post-Liberation establishment. The film was denounced from all sides, by Resistance activists from the left and the right, and by the Catholic church. It was withdrawn from distribution and Clouzot (along with some of his production team and leading actors) banned from working for several years by the cinema purging committee. What was more surprising was that *Le Corbeau* was ever made in the first place. Clouzot benefited in the short term from his close association with the German production company Continental Films, which was established in Paris in October 1940 under the direction of Alfred Greven (whom Clouzot knew from working for UFA in Berlin in the early 1930s). Clouzot was put in charge of Continental's script department between January 1941 and October 1943; he wrote at least two scripts for their productions and was finally able to direct his first two feature films. Continental was intended to relaunch and then dominate the French film industry, and it was exempt from censorship by the Vichy government's cinema regulatory committee. As Mayne observes, Continental was meant to promote the "positive face" of Franco-German collaboration: "In other words, broad freedom of expression and topics promoted the idea that German domination was good for France" (p. 19). Nevertheless, by working for several years as an executive for Continental, as well as a writer and director, Clouzot exposed himself in the longer term to legitimate charges of economic and cultural collaboration. In addition, Clouzot became a target for post-war retribution because of the success of his films.

Judith Mayne argues that *Le Corbeau* manages to offend both Vichy and Resistance values: "For a Resistance determined to reaffirm the virility of France, a film that so threatened the stability of masculine identity was dangerous" (p. 78). While Clouzot himself was fatally compromised by his association with Continental, his film is too subversive of conventional identity roles and morality to fit the simpler and more upbeat patriotic messages required by either Vichy or the Resistance. Thus the fateful *corbeau* at the center of the film is both an evil-doer and a truth-teller, threatening and yet also purging the community. We never learn what motivates Dr Vorzet, beyond his self-mocking references to sexual inadequacy and evident envy of his younger colleague Germain's apparent wealth, integrity and seductiveness. How many imitators does the raven spawn, and how does Vorzet's killer discover his guilt? Such questions likewise remain unanswered. Germain's identity and actions also remain enigmatic, and he is far from a model of virtue (he is clearly on intimate terms with Vorzet's wife and may well be an abortionist). Conventional identification of virtuous behavior models is also impossible with the main female characters. Although Vorzet's wife Laura "looks like a Vichy poster for womanhood" (p. 54), she proves to be as disturbed as her husband. The sluttish Denise, on the other hand, whose promiscuity and indolence make her a more likely suspect, has a child with Germain and restores his faith in truth and the family.

Clouzot's fellow screenwriter Chavance defended himself against charges of unpatriotic actions by observing somewhat disingenuously that his screenplay had been written by 1937 and was based on a vendetta and court case which had occurred in Tulle between 1917 and 1923. Apart from the fact that the parallel with wartime conditions still remains unavoidable, the changes which Clouzot made to the original script intensify its provocative aspects. Thus the main villain ceased to be the wife Laura and became the more authoritative Vorzet, while Denise was no longer the wife of a rival doctor but his mistress, and the issue of abortion was more strongly emphasized.

Mayne also draws attention to and analyzes key examples of the film's "distinctive style," its use of high contrast and shadows "to create a world of suspicion and paranoia" (p. 39), although such expressionist devices are a generic feature of many films noirs of the 1940s. All in all, she has produced a persuasive and lucid account of a film which in many ways is symbolic of the betrayals and dilemmas caused by the Occupation. Two minor factual errors caught my attention. Sacha Guitry was not imprisoned "for three years" (p. 2) at the liberation, but for a few weeks and then released without charge; and the translation "I need a tutor" (p. 27) when referring to a plant surely should be "I need a stake" or "I need a support." But this book certainly offers welcome support for a classic of French cinema and a director who deserves to be far better known by English-speaking audiences.

NOTES

[1] See Susan Hayward, *Les Diaboliques* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press/London: Tauris, 2005). See also Christopher Lloyd, *Henri-Georges Clouzot* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007).

[2] See André Halimi, *La Délation sous l'Occupation* (Paris: Éditions Alain Moreau, 1983). Louis Malle's film *Lacombe Lucien* (1974) includes a scene at Gestapo headquarters showing the daily arrival of a postbag full of anonymous denunciations.

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