

# *J'accuse...*

**Henri-Georges Clouzot's Judging of Morality in *La Vérité***



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## Introduction

Although currently Henri-Georges Clouzot's *Le Corbeau* (*The Raven*) is widely acclaimed as one of his masterpieces, at the time of its release in 1943, it paradoxically almost put an end to Clouzot's career. What was supposed to be uplifting entertainment, demonstrating the "occupied countries the benefits of cooperating with the Germans" certainly did not turn out to be a positive piece of pro-German propaganda. Nor was it perceived a pro-French Resistance cinematic offensive (Thompson & Bordwell 273). Instead, the French director's film, produced by the German production company Continental, was universally denounced, as all parties felt offended by its ambiguous political contents; a paradox leading to the "Clouzot affair", and almost putting an end to the promising career of a brave, misanthropic director on a mission to disclose the truth about the dark side of humanity (Thompson & Bordwell 276).

Set in a small village somewhere, or rather anywhere, in France, the villagers are startled by a series of poison-pen letters, signed Le Corbeau. The letters reveal various secrets about respected members of the community, particularly Dr Germain. This unleashes hysterical suspicions and unreasonable accusations among the villagers, escalating into a crisis of moral decay and, finally, death. With his *Le Corbeau*, Henri-Georges Clouzot is responsible for what is possibly one of the most famous films of the Occupation period.

When German forces occupy Paris in 1940, a right-wing government is established in Vichy. The German Occupation has a great impact on film production and exhibition, changing the conditions radically. Many filmmakers have to flee or go into hiding (Thompson & Bordwell 259); yet, the talented screenwriter Henri-Georges Clouzot chooses a significantly different, very interesting direction that would lead to an unexpected political impasse.

Owing to his pre-war connections within the film industry in Berlin, Clouzot is appointed head of the script department at German production company Continental. With the objective to produce films for French audiences for entertainment purposes and in order to replace American films, Clouzot scripts at least two films and finally directs *L'Assassin Habite au 21* (*The Murderer Lives at #21*) in 1942 and *Le Corbeau* in 1943. Clouzot resigns from Continental after the release of *Le Corbeau*; however, this could not prevent him from being suspected of Nazi collaboration. The Comité de Libération du Cinéma Français (CLCF) assumes that the film “had probably been shown in Germany under the title *Province Française*”. Clouzot, in turn, responds that: “because the film had not been dubbed, it was only shown in Belgium and Switzerland” (Watson). Yet, the CLCF bans Clouzot lifelong from filmmaking in 1945 on the accusation of anti-patriotic behaviour and *Le Corbeau* is widely condemned as anti-French. However, some argue the opposite; instead of reading this storyline as an attack on the right-wing Vichy regime, some perceive *Le Corbeau* to depict an anti-informant and anti-Gestapo stance. Whether Clouzot intends to take a stance on political systems and relationships could be debated; alternatively, *Le Corbeau* may be primarily regarded as a representation of Clouzot’s wholly pessimistic view of humanity altogether. As a matter of fact, Clouzot has always insisted that “it was based on a real incident that occurred in the 1930s, rather than being a metaphorical statement about France under the occupation” as, supported by the opening caption, the location of the town could be anywhere (Watson). This defies the argument that it is the location and its political situation that defines human behaviour; instead, it is social structure and stratification that drives actions and emotions.

Due to the direct political context and the ambiguity of the subject matter and storyline, Clouzot’s political position seems inconclusive and is therefore presupposed to be repellent and offensive to both the left and right wing regime. Although *Le Corbeau* gets

Clouzot barred from filmmaking, initially for life, but later reduced to two years; the controversy that is raised also secures the film's abiding fame. Over the years, the political context becomes less relevant and the film is now praised for its artistic merits. Finally, the initial interpretation of the storyline as a critique specifically aimed at France develops to an interpretation of an outright pessimistic perception of humanity as such. Moreover, the pessimism and cynicism displayed set the tone for the rest of Clouzot's oeuvre, as, with the exception of *Quai des Orfèvres (Jenny Lamour, 1947)*, all Clouzot's works are saturated with a sense of misanthropy.

Clouzot books great success receiving rave reviews from the critics for *Le Salaire de la Peur (The Wages of Fear, 1953)* and *Les Diaboliques (Diabolique, or The Devils, 1955)*, earning him Alfred Hitchcock's admiration, or, rather, his envy as he effectively trumps Hitchcock's accomplishments with these suspense thrillers. In other words, in spite of the major career obstacles he encountered during the war, there are no grounds for Clouzot to alter the initial path he took with *Le Corbeau* – a path that was heavily influenced by Fritz Lang, “whose unflinching view of the sordid side of life can be detected throughout Clouzot's oeuvre” – as his star is steadily rising (Watson).

However, determined to change his course, Clouzot misses the mark with his following documentary *Le Mystère Picasso (The Mystery of Picasso)* in 1956 and the thriller *Les Espions (The Spies)* in 1957 before he returns to his niche of creating narratives revolving around jealousy and infidelity. In fact, a closer examination of his 1960 courtroom drama *La Vérité (The Truth)* unveils the close similarity in tone to *Le Corbeau*. Once again, Clouzot questions social structures and social institutions and concepts that have a significant impact on its agents' conceptions and behaviour. However, despite *Le Corbeau*'s lasting relevance, current audiences basically overlook *La Vérité*. How is it possible that such an established director with such a fascinating history, getting a lifetime ban from filmmaking only to return

to be hailed as one of the greatest French directors, directs a film starring one of the most iconic French actresses, Brigitte Bardot, and only a handful of people today are familiar with it?

Perhaps the obscurity of *La Vérité* is again a consequence of poor timing. However, unlike *Le Corbeau* being released before the time was right, *La Vérité* comes out when the ship of the trial of passion had already sailed. Due to the great popularity of Billy Wilder's *Witness for the Prosecution* (1957) and Otto Preminger's *Anatomy of a Murder* (1959), *La Vérité* enters a saturated market. As Clouzot's subtlety fails to offer the public something new and exciting, critics basically overlook the film. Of course, this makes one wonder what drove Clouzot to decide on creating a French alternative for these American box office hits?

To understand Clouzot's motivation, we must reconstruct the events that led up to the moment of creating *La Vérité*. When Clouzot directed *Le Salaire de la Peur* and *Les Diaboliques*, he was ahead of his American colleagues and he enjoyed great popularity. However, with his consecutive *Les Espions* released in 1957, the American spy thrillers easily overtake his proposition as he fails to exceed the level of contemporary American immigrant directors Lang and Hitchcock. Moreover, his attempt at retaliation with *La Vérité*, too, turns out under-appreciated as Clouzot again is unable to match the critical success of the American courtroom dramas directed by immigrant directors Preminger and Wilder. And still, even today the critics consider the American variants superior to Clouzot's interpretation as, for instance, the Internet Movie Database rates both *Witness for the Prosecution* and *Anatomy of a Murder* at least half a point higher on a scale of one to ten with an 8.4 and an 8.1 respectively against a 7.6 for *La Vérité* (IMDb). Therefore, I would like to argue that if, similar to *Les Espions*, *La Vérité* is unduly neglected by the critics this is not due to the quality, nor the subject matter. Instead, Clouzot has fallen victim to poor timing, causing him

to lose initiative and, thus, allowing his American-based ‘competitors’ to get ahead of him and take over by releasing the crime of passion courtroom drama first.<sup>1</sup>

However, in order to support this argument, it is vital to closely examine *La Vérité* and determine accurately its significance in comparison to the American courtroom dramas. To what extent does *La Vérité* share fundamental incentives or implications with its American predecessors? How does this connect to *La Vérité*’s representation and interpretation? And what does Clouzot expect of his audience in terms of their role and involvement given his approach to presenting his topic with emphasis on the relation between morality and justice?

Similar to *Le Salaire de la Peur*, *La Vérité*, which translates as *The Truth*, is a chain of Clouzot-isms with his typical “deliberately unlikeable yet oddly sympathetic characters, the way these characters are reduced to childlike demonstrations of emotion in the face of extreme situations” and, most prominently, the misanthropic and cynic mood that is already so characteristic of *Le Corbeau*. With *La Vérité*, Clouzot certainly is not gentle on the delicate or susceptible soul. In fact, watching the movie leaves an awfully bitter taste as, in accordance with the common proverb: the greater the truth, the greater the libel, Clouzot boldly chooses to libel all; even the audience does not escape his accusations as through the protagonist we are handed a mirror to self-reflect and face the truth. In line with the theme of *Le Corbeau* this reflection is rather sinister as in *La Vérité*, Clouzot cynically confronts the viewer with his fatalistic conception of life in a French society heavily relying on social stratification and his misanthropic pessimism that exposes humanity’s moral weakness. Paradoxically, Clouzot’s prior ban from filmmaking was founded on the accusation of an immoral act, which makes him and his *La Vérité* all the more interesting to examine.

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<sup>1</sup> A rather common phenomenon that occurred most explicitly when Miloš Forman’s *Valmont* is released in 1989, almost a year after the release of Stephen Frears’s *Dangerous Liaisons*. Forman’s movie only runs in theaters for a limited time and receives mixed reviews in opposition to the highly acclaimed *Dangerous Liaisons*.

Watching *La Vérité*, compares to watching an ecological food chain in play, as Clouzot early on reveals that a colony of predatory spiders are hungry and out to devour their prey; throughout the movie the viewer is sucked into the web of moral prejudice in which Dominique Marceau, like a struggling fly, gets caught deeper and deeper every scene. Moreover, the more scenes are shown, the more the spectator will debate the question of what is truly morally correct. This becomes even more evident when the viewer accepts Clouzot's proposition that every human being is potentially capable of committing murder, regardless of age and gender. In fact, Clouzot craftily involves the audience gradually, ultimately indicating that it is society that is the true murderer. Therefore, I wish to suggest that this courtroom drama is not merely set up to show the viewer how the accused is judged; instead, Clouzot holds up a mirror to his audience and slyly lures the viewer to take a look and self-reflect. In other words, in Henri-Georges Clouzot's *La Vérité* it is, in fact, the viewer's moral judgement that is on trial rather than the accused as nothing tells the truth like a long, hard look in Clouzot's mirror; a mirror showing the viewer a frank reflection of reality without a fog of assumed morality.

In order to support my suggestion, this study is divided into two parts. In part one, I offer a background to the two essential individuals who provide an extra dimension to *La Vérité*'s interpretation, Henri-Georges Clouzot and Brigitte Bardot, by exploring the positions that they occupy in French cinema at the moment *La Vérité* is produced. In part two, I first discuss the key variables that affect the approach and implications of *La Vérité*'s plot line by drawing a brief outline of the concept of morality and its manifestation within society, followed by a concise discussion of *crime passionnel* and its codification in the French legal system. Equipped with the information and specifications, defined and limited by this theoretical framework, it is viable to closely analyse and distinguish the variety of decisions that Clouzot made in order to express his point of view and connect these with the



information from part one to investigate a correlation and shed light on Clouzot's approach through the various references, the symbolism and the themes that will start to become recognisable and, perhaps, even more apparent and valid by the final step in this study: a parallelisation of *La Vérité* as a French response to the contemporary American *Witness for the Prosecution* (1957) as this remarkably witty film with a surprising finale directed by Billy Wilder, too, deals with a courtroom drama and a pursuit of the truth and *Anatomy of a Murder* (1959); a fascinating, yet complex film about a courtroom case that raises a number of questions and ethical issues directed by Otto Preminger. This parallelisation will clarify how Clouzot felt inspired and why his personality drove him to create a French equivalent questioning a subject already questioned as he was fighting a personal battle motivated by an emotional reaction to an, perhaps, unexpected reversal in initiative.

PART ONE

***Mise en Scène: Shaping A Background to Henri-Georges Clouzot and Brigitte Bardot within the Context of French Cinema***

*“un être négative, en conflit perpétuel avec lui-même et le monde qui l’entourait.”<sup>2</sup>*

Brigitte Bardot on (working with) Henri-Georges Clouzot (qtd. in Lloyd 6).

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<sup>2</sup> “A negative being, for ever at odds with himself and the world around him” (translation Lloyd).

## 1.1 Henri-Georges Clouzot

In order to fully grasp the scope of Clouzot's objectives and implications at the time he directs *La Vérité*, it will prove to be constructive to shape an understanding of his persona through a reflection on his prior experiences beyond the "Clouzot affair". As a matter of fact, Clouzot discloses that the foundation for the formation and development of his personality is laid during the 1930s when he spends four years in sanatoria due to his poor health. He describes this period in his life as "the making of him: "I owe it all to the sanatorium. It was my school. While resident there I saw how human beings worked."'" (Watson). So, how exactly has Clouzot displayed his understanding of humanity, human behaviour and social interaction over the years? And was he at all successful at turning his personal conceptions into comprehensible public showings?

Looking at Henri-Georges Clouzot's works, he proves to be a true cynic, a pessimist, and a misanthrope. In addition to both physical and mental illness, infidelity and jealousy are recurring topics. Moreover, he continually questions traditional conventions, recurrently pictured by suspense, deception, betrayal and violent death linked to enclosed spaces, guilty secrets, voyeurism and entrapment. Although Clouzot habitually kills off his characters, including the protagonists, these characters generally are as important to themes as the settings, mood and tone, which are consistently dark, but not without a touch of pitch-black humour.

After his two-year ban, Clouzot restores his reputation with the popular *Quai des Orfèvres* (1947) and his success keeps growing with *Manon* (1949), and *Le Salaire de la Peur* (1953), to which Hitchcock attempted to buy the rights, but failed as writer Georges Arnaud opts for a French director. *The Wages of Fear* is Clouzot's "first worldwide critical and commercial success" (Watson). Interestingly, soon after Clouzot beats Hitchcock for the second time by acquiring the copyrights of *Celle Qui n'Était Plus* by authors Pierre Boileau

and Thomas Narcejac. The film, *Les Diaboliques*, is released in 1955 and becomes Clouzot's most acclaimed title. Its immense success accounts for the vast number of adaptations and re-releases. *Les Diaboliques* is putting flesh on the bones of the frequent comparison with Hitchcock as their work displays a great number of parallels. However, some would argue that dubbing Clouzot the French Hitchcock would be selling him short as they equally have their personal triumphs and tragedies and it appears that at times they find a mutual inspiration in each other's projects. For instance, *Psycho* (1960) "is usually credited with changing the entire landscape of thriller/horror cinema, but in fact that honour rightfully belongs to *Les Diaboliques*" (Watson). Moreover, Huckvale argues that Hitchcock "reprised *Les Diaboliques*' bathroom imagery in *Psycho* and its duplicity plot in *Vertigo*" (11); Rotten Tomatoes declares *Les Diaboliques* "the greatest film that Alfred Hitchcock never made" (RT); and Stephen Whitty, although rejecting a direct link between *Les Diaboliques* and *Psycho*, points out that the clever marketing of *Les Diaboliques* by means of a spoiler alert *avant la lettre* "definitely first alerted Hitchcock to how profitable grimy black-and-white horror could be" (68). In reference to the title, Clouzot requests his audience at the end of the movie not to reveal the plot, showing a message on the screen that more or less translates as: "Don't be devils. Don't ruin the interest your friends could take in this film. Don't tell them what you saw. Thank you, for them" (*Les Diaboliques*).

*Les Diaboliques* is followed by the documentary *Le Mystère Picasso* in 1956 and the thriller *Les Espions* in 1957, which are both commercial failures. According to *Senses of Cinema*, *Le Mystère Picasso* is inspired by *Bezoek aan Picasso*, a 1949 documentary directed by the Belgian Paul Haesaerts. In fact, *Le Mystère Picasso* "employs precisely the same technique for much of its running time – painting on transparent glass, while the camera films from the other side" (Dixon). What sets Clouzot's documentary apart is that most of the featured paintings were destroyed after the shooting had ended so that they would only exist

on film. For *Les Espions* Clouzot, too, found inspiration in the works by his European peers, as it had of course been Hitchcock who had popularised the spy film genre after Lang had laid the foundation with *Spione* in 1928. Yet, despite ambitious intentions, the critical response to Clouzot's representation is disappointing.

Then, in 1960, *La Vérité* is released. The film receives some harsh critiques and, as it turns out, Clouzot has again drawn his inspiration from the works by other European filmmakers, specifically Wilder's *Witness for the Prosecution* and Preminger's *Anatomy of a Murder*. Yet, in spite of the critics, *La Vérité* books great success at the box office. In fact, Lloyd notes that this movie would be "the second most popular film in France in 1960" and Brigitte Bardot's "highest grossing film" (4).

## 1.2 Brigitte Bardot

Brigitte Anne-Marie Bardot, or BB for short, is born on 28 September 1934 in Paris. She is raised in an upper-middle class Roman Catholic home and her focus mainly lies on ballet. In 1947, she is accepted to the Conservatoire de Paris where she is educated in dance. However, before long she starts modelling and in 1949 she appears on the cover of *Elle* magazine. The picture is a last minute replacement and Bardot's name is not listed. However, her looks attract the attention of film director Marc Allégret, who sends out his assistant Roger Vadim to find her.

In the 2003 documentary on her in the series *Biography*, Bardot describes Vadim as the bohemian type, living as he pleased, without any morality. In other words, exactly the type of man her parents loathe. Bardot falls madly in love with Vadim and when her parents refuse a marriage, Bardot puts her head in the gas oven. Vadim starts writing scripts tailored to Bardot and he makes sure that she is regularly photographed at the many functions and

events they visit together. In 1952 Vadim's efforts pay off and he gets Bardot her first acting job with a part in the comedy *Le Trou Normand (Crazy for Love)*, directed by Jean Boyer. Soon, her second role would follow as the skimpily dressed light-keeper's daughter Manina in the 1952 *Manina, la Fille Sans Voiles (Manina, the Girl in the Bikini)*, directed by Willy Rozier. Bardot's parents are outraged seeing their daughter in a revealing bikini and, moreover, even some brief nudity passes the scene. Bardot's father initiates a lawsuit based on the claim that the film compromises his daughter's honour and Bardot could not have been more pleased. In fact, against her parents' will, a couple of months later the now eighteen-year-old Brigitte marries Vadim.

Vadim finally is in full control of his beautiful, young wife's career and Bardot stars in one film after another. Soon she is one of France's most successful actresses, gaining international interest due to her eroticism and explicit sexuality, which was particularly different from American movies at that time due to the Production Code in Hollywood. This set of moral guidelines scrutinises the Hollywood movies to verify whether the contents are acceptable or not. Movies that do not receive a certificate of approval are kept out of theatres. The Code is, of course, dismissive of nudity, but engages also in political censorship, prohibiting for instance anti-Nazi films from being produced. However, foreign films, such as the films featuring Bardot, are beyond the Code's limits, increasing their popularity and impact on American audiences.

When Vadim in 1956 makes Bardot the star of his *Et Dieu... Créa la Femme (...And God Created Woman)*, the British audiences are lining up to see the sexy melodrama. Moreover, the American viewers are even more excited, and when the National Legion of Decency condemns Bardot, calling her "a creation not of God, but of the Devil", their enthusiasm only increases (*Biography* 13:13). The film receives C-rating, which means that

seeing this movie would count as a mortal sin and, yet, its popularity is immense and Brigitte Bardot becomes a true sensation in the United States, representing freedom and sexuality.

Vadim had created the ideal woman; however, he had also taught her to be free and she leaves him for her co-star. The media eventually start to criticise Bardot for her subsequent string of different bed partners, but Bardot keeps finding new men to keep her company. When she is twenty-four, she falls head over heels for her co-star in the comedy *Babette s'en va-t-en Guerre (Babette Goes to War)*, Jacques Charrier. As soon as Bardot is pregnant, she and Charrier marry. However, Bardot expresses that she does not want to be a mother for which she is judged heavily by friend and foe alike. A divorce follows and Charrier receives custody of their child.

Bardot, then, goes from one lover to the next and her image starts to degrade. It seems she has hit rock bottom when she receives death threats and is physically attacked by a woman in a lift. This is the moment when Bardot, now twenty-five years old and as emotionally fragile as can be, starts working with Clouzot on *La Vérité*.

### 1.3 Collaboration

Due to his authoritarian and perfectionist personality, Clouzot's choice for Bardot to play his protagonist seems rather peculiar as she has the reputation of a person who does as she pleases. However, Clouzot is known to push his actors to and, at times, even over their limits, as he wants them to truly identify with their character and relate to their situations. For instance, it is said that he intentionally served Véra Clouzot rotten fish on the set of *Les Diaboliques* in order to get a genuine reaction from her in a scene in which her character is forced by her husband to eat rotten fish. Furthermore, Clouzot appears a master manipulator; Bardot claims that when she asked for aspirin, Clouzot gave her sleeping pills instead as

Bardot's character would overdose on sleeping pills in an upcoming scene. Bardot, unaware of the fact that she was taking sleeping pills, took all of them and had to get her stomach pumped. Moreover, several of his actors, including Bardot, claim to have been hit or slapped by Clouzot.

Although these examples may portray Clouzot as extreme or maybe even delusional, they also demonstrate how far Clouzot is prepared to go in order to get his films exactly right. Looking back, however, Bardot calls Clouzot "diabolical" as he kept putting her down by telling her that her life was over and that she would never succeed at anything due to her bad reputation (*Biography* 22:33). Eventually, the pressure becomes too great and on the morning of her twenty-sixth birthday, Bardot is found outside her home after taking an overdose of pills and slashing her wrists. Following this suicide attempt, she is taken to hospital where she is diagnosed as suffering from a nervous breakdown.



PART TWO

**Investigating *La Vérité*: A Discussion of Morality, *Crime*  
*Passionnel* and Clouzot's Approach**

*“Vous voulez me juger mais vous n’avez jamais vécu, jamais aimé...  
C’est pour ça que vous me détestez, c’est parce que vous êtes tous  
morts, morts!”*<sup>3</sup>

Dominique Marceau in *La Vérité* (1960)

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<sup>3</sup> “You want to judge me, but you have never lived, never loved... That’s why you hate me, because you’re all dead, dead!” (translation mine).

## 2.1 Theoretical Framework

### 2.1.1 Morality

As morality is an abstract concept, it is rather complicated to define. Yet, despite its complexity, every rational person feels moral obligations. Therefore, according to the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, morality “refers to a code of conduct that would be accepted by anyone who meets certain intellectual and volitional conditions, almost always including the condition of being rational”. The individuals meeting these conditions count as moral agents. Being a moral agent proves beneficial as following the accepted code of conduct offers its agents protection, for when all obey the rules, everyone acquires protection. Therefore, morality is a societal concept functioning as a public guide for every rational person, keeping its agents safe from harm.

Since morality is a public matter that should offer moral agents protection, consequently, there must be a link between morality and law as law is a system drawn up and carried out as a means to keep our society safe and govern behaviour. However, the difference between law and morality is that law has “explicit written rules, penalties, and officials who interpret the laws and apply the penalties”, whereas morality is a code of conduct. Moreover, “although there is often considerable overlap in the conduct governed by morality and that governed by law, laws are often evaluated—and changed—on moral grounds” (*Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*). In other words, morality and law interact, making morality, despite its abstractness, a fundamental societal concept of grave dimension. An interesting example of the close connection between morality and law is the increasing rejection of Capital Punishment in many legal systems over the years based on the argument that it is morally deplorable to kill another human being.

In the case of *La Vérité* the accused is facing murder charges. As it is made rather obvious right from the beginning of the film that the accused is in fact the perpetrator, this seems to be a clear-cut matter from a legal point of view. However, the accused is a very young and breathtakingly beautiful woman and, thus, certainly not the type of person who seems a dangerous criminal that should be put away in a dark and dreary prison cell for years, or worse, that should be put to death. Moreover, she claims to have been in love with the victim, which provides her lawyers the perfect opportunity to plead *crime passionnel*. This adds to the moral complexity as in France crimes of passion are traditionally treated rather leniently. In other words, if it had been Dominique Marceau's intention to murder her lover, then she would basically get away with murder, as she will avoid a just penalty when the jury finds her guilty of a crime of passion rather than murder since the legal punishment for *crime passionnel* is limited.

### **2.1.2 *Crime Passionnel***

In the *Cambridge Dictionary*, murder is defined as “the crime of intentionally killing a person” and, thus, in criminal law different degrees of murder need to be distinguished as it depends on the level of intention whether murder is, in fact, legally classified as murder or another form of homicide. This is also true for the French court.

The French legal system is based on the principles of Civil Law, which means that codified statutes form the basis for judicial decisions. The foundation of the French civil legal system goes all the way back to the document known as the Code Civil or Code Napoléon established under Napoléon in March 1804. The Napoleonic Code was greatly influential as it was adopted by a vast number of countries that the French occupied during the Napoleonic Wars. The Napoleonic Penal Code, or *Code Pénal*, then, was issued in 1810 and remained in use until 1994. It served as the leading model of European criminal legislation. In this Penal

Code, murder is defined and classified in Book III, Title II, Chapter I: Crimes and Delicts against the Person, Section I, article 295 to article 304. Relevant in order to examine the pleading of *crime passionnel* are:

295. Homicide, committed wilfully, is denominated *murder*.

296. Every murder, committed with premeditation, or with lying in wait, is denominated *assassination*.

297. Premeditation consists in a design formed, before the action, of attacking the person of any particular individual, or even of any one who shall be found or met with, even though such design may be dependant upon some circumstance or condition.

And regarding the penalty:

302. Every person guilty of assassination, parricide, infanticide, or poisoning, shall be punished with death; without prejudice to the special disposition contained in article 13, relative to parricide.

303. All malefactors, of whatever denomination, who, for the execution of their crimes, make use of tortures, or commit acts of barbarity, shall be punished as guilty of assassination.

304. Murder shall be punished with death, whenever it shall have preceded, accompanied, or followed any other crime or delict. (*The Penal Code of France*, Translated into English, 61-2)

In other words, conviction of murder, or assassination, will result in the death penalty.

Therefore, lawyers defending the accused are keen to search for a different approach. Section III of the same chapter discusses Involuntary Homicide. As stated in article 319, the penalty in case of a homicide committed involuntarily is imprisonment of three months to two years and a fine, which makes this, of course, the more favourable plea. In addition to involuntary homicide, the Code distinguishes Excusable Crimes and Delicts, and Cases not admitting Excuse. Most importantly, in article 324 it is indicated that adultery may count as an excuse for murdering your wife and her accomplice. In case of excusable homicide, the death penalty is reduced to imprisonment from one year to five years, as is stated in article 326.

Although article 324 is the only legal justification for murder, due to this instance of tolerance that can be found in the Napoleonic penal code, the concept of *crime passionnel* is often associated with France. However, the phenomenon is well represented in art and culture all around the world. An eminent example is, for instance, the crime of passion in literature, such as in Shakespeare's *Othello* and Dante's *Inferno*. Also, movies often feature the crime of passion as motive for murder, think for instance of Adrian Lyne's *Fatal Attraction* (1987) and Sam Mendes's *American Beauty* (1999). Evidently, *crime passionnel* fascinates and, although it was established that every rational person understands a common morality that, among other acts, rejects murder of another human being, murder fuelled by passion seems less morally deplorable. In other words, moral behaviour and murder are not mutually exclusive, at least not according to article 324 of the Napoleonic penal code, as adultery is morally considered the graver crime. However, objectively almost every murder could be categorised as passion driven. This causes legal complexity as it is the question who determines when a murder is committed out of passion and when this passion is sufficiently intense to qualify as *crime passionnel* and will, thus, be virtually tolerated on moral grounds?

In order to prevent abuse of power, different officials have responsibility over different stages of the French criminal procedure, which, Catherine Elliott explains, is additionally divided into three stages, to know “the police investigation and the prosecution; the judicial investigation; and the trial” (13). Interestingly, the French court applies the concept of a jury trial in major criminal cases; however, “unanimity is not required from the jury; they decide by a mere majority; and, if the voices are equal, the prisoner is acquitted” (*The Penal Code of France, Translated into English*, xi). This great jury influence signals the significance of the public opinion, which makes perfect sense considering the view that morality and law are both systems that serve to govern public safety; however, as already established, the difference between law and morality is that law is an explicit set of rules, whereas morality is an abstract concept. In other words, morality cannot be measured and giving more independent parties a vote in the matter does not necessarily increase justice. In fact, giving a vote to parties without any legal background could result in a judgement based chiefly on moral grounds. If it were not for the different variables interfering with the different moral agents’ judgement, this should not be a problem as morality is universal; however, those different variables are exactly the issue that makes a controversial topic, such as the crime of passion, interesting to examine. Of course, this is precisely what Clouzot does in *La Vérité*; he examines the truth behind our moral behaviour and the decision that we make under the influence of our common morality. In other words, Clouzot presents the viewer the question: if everyone believes that they act morally, how, then, are we capable to judge others believing, too, to act in a moral manner to be immoral? Or would the only other option be the offender being untruthful when claiming to be sincere?

Of course, the concept of *crime passionnel* does not make the issue any easier. To determine when a crime is, in fact, a crime of passion is as complex from a moral point of view as it is from a legal perspective. Although article 324 is very specific, stating:

Murder, committed by the husband, upon his wife, or by the wife, upon her husband, is not excusable, if the life of the husband or wife, who has committed such murder, has not been put in peril, at the very moment when the murder has taken place. Nevertheless, in the case of adultery, provided for by article 336, murder committed upon the wife as well as upon her accomplice, at the moment when the husband shall have caught them in the fact, in the house where the husband and wife dwell, is excusable. (*The Penal Code of France, Translated into English*, 65-6)

In short, this means that in the absence of a life-threatening situation, it is only a crime of passion when the husband catches his wife in the act in his own house. How come, then, do women also plead *crime passionnel* when on the stand? According to Mary Hartman, at the end of the nineteenth century crimes of violence committed by women without a poverty motive, are very often instigated by a respectability motive. In other words, respectable middle-class women maintained a perfect reputation by murdering men who could quite possibly harm their good name. Hartman explains that it was worth the risk for these women as “given the legal and extra-legal immunities enjoyed by the middle-class – and the higher regard for its women – a good deal of this crime may have gone [...] unpunished” (55). Additionally, Ruth Harris points out another motive as she describes how women were regularly diagnosed in court to be suffering from a hysterical disorder:

“psychiatrists brought to bear a clinical, scientific vision, professedly based on determinist theories of neurophysiological disinhibition and hereditary degeneration, which almost always stressed some aspect of the hysterical disorder and linked a portrait of irresponsibility to a wider account of women’s biological life cycle (...)” (Harris, 209)

Consequently, these women were portrayed and basically diminished as to being irrational. Due to the idea that only a rational person is a moral agent, an irrational person can by definition never be expected to act morally. This referral to (temporary) insanity opened up the possibility for women, middle-class, but now especially women of the lower classes as well, to plead *crime passionnel*. In fact, when comparing men and women, “the proportion of female crime associated with passion was much higher” (Harris 210).

Moreover, women from the lower classes, “petit bourgeois women and femmes du peuple”, also started to refer to abuse of their honour in justifying their violations. One of the many examples Harris gives is the story of Marie-Françoise-Léontine F., a domestic servant who tried to murder her lover. Although he had promised to marry her, after getting her pregnant, he abandoned her. In court, Marie-Françoise-Léontine F. pleaded that he had dishonoured her and her family. The fact that the court acquitted Marie-Françoise-Léontine F., and many other women in similar situations who either attempted to kill or succeeded in killing their lovers, exemplifies the significance of moral values in legal settings and, similarly, the far-reaching, versatile and dynamic effect of article 324 which accounts for the association of *crime passionnel* with the French court and the reason why both male and female offenders plead crime of passion. In other words, as previously discussed, morality and law interact and in this case moral values serve as a stimulus for accommodating legislation to the situation; a development which is possible due to the fact that morality is not set in stone, but is a concept and, hence, it can transform over time.

However, despite the modifications, the crime of passion is distinguished from other crimes in a specific manner; a precondition for justification of a *crime passionnel* is passion. In other words, the crime must not be premeditated. Although this seems rather straightforward, it is far from easy to determine whether an act is premeditated or not. For instance, is buying a gun and shooting your lover a premeditated act as the gun first had to be



bought by the shooter, or is the action of buying the gun included in the passion as this person did not own a gun and was, therefore, never inclined to shoot another person? And, possibly even more ambiguous, could one link the honour motive to passion as honour crimes are generally motivated by revenge which by definition implies some form of premeditation as revenge happens in retaliation? According to Howard Engel: “research suggests that revenge murders are a different category, related to crime passionnel in many ways, but not very helpful in exploring its passionate side”. Moreover, Engel points out that “the time between the provoking act and the commission of the crime is an important factor” (19). Basically, it can be concluded that every situation and every action of the participants has to be judged independently in order to decide whether crime of passion is applicable according to the moral agents’ deliberations.

Despite, or likely due to its complexity, its relation to morality and its unique legal admission, *crime passionnel* serves as a fascinating topic in order to research French society. Engel aptly argues that: “the study of crime offers a special tool to the social historian. Through a study of the offenses that societies, throughout history, have chosen to criminalize, prosecute and, at the end of the process, punish, we get some notion of how people behave *in extremis*”. Furthermore,

we can learn about the structure of the society, the classes, the power base and the mentality of not only the offenders, but also of those who judge them [...] [as] the study of a particular crime allows the criminologist and anyone else interested in looking to see a slice of a micro-civilization that existed surrounding a peculiar group of circumstances. (Engel 15)

In film, judgement goes beyond the courtroom, as there is an entire movie-watching audience who become the criminologist and form an opinion on the claims as the scenes unfold. Clouzot cleverly challenges the audience to get involved and come to a just verdict in a case that is tailored to incite controversy and confusion as law and morality interweave. A critic from the *Los Angeles Times* aptly commented that *La Vérité* is: “an amazing picture, a tour de force from all concerned. It is at once immoral, amoral and strangely moral” (Scheuer).

## 2.2 Clouzot’s Approach

### 2.2.1 *J’accuse*

When researching *La Vérité*, the most significant result is that there is not much information to find on this film. However, it is often mentioned that this overlooked *tour de force* is one of the key works of Clouzot’s oeuvre, and it should be, given the fact that it was not just a box office hit upon its release; it is also one of Bardot’s films and roles she is most proud of and, more importantly some argue it is Clouzot’s covert sequel in thematic sense to *Le Corbeau*, the film that got him banned from filmmaking due to the subject matter. *La Vérité* was nominated for the annual United States Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film, competing against the Italian *Kapò* by Gillo Pontecorvo, the Spanish *Macario* by Roberto Gavaldón, *Deveti Krug (The Ninth Circle)* by France Štiglic from Serbo-Croatia and, the winning, *Jungfrukällan (The Virgin Spring)* by the Swedish Ingmar Bergman. Moreover, it was awarded the Grand prix du cinéma français. Clouzot wrote the scenario, together with

his brother Jérôme Géronimi and his wife Véra Clouzot, assisted by Simone Drieu, Michèle Perrein and novelist Cristiane Rochefort.<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, *La Vérité* is produced by Raoul Lévy who had also produced Vadim's *Et Dieu... Créa la Femme*. Filming locations are all in Paris and shooting the film took about six months. Clouzot had a budget of 1.5 million dollars of which a large amount went towards Bardot's fee. The movie's tagline, "Clouzot directs Bardot", could not have been more fitting as it is anticipated by critics and public that this film will turn Bardot into a real actress (*The Truth* IMDb). Of course, as with every other project, Clouzot takes his mission very seriously; in fact, Bardot finds in Clouzot her worst director nightmare.

Clouzot was known to pick top-ranking actors for his films and starting shooting *La Vérité*, Bardot had already acted in twenty-six films. However, the vast majority of Bardot's previous films can be categorised in the same light-hearted romantic genre. Moreover, no matter Bardot's role, she is said to always play the same character. In fact, Vadim goes so far as to state that "she doesn't act"; instead, "she exists", which Bardot confirms (De Beauvoir 18). Therefore, for Clouzot to choose Bardot is an odd decision as *La Vérité* does not at all fit the genre she is used to and she is by no means an actress who seems to match with Clouzot's conventional and authoritarian take on the filming process. However, according to Lloyd, Clouzot created the script and the character of Dominique Marceau "intentionally for Bardot" and "the personality and tribulations of Dominique Marceau in *La Vérité* are to a considerable extent derived from Bardot's own experience" (153). Granted, Bardot has never been on trial for murder, but the story does echo a number of her personal experiences, including the manner in which the French public perceives her.

The first scene of *La Vérité* features a nun walking up the stairs of a women's prison. The entire film is shot in black and white, which adds to the suspense and tension that is so

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<sup>4</sup> In 1962, Vadim would film Rochefort's novel *Le Repos du Guerrier* (1958), starring Bardot. It is released under the same title, which translates as *Love on a Pillow*.

typical of a film noir. Whether *La Vérité* is a genuine film noir could be disputed; yet, there is no question that it is a suspenseful courtroom drama revolving around a supposed crime of passion and a course of judgement interspersed with prejudice and contempt. The nun, or rather the prison guard, goes up a large staircase with long vertical bars that mimic the bars of a prison cell. The black and white intensify the darkness and the shadows cast by the prison bars on the floor arouse the feeling of entrapment. The black garment that covers the nun from head to toe gives her a ghostlike air while she is roaming the narrow prison hallways. The silence is daunting as, reminiscent of *Les Diaboliques*, there is no music, not even some tones or sound effects except for the soft sound of footsteps and the clanging of keys. Turning on the lights does not lift the eerie atmosphere; in fact, the light instigates the swelling of women's voices, chatting heatedly and moaning bitterly from behind the closed prison doors, increasing a sense of distress. The enclosed, dark space hauls the viewer into this oppressive and bleak world that is Dominique Marceau's future.

The viewer meets Marceau in her prison cell, lying on a bed smoking and throwing the ashes on the ground. Unlike her cellmates, she does not get up from the bed when the door is unlocked; moreover, she refuses to look at the nun when she addresses her. Instead, she tells the nun to leave her alone. Clouzot wonderfully manages to change Bardot's character perception in the course of the film. By means of the storyline and the providing of an elaborate background story, but also clever camerawork, zooming in on Dominique's non-verbal signs of vulnerability, such as her widened eyes and her reduced body size due to her hunched shoulders, he raises the viewer's sympathy for Dominique. While the nun walks on and her cellmates argue, Marceau grabs a piece of a broken mirror from behind her bed and studies her face. Already in this first scene, Marceau's tragic ending is being foreshadowed. As her cellmates are debating Marceau's crimes, she holds up the mirror fragment and in a long shot of part of Marceau's face that is reflected in the mirror, the viewer starts to become

aware of the paradox between the different reflections a person can have. On the one hand, we see the reflection of a beautiful young girl; on the other hand, we see the reflection of a supposed murderer. Yet, normally when we look in a mirror, we see our own reflection. Thus, through the mirror Clouzot is showing us how our own perceptions are reflected in Marceau.

The following scene, again, starts with an emphasis on the enclosed space by means of the camera emphasis on the large doors to the courtroom that are being closed and the attention to the lack of fresh air in the courtroom. Moreover, another lock has to be opened, in this case the lock on one of the stands, for which permission is needed. The confinement literally mimics the prison environment. However, figuratively it implies the narrow-mindedness and extreme pressure of the public opinion that is not only present in the courtroom, but also outside in the form of the press. Before the trial starts, Marceau's lawyers discuss her case together. They are not at all interested in the truth; instead, they are concerned about her attractive looks and the implications of her appearance on the jurors, who are all middle-aged, white, conservative-looking males and a handful of women. It is again pointed out that Marceau's lawyer, Maître Guérin (Charles Vanel), as well as the lawyer of the defendant care less about justice than they do about their own victory; the more because they have a personal rivalry amongst them being both successful lawyers, earning great sums of money. In fact, Guérin remarks how much he enjoys his profession if it were not for all the clients.

As soon as Marceau enters the courtroom, all eyes are on her. She is the only one standing up and as the shot is filmed from a large distance, including the rest of the trial attendees sitting down, Dominique sticks out like a sore thumb. The camera distance separates her from society like a social pariah. She is a *persona non grata*, an outlaw, and she needs to be legally rendered. As requested, she states her name and age; yet, she keeps silent

when she is asked to give her profession. During the film, it will become clear that Marceau collects her money by borrowing, begging and prostituting. While the jury lots are being drawn, the court reporters voice the public opinion on Marceau, which is obviously fed by their reporting, and openly discuss their aversion to her and their prejudices towards her guilt, claiming premeditated murder. One of the reporters predicts that Marceau's lawyers will plead *crime passionnel*, and whether Marceau is guilty or not, they already speculate about the prospect of tomorrow's story as they look eagerly forward to describe Marceau's lifelong jail sentence. In short, justice does not stand a chance against social conventions and convictions as Marceau fits the bourgeois' or conformists' stereotype of a criminal. However, the courtroom crowd does not realise that the public opinion is a reflection of their own hypocrisy.

Clouzot's cynicism becomes clearer every minute the scene progresses and when the members of the jury are selected and lined up, the close similarity between the men is emphasised as they are filmed one by one, all wearing similar clothes and all having a similar, emotionless expression on their faces. This is the man who represents the French population, and, moreover, this is the man who functions as France's moral compass. During the preliminary hearing, Guérin passes the time by drawing a picture of an increasing number of black spiders in an expanding web on his note pad. It is hard not to interpret this as a representation of the Marceau trial, with her being the little fly that her judges try to catch and entangle like a spider captures its prey in its web, especially since all judiciary officials wear the same large black toga. Although both great illustrations of Clouzot's cynicism, perhaps the best example is the film's title as there is nothing that seems less important to everyone involved than the truth. Of course, what exactly is the truth is hard to determine, as the only person who is able to recount the events is Marceau. However, Guérin refuses to even consider using Marceau's truth in her defence as he feels that would guarantee a definite

defeat. Instead, he indeed opts for pleading crime of passion, or as his assistant lawyer labels it: “the old story” (*La Vérité* 7:45).

### 2.2.2 Morality in Perspective

From personal experience, watching *La Vérité* evokes feelings of confusion; initially, one will possibly wonder: how could such a pretty, sweet girl have done something wrong? Followed by the thought: why does no one seem interested in the truth? Ending in the contemplation: who should be found guilty and of what exactly? Yet, it starts to make sense when observing that Clouzot created a trial that is beyond the silver screen as it is a reflection of society; he depicts a macro phenomenon on a micro level and the variables that he so carefully chose transmit his cynicism of French society at that time. It is no coincidence that particularly Bardot is playing Marceau and it is not a random act to kill her off in the end. France’s Hitchcock may have a similar talent for suspense as the British master, but his extreme cynicism sets him apart. Accused of conventionality and traditionalism now that the *Nouvelle Vague*, or New Wave, is the preferred French cinematic style, Clouzot challenges his audience to reflect on their own conformity. He hands France a mirror and he tempts society to take a deep look and reflect on social standards and on morality as a whole. Does merely claiming the moral high ground make one moral or, on the contrary, does it make one morally deplorable? Clouzot knows the answer to this question and he is not afraid to share it; in his typical cynical and fatalistic way, he has prepared the most convincing closing argument a trial could have when it winds up to be that same mirror fragment that Marceau uses to take law into her own hands and put an end to the passing of judgement on her by ending her own life.

Although no Fellini or Godard, the subtle nonlinear structure that Clouzot chooses conveniently offers room for the deeper dimensions that the narrative contains as the past

events that led to the trial are shown in extensive flashbacks that interrupt the hearing in an order based on their connection to the argument raised in the present. Linked to the court scene in which the general opinion on Marceau is so brutally presented is the first flashback, which directly takes the viewer to the crime scene. As in the film's opening scene, the first flashback starts with a staircase again that, as we will learn, leads to the apartment of Gilbert Tellier (Sami Frey). However, instead of doors being opened; in this scene the door keeps firmly closed. A smell of gas seeps through the door into the corridor and the concierge runs up with a key. In the room, we see Tellier dead, lying facedown on a piano bench in the living room, and Marceau unconscious, foaming at the mouth on the kitchen floor with a gas pipe next to her. Marceau must be the murderer as she is still alive and the concierge yells out to call the police and let her die. Starting with the murder already indicates that triviality of the act in respect to the story line. This is not a narrative about the judgement of a murderer; there is something else at stake.

Back in the courtroom, the camera zooms in on Marceau tightly gripping the railing of the defence dock, again emphasising her vulnerability as she seems to be searching for support while attempting to get a grip on her emotions, as she hears how she is accused of murder with a possible death penalty. The *président des assises* mirrors her childhood behaviour with that of Annie, Marceau's well-behaved, hardworking and talented sister. In order to characterise Marceau and illustrate her innate immorality, the *président des assises* refers to an incident when she was eight years old and got her hands on Annie's new doll, which she completely dismembered and destroyed. Furthermore, he exemplifies her immoral promiscuity by accounts of how she roamed the streets with boys and even brought De Beauvoir's *Les Mandarins* (1954) to school, a novel considered controversial to the extent that the Vatican put it on the Index Librorum Prohibitorum. Although in good company as for example, John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667) is on the same list, the opposition clearly



attempts to emphasise Marceau's indecent immorality.<sup>5</sup> The subsequent rejection of De Beauvoir by the Court, stressed by Guérin who is befittingly questioning whether she or Marceau is on trial, suggests a traditional perception of gender inequality, especially since Marceau is literally surrounded by men judging her. In fact, the camera zooms in on the face of the cipher sitting next to her, focussing on his disapproving look. In order to maintain her costly lifestyle, going to cafes and the cinema several times a week, Marceau took a lover whom she clearly left on her own initiative. Obviously this does not fit the *président des assises*'s traditional idea of a relationship as he feels that it should be the man who leaves the woman instead of the other way around. According to his conventions, the consequences of Marceau's leaving must be the reason why she had to relocate to Paris. Due to the consistent low camera angle when filming him, the *président des assises* appears an intimidating authority close to a disapproving father-figure as the editing of the shots in which he addresses Dominique is predominantly sequential, showing her, small in comparison and submissive, in medium shot from a high angle as if the *président* is looking down on a misbehaving child while reprimanding.

Another flashback gives the viewer an insight into the Marceau family life, starting with a dinner scene in the family home in Rennes. Marceau's mother and sister are serving dinner while Marceau and her father are quarrelling over Marceau's future. She wants to go to Paris and become a secretary or a beautician; yet, her parents feel that she is incapable of finding a job that they will approve of, as she is not educated and working in a beauty parlour is below their social standards. As Marceau does not get her way, she attempts to commit suicide, an act that recalls the suicide attempt in reaction to Bardot's parents refusing to allow

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<sup>5</sup> The reference to De Beauvoir is interesting as it could support the implication that Clouzot wrote the script with Bardot's life in mind due to the connection between Bardot and De Beauvoir as an advocate of her image, which she presents in her 1959 study entitled *Brigitte Bardot and the Lolita Syndrome*.

their daughter to marry Vadim. Unlike Bardot, Marceau convinces her parents and she gets their approval to go to Paris.

In Paris, Marceau starts to involve herself with a group of young, non-conformist, self-proclaimed intellectuals hanging around in Parisian cafes all day. She is not working, nor studying. Moreover, she greatly enjoys the attention she gets from all the men she meets and she enacts her sexual freedom by sleeping with her friend, Michel. Annie, on the contrary, is the embodiment of morality as she is a proper, celibate girl who spends her time cleaning after Dominique and studying very hard. She attends the Conservatory, playing the violin and practising Classical masters, such as Mozart. Of course, Dominique has a much less respectable taste in music. During her first encounter with Tellier, she lies facedown on her bed, shaking her derriere to the rhythm of a bossa nova beat. Tellier, the most gifted student at Annie's Conservatory and potentially Annie's future partner as they seem a perfect match, is nothing like the bohemian Dominique and her gang. He dresses according to the norm, enjoys classical concerts and conducting orchestras and he always politely shakes everyone's hand upon meeting. However, despite his good manners, we learn from the *président des assises*'s statement that without Annie's knowing, Tellier starts visiting Dominique. He is interested in her and they start going out together, but it is by no means smooth sailing. This ideal son-in-law initially only seems a perfect opportunity for Marceau to thwart her sister. Dominique plays him for a fool, attracting him and then rejecting him, but Tellier is persistent and after a long scene in which the viewer undergoes Tellier's emotional suffering, waiting all night for Dominique to return from her escapade with another man, in a rather satiric manner, Dominique finally decides they will make love; and lovely it is as against all expectations their intimacy is so intense that they fall deeply and madly in love with each other. While Dominique's roommate Daisy is waiting on the steps of staircase in the corridor until she is allowed access to her room, her solitude contrasts the affection and closeness that

Dominique and Gilbert experience in this tender moment together, concluded by a confirmation of their hearts finally and against all odds being stolen by one another with the words: “Tu sais, j’aurais jamais cru... – Moi non plus j’aurais jamais cru”<sup>6</sup> (*La Vérité* 43:37). This is true passion; yet this also sheds a new light on the perception of both Marceau and Tellier. Dominique, now, is no longer immoral as she has entered a proper relationship with a respectable man; however, Tellier, on the contrary, is definitely not the model of morality anymore as he is in a relationship with the indecent Dominique. If, thus, both are not moral, nor immoral, could they perhaps be amorally in love? However, although the entire movie is rather dark, this scene is so pitch-black that it evokes a sense of impending doom.

Although the love between Tellier and Marceau seems genuine as Dominique tells Daisy that she is in love and Tellier tells Dominique that they should get married, maintaining the relationship is hard due to the great personality differences between the two. Marceau attempts to comply with Tellier’s passion for music. As Tellier told his landlady that Dominique is his fiancée, she is allowed at his home where she listens to his Bach records and turns the pages of his sheet music when he plays the piano for his landlady. Yet, Dominique wants to go out, see her friends and dance. They fight and Dominique walks out, slamming the doors behind her. After three days, Tellier calls up Daisy to ask whether she knows where Dominique is and right at that moment Dominique returns to Tellier. They are very happy to see each other, until Tellier notices the shirt that Dominique is wearing which is her friend’s. They fight again and Tellier seems to turn rather violent, judging by Dominique’s screams. The landlady goes to listen by Tellier’s door and she explains poor Gilbert’s behaviour to be a consequence of Dominique’s constant infidelity. Although Dominique tries to defend her acts, she is continuously ridiculed and slandered during the hearing and it is painfully clear that everyone in the room is rooting for the prosecution. The

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<sup>6</sup> “You know, I never would have thought... – I never would have thought either” (translation mine).

long shots of the courtroom crowd increase the sense of a united front encountering an outcast. However, Guérin seizes the moment to support his plea of *crime passionnel*. When the landlady gave Tellier the choice between Dominique and his apartment, he did not hesitate to choose his flat. However, he keeps seeing Dominique, but, as it seems, purely out of self-interest as he is not taking care of her at all. Guérin slyly exhibits Tellier's immoral conduct in favour of Dominique's loyalty to him and to their relationship, which unleashes a subdued stir of consternation throughout the courtroom.

Since Dominique was cut-off by her parents, she needs money and she goes to work at a bar called Le Spoutnik. When her employer, Ludovic, starts making advances at her, Dominique declines and states that she loves Gilbert. Meanwhile, Gilbert and Dominique quarrel the days away; yet, their love endures still. Dominique is careful to avoid arousing Gilbert's jealousy and she attempts to fit herself into his busy schedule and support his interests and pursuits. For example, she attends his numerous orchestra rehearsals of Stravinsky's *The Firebird* on her nights off from work and she refrains from complaining when she catches a cold from waiting for him while he is conducting in a freezing concert hall, because she realises how happy conducting makes him. While Dominique gives in and sets aside her own needs, Gilbert, in turn, is not prepared to do the same. When Dominique loses the pin of her shoe and Ludovic lies he found it outside the door of the club on the pavement, this causes Tellier to become suspicious. As soon as he sees Dominique get inside Ludovic's car after work that night, he is fed up with her. Right at the moment that Ludovic tells Dominique to close the car door, Tellier walks up to her and ends the relationship. Overtaken by emotions due to the realisation that she has just lost Gilbert's love, Dominique takes revenge and ends up in a hotel with Ludovic. Before long, Dominique quits her job at Le Spoutnik and she spends her days lying heartbroken in her bed full of regrets over losing Tellier's love. In spite of their rendezvous, Ludovic states in court that Dominique

worshipped Gilbert and that Gilbert initiated all their disputes as he always found reasons to complain about her work, but never supported Dominique financially. However, Ludovic lied before under oath about his relations with Dominique and the prosecution, led by Maître Éparvier (Paul Meurisse), is quick to point this out, turning him into a useless witness in light of Dominique's defence.

When Dominique runs out of money and is no longer able to pay rent, she leaves Daisy's apartment and ends up on the streets of Paris. Her friends are fed up with supporting her and Dominique, without a home and without food, turns to prostitution. Matters become even worse when Dominique's prostitution makes it impossible to locate her when her father passes away. After the funeral, Dominique joins her mother and Annie and she learns that Annie is about to marry Tellier. Dominique returns to Paris and seeks consolation with Michel. In court, Michel recounts their discussion about Dominique's grief over Tellier; yet, he expresses himself arrestingly tactless and manages to insult the entire courtroom public, stating: "Dominique était sincère. Non, ça, c'était pas une de ces bourgeoises organisées qui mangent le pognon au mari, le plaisir à l'amant et enfilent leur vison pour venir voir jugées les autres", followed by his *en passant* denouncing everyone morally corrupt and traditional: "Dominique ne croyait plus à la morale hypocrite de nos parents, comme nous tous. Au fond, c'est ça qu'on lui reproche". Michel feels that this trial is primarily based on accusations caused by a generation gap and he believes that Dominique deserves a more appropriate judgement. "Mais vous êtes des adultes; vous ne pouvez pas comprendre. Il faudrait que Dominique soit jugée par des jeunes. Je ne dis pas que l'on ait raison; non, nous pensons autrement, c'est tout"<sup>7</sup> (*La Vérité* 78:40). However, instead of helping Dominique's defence,

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<sup>7</sup> "Dominique was sincere. Not like one of these bourgeois housewives juggling husband and lover and putting on their mink to come and see others being judged".

"Dominique no longer believed in the hypocritical morals of our parents, like all of us. Basically, that is why she's being accused".

"But you are adults; you cannot understand. So Dominique should be judged by young people. I'm not saying that we are right; no, we think different, that's all" (translation mine).

he achieves the exact opposite and Éparvier is happy to provide his personal summary of Dominique's actions, supporting his claim that she never really loved Tellier and, thereby, excluding the possibility of pleading crime of passion. Éparvier convincingly orates Dominique's true intentions with Tellier which were solely based on interfering with Annie's happiness. Yet, Guérin is not easily daunted and he exploits Éparvier's dramatic tone to provide a stage for Dominique to desperately voice her longing and aching for Tellier.

In the following flashback, we see Dominique running after Tellier like a helpless puppy running after its owner. She tries to catch a glimpse of him in the Conservatory and at the church where he plays the organ at weddings, she reads his notebook in which he wrote Dominique Tellier time and time again and she repeatedly calls him up without saying anything, just to hear his voice. Finally, she passes a shop window with a number of televisions that all show Tellier conducting *The Firebird*. The music keeps playing and swells as we see Dominique tossing and turning in her bed before she abruptly turns on the light and grabs her alarm clock that shows half past two. The swift successive shots perfectly capture her rush and intense desire to be with Tellier. She catches a taxi and the camera zooming in on her face, we see great determination as the streets flash by under the captivating sound of *The Firebird's* full finale. This scene is meticulously edited as, reaching the apotheosis, Dominique rushes up the steps of the stairs to Tellier's apartment. Exactly when the music ends, Tellier opens the door. Dominique declares her love for him and begs him for forgiveness. Tellier gives in to her pleas and they spend the night together. However, the morning after, the naive Dominique learns that Tellier never loved her. In fact, he literally emphasises his emotional distance from her when they pass the concierge's window and he, embarrassed to be seen with her, hides her by pushing her head down towards the ground, before he leaves her alone on the streets. She tears up the notebook and, absorbed in her heartache, she crosses the street without looking and is hit by a bus. The bus driver needs to

note her name and address for his report which turns the accident into an essential piece of evidence as it supports Dominique's presence at Tellier's and, thus, adds a possibility for admitting *crime passionnel*. However, the concierge is positive that Dominique was never there that night. Although the concierge firmly claims to be an honest woman, Guérin rebuts her testimony by satirically presenting evidence that the door of the apartment building that she attends seems to always be open; unlike the door of the concierge's office which seems to always be closed. The avocat général disputes the significance of the evidence and argues how conclusions in favour of Dominique's case based on the defence's findings are merely hypotheses rather than proof of causality. A fact, on the other hand, is Annie's statement; she is the next witness to appear on the stand and she confirms that the morning after the very night, Tellier rushed in and suggested that they would go and publish the banns of marriage. Annie's words cause great commotion among the spectators and emotions run high, especially when Annie addresses Dominique directly. The sisters argue ferociously over Gilbert's love and preference until the *président des assises* orders for Dominique to be removed from the courtroom. While being dragged away by the court officers, Dominique hysterically screams and cries how she meant to kill herself instead of Gilbert.

The subsequent flashback displays how Michel finds Dominique's gun when she tells him to look in her bag for cigarettes. They discuss committing suicide as they often do. However, he fails to see Dominique's intentions if it would be even possible to see them at all. It is unclear if Dominique is aware of her own intentions; in other words, if this is a case of premeditated murder. It is Michel who immediately assumes that the gun is meant for Dominique to take her own life and she does not deny this assumption; yet, unlike Michel's rope, a gun could be rather easily used to take someone else's life as well; for example, Tellier's or, perhaps, Annie's, or both. Although Michel is oblivious, another friend is sceptical. He informs Tellier's friend, Martineau, of the situation and tells him that Tellier

should be wary. As soon as Martineau leaves Tellier's apartment to run to the shop, Dominique slips through the open door and confronts Tellier. During the argument that occurs, Tellier takes Dominique's bag, supposedly containing the gun, and puts it away. In the background, Annie's photograph is visible between the two, insinuating how she has always been between them. Dominique initially vents all her frustration, which increases her anger to the point where she wonders if Tellier is worth dying for, but this sudden change of heart is directly followed by a declaration of her love for him. Tellier is not interested and he wants her out of his apartment. Then he realises that the bag he took is empty. Dominique takes the gun from her pocket, points it at her throat and Tellier starts screaming madly one cruel offense after the other until Dominique snaps. She turns the gun and shoots Tellier in the back. After five more shots at Tellier, she puts the gun against her own chest and pulls the trigger. However, she has emptied the magazine, leaving her without any bullets to take her own life. In court, a specialist reviews the autopsy report, but Éparvier wishes to reconstruct the killing in order to uncover the truth and verify that Dominique, indeed, intended to kill herself instead of Tellier. The *président des assises* allows him his experiment and Éparvier demonstrates how the first shot that Dominique fired must have been the one that hit him in the back and the other five shots hit him when he had already collapsed. Guérin defends with hysteria and Dominique describes how she attempted suicide by gas in Tellier's kitchen. However, Éparvier has a razor sharp tongue and he is not afraid of using it; with his final verbal cut, he completely breaks the defence in such a manner that even Guérin feels personally affected and wonders out loud whether Éparvier has ever experienced love. Éparvier, too, is aware of his fatal blow, concluding his questioning with "j'ai fini"<sup>8</sup> (*La Vérité* 113:15). As Guérin never leaves the bar and generally remains seated, Éparvier

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<sup>8</sup> "I've finished" (translation mine).



involvement in the case seems much closer throughout the film, making his arguing more convincing and persuasive.

Yet, whereas Dominique initially seemed an immoral, indecent and unkind seductress, a Lolita in need of conformity and male dominance, moulded to the publically perceived image of Brigitte Bardot to an extent that she even experiences situations that reflect Bardot's personal life; she is, in fact, a vulnerable, susceptible and tragic individual, yearning for some love and attention. Tellier, contrarily, seemed at first a well-mannered, innocent and gentle person; yet, he shows his true colours when he evolves into the egocentric, selfish and cold-hearted hothead that he really is. Guérin puts his finger on the sore spot when he exclaims that her appearance does not define Dominique's personality. In fact, her good looks probably created the predicament she is in now and the additional hostility she encounters as no one cares to take her seriously. Dominique is regarded as an object for men to take and use until they have had enough of her. When people realise she is a person with needs and feelings, they get fed up with her and drop her like a sack of potatoes. Tellier offered Dominique nothing but his bed for seven months as he had no interest in her wants and needs as they did not comply with his own. In fact, he tells her that he never loved her, but that he loves her sister instead. However, Dominique rejects Guérin's interpretation. She is convinced that Tellier has loved her and she still loves him. She still is searching desperately for acknowledgement of his love for her.

Whether Tellier truly loved Dominique is impossible to determine. On the one hand, one may feel that his selfishness and his negligence of Dominique's needs, and even her existence, show that he did not. On the other hand, his intention to marry her sister may indicate that he was not ready to let Dominique go. However, that Dominique thinks she loves him is crystal clear. Moreover, she is so set on this thought that she stops at nothing to prove it. Back in her cell, she breaks the mirror fragment into smaller pieces and then slits her

wrist. Again, she is almost saved as the nun turns on the lights and checks through the small barred window in the cell door whether the prisoners are asleep. Yet, she fails to see what is happening and the next day when the trial continues Dominique, still alive but barely, is absent. The *président des assises* reads her suicide letter which finally discloses a truth that seems plausible. Dominique explains how she loves Gilbert and how he had loved her, but, unfortunately, they did not love each other at the same time. Dominique's clarification provides grounds for a crime of passion. However, the motive is no longer relevant as Dominique wishes to join Gilbert, which thus means she has to die. Moreover, although Guérin had moved heaven and earth during the hearings, Dominique would have never fit the traditional profile of a *crime passionnel* perpetrator, as this perpetrator must be seen as a victim. During the trial, Guérin engaged all the legal weapons at his disposal, including Tellier's violence and Dominique's female hysteria; yet, even her public breakdown could not convince the world of her love. Dominique decides she is no longer to be judged by people who do not understand her and she opts for her own judgement, which is to only love Gilbert and no other again. She is certain that Gilbert will forgive her because of his love for her. Dominique feels that she has made the morally correct choice and, therefore, she dares to ask for forgiveness from her sister, the Court and even Gilbert's mother. Yet, paradoxically, this first part of Dominique's letter is everything but morally satisfying to the people involved. Of course, showing Dominique's personal truth that serves as the basis for her behaviour and decisions leaves the viewer with an indicative impression. In other words, it encourages the viewer to question how we can attempt to judge someone immoral if everyone believes that they act in a moral manner? Then justice becomes merely a farce as two wrongs do not make a right. Therefore, seeking a verdict on something we do not know must be the ultimate form of immorality.

The judicial triviality of the truth is again emphasised as we never hear the whole truth when the président's reading is interrupted by the message that Dominique has just died. The trial is immediately terminated and the reading of the letter is discontinued. When everyone in the courtroom starts rushing away, the unaffected Guérin, already involved with his next trial, pats a disappointed Éparvier on the back and concludes "les aléas du métiers"<sup>9</sup> (*La Vérité* 119:44). The death of his client is no more than an occupational hazard and the motive, the victims, and the truth are irrelevant. In fact, next week they will go through the motions again, but then Guérin will perform the prosecution. Nothing has changed as they walk away together towards the wide-open courtroom doors.

### 2.2.3 *Coup de Grâce*

Analysing Clouzot's *La Vérité* it becomes clear that this courtroom drama is not merely set up to show the viewer how the accused is judged; instead, Clouzot holds up a mirror to his audience and slyly lures the viewer to take a look and self-reflect. In other words, in Henri-Georges Clouzot's *La Vérité* it is, in fact, the viewer's moral judgement that is on trial rather than the accused as nothing tells the truth like a long, hard look in Clouzot's mirror; a mirror showing the viewer a frank reflection of reality without a fog of assumed morality. By means of the jigsaw structure of the narrative, the scenes alternate between the trial and the events that led to the trial, presenting the viewer a dissected version of Dominique's life, which should serve as a means to piece the evidence together. In retrospect, the fragmented structure reflects the mirror fragment from Dominique's first scene that she breaks into smaller pieces in her final scene. Moreover, in figurative sense, Clouzot hands his audience a mirror in order to reflect; who are we to judge someone else? And what is this judgement based on? In Clouzot's world, good and bad coexist. In fact, they can even blend into one; for

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<sup>9</sup> "an occupational hazard" (translation mine).

example, in a legal setting where hypocrisy and prejudice, perhaps involuntarily or due to incompetence, interfere with justice and truth due to conformity and conventions that stem from a tradition of moral perspectives. In the case of Dominique, she could never be innocent as her promiscuity and indecency collide with perceived morality. However, the notion that Tellier had chased her for weeks in order to have sex with her is deemed irrelevant as with his politeness, ambition and talent, he conforms to social norms. In addition to the fragmented timeline, Clouzot has more tricks up his sleeve to engage the audience in a clever and eloquent way. An eminent example is the choice for Bardot to play the protagonist. As a matter of fact, Bardot does not only play the role of Dominique; Dominique is almost the mirror image of Bardot as she looks the same, she takes similar sexual liberties and she is regarded equally immoral and obscene by French society.<sup>10</sup>

In addition to the many figurative and literal mirror images, Clouzot also integrated structural antitheses in many different forms. These antitheses signify the opposition between conformist and nonconformist that is displayed so clearly in the courtroom where Dominique's personality and outlook on life are continuously judged, rather than her crime. First of all, the characters; Annie and Dominique are the embodiment of this theme with Annie being the paragon of the societal perception of morality and decency and Dominique, of course, serving as the personification of everything that is wrong with today's immoral youth. As her antagonist, Annie has to cope with Dominique's jealousy of her. Eventually, their rivalry climaxes in a hysterical clash beyond any reason and without any winners. Clouzot seems convinced that these two opposites are incompatible.

Second, the mood; Clouzot uses *The Firebird* to set the mood and the mood is passion. When Dominique sees Tellier conducting his orchestra on television, her passion for

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<sup>10</sup> Moreover, it does not stop at these resemblances as Bardot, just as Marceau, is found with slashed wrists and, like Marceau falls in love with Tellier, Bardot falls for Sami Frey.

him is aroused so strongly that she cannot be without him any longer. The notes of *The Firebird* keep her awake and lead her, filled with passion, back to him. The ballet performance of *The Firebird* tells the Russian tale of a young prince chasing a gold and flaming firebird. Upon capturing her, he takes her enchanted feather. Of course, Tellier's chasing of Dominique and her long, wavy blonde hair could imply that she is the fiery and radiant firebird; on the contrary, with his constant stiff demeanour, never smiling, never showing affection, and attitude, self-centred and offensive, Tellier oozes coldness. In fact, even the concert hall where he conducts is cold as an icebox. Additionally, *The Firebird*, too, reflects the power relationship between Tellier and Dominique. Initially, she is in control as Tellier wants her more than anything and he is willing to overlook all her flaws and faults. However, then the tables turn and Tellier gains the control. He is no longer chasing Dominique; instead, he can summon her at his will, just like the prince could summon the firebird by using the feather that he kept.

Third, Clouzot boldly challenges his New Wave critics by abiding by a tremendously traditional visual style in black-and-white, perhaps another means of optically highlighting the thematic contrast, and painstakingly planning every element, down to the smallest detail; yet, featuring very current topics, particularly the contemporary generation gap between the traditionalist bourgeoisie and the modern urban youth culture and their contrasting view on morality, exemplified by Dominique's sexual freedom through the frequent sexual insinuations and vulgar language.

Clouzot's choice of plot device is very appropriate. Already during the introductory scenes, the viewer will notice that everything hinges on the doors; doors naturally move the plot along as incidents often occur depending on whether a door is closed or open. Take, for instance, the car door that Dominique closes on Ludovic's command. To Tellier, this action indicates that she is indeed driving off with him and he rushes up to obtain redress.

Furthermore, Dominique rushes out, slamming the doors behind her after an intense fight with Tellier that made tempers rise so high that he turned rather violent, causing Dominique to yell so loudly that the landlady came up to listen behind Tellier's door what was happening. Dominique leaves, not to return for three days. Moreover, Tellier forgets to close the door of his apartment behind him when he hands his friend who is going out in the rain his coat. Dominique who was waiting out in the corridor slips in behind Tellier's back and hides behind the door for him to return to his apartment before shooting him. Additionally, the doors indicate entrapment and restrictions; Clouzot often incorporates shots of closed doors that only authorised people are allowed to open, such as the cell doors, the courtroom doors and the doors to the stands. In the first scene, a conspicuous and noisy prisoner follows the nun around as she theatrically opens every cell door that the nun unlocks, implying a sense of false freedom and possibly projecting the madness of existence that does not stop at the prison cell doors. Also, the courtroom doors that are closed right before the start of the trial distinguish the eligible spectators; a number so great that many people are in desperate need for some oxygen. This suggests the suffocating feeling that Dominique experiences under the public pressure to conform to traditional societal standards and the literal suffocation she experienced when she attempted to commit suicide in Tellier's kitchen. Moreover, the concierge claims that the door to Tellier's apartment building is automatic and, therefore, always closed unless she opens it. However, the verification that this door is, in fact, wide open as the concierge is lying could very well ensure Guérin's victory and, thus, Dominique's freedom.

Lying is a recurring theme in the narrative. Although one would expect Dominique, with her loose morals, to deceive and betray, Clouzot cynically catches the upright citizens in lies as well, starting with Tellier when he claims that Annie sent him to check on Dominique and reaching a climax when the concierge is on the witness stand, claiming under oath that

she is an honest woman who would never lie about leaving her post. Of course, claiming the moral high ground while lying in court where justice should prevail provides food for thought in terms of the earlier mentioned interaction between law and morality. If society tailors its morality to the traditionally and conventionally preferred situation, then circumstances, such as truth, are irrelevant and justice becomes merely a matter of the vagaries of witnesses and their social perception in combination with the social class and appreciation of the accused and the victim. Clouzot emphasises this idea by picturing the courtroom setting as a spectacle with a large audience jostling each other for a seat, but with the box seats that have the best view reserved for the wealthy and upper class. Like an ancient Roman arena, the crowd is entertained with a hot fight to the death disguised as justice. In other words, Clouzot challenges the clash between morality and justice, giving the viewer a sense of moral obligation by presenting immorality in play and, concurrently, rejecting amorality by holding up the mirror to the viewer who attempts to deny involvement by seeking for a scapegoat. In fact, it is this idle bystander who is to blame if the objective is to find the true murderer since it is the mirror that kills Dominique, void of passion; yet, with at least two hours of premeditation based on a lifetime of moral grounds.

*Et voilà*, in a classic and conservative style, Clouzot responds to his personal judges accusing him of conformity and conventionality, assisted by the famously infamous representative of loose morals, Bardot. Both publicly critiqued, Clouzot and Bardot join forces and fend off the accusations with the most powerful weapon a director and an actress have at their disposal: cinema. Like Nemesis luring Narcissus to the pool, Clouzot alluringly invites the viewer to take a long, hard look in the mirror. However, the reflection is by no means a pretty picture. In the words of Dominique, it is not her and Tellier who are dead; instead, it is us who have been long gone: “Vous voulez me juger mais vous n’avez jamais vécu, jamais aimé... C’est pour ça que vous me détestez, c’est parce que vous êtes tous

morts, morts!”<sup>11</sup> (*La Vérité* 115:26). We should reflect on our apathetic and detached judgement of others who do not conform to our conventional moral standards and that is Clouzot’s sworn testimony; with his *La Vérité* Henri-Georges Clouzot shows us the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

### 2.3 *La Vérité* as a French Response

It would be a legitimate question to ask whether *La Vérité* is a courtroom drama after the fact as the Americans already gave us *Witness for the Prosecution* (1957) directed by Wilder and *Anatomy of a Murder* (1959) by Preminger. Why, then, did Clouzot think it was necessary to provide a French response? Perhaps the popularity of the American courtroom dramas inspired him to catch on and reap the benefits of choosing a popular genre. However, looking back at Clouzot’s career, specifically *Le Corbeau*, popularity does not seem to generate his motivation. In light of Clouzot’s cynic and perfectionist nature, it would be plausible to assume that it could very well have been a sense of impending irrelevance that drove him to take it upon himself to create a French equivalent.

During his career, Clouzot is often compared to Hitchcock and their paths cross several times when both have their heart set on buying the copyrights to the same novels. Although many would welcome a comparison of this order, Clouzot was not too fond of it; in fact, possibly due to the close association with Hitchcock, Clouzot would later in his career dismiss *Les Diaboliques* “as a shallow and trivial exercise in manipulating the formulaic conventions of a genre unworthy of a serious film-maker” (Lloyd 112). Hitchcock, on the other hand, cannot have been very keen on Clouzot either, as he won both copyright battles

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<sup>11</sup> “You want to judge me, but you have never lived, never loved... That’s why you hate me, because you’re all dead, dead!” (translation mine).



and booked great international success with the resulting movies. However, Boileau and Narcejac wrote *D'entre les Morts* that would be the basis for the screenplay of Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958), after which he makes *North by Northwest* (1959). Whereas Clouzot's 1957 espionage thriller *Les Espions* is, as already mentioned, a commercial failure, Hitchcock fares extremely well in this genre. In fact, *North by Northwest* is still regarded as one of the most influential movies ever made.

Hitchcock's success perhaps draws Clouzot's attention to American movies. If he wishes to remain relevant, then he needs to expand his horizon. Hollywood has just delivered the courtroom dramas *Witness for the Prosecution* and *Anatomy of a Murder*, both films by directors emigrated to the United States and both receiving rave reviews. Looking to regain a top spot, this may have inspired Clouzot to write *La Vérité* as a strong case could be made for the argument that this film is a French equivalent for *Anatomy of a Murder* as Preminger "peels back the layers of the American legal system and its complex processes as it examines murder, rape, marriage, dead-end careers and lives and a peculiar outcrop of American geography, the Upper Peninsula of Michigan" (Fidler).

Similar to *Anatomy of a Murderer*, *La Vérité* revolves around a crime of passion that is judged in court based on testimonies that should disclose the truth. Moreover, comparable to Clouzot, during the movie the truth is never straightforward and, what is more, there never seems to be only one truth. In fact, Preminger questions the integrity of justice and morality as he emphasises the credibility of the witnesses who need to provide the evidence for the arguments that reconstruct the situation and, thus, disclose the truth. This parallels Clouzot's witnesses who claim reliability; yet offer a moral revision of the facts. Additionally, the attractive, but flirtatious and seductive Laura Manion is, like Dominique Marceau, difficult to picture as the victim, especially since it is said she has been seen flirting openly with other men, including the man who she claimed has raped her. As in *La Vérité*, Preminger's point is

not to find out who is guilty or not, as there is no conclusive evidence of who is telling the truth and, similarly, the murder is never being denied. Instead, he aims to show the deficiencies and discrepancies of the legal system and the great influence of context provided by different parties on a verdict. This is the same lack of objectivity that we see so clearly in *La Vérité* in which the court even voices its opinion on Dominique's integrity to be questionable seeing her lifestyle choices and social conduct. Whether in Preminger's representation justice in fact prevails, is dependent on the interpretation of justice. However, if justice means truth, then the legal system fails, as the ambiguity is never cleared. *La Vérité* takes after Preminger's issue with the legal system as Clouzot, too, attempts to show the truth about the legal system failing to pursue the truth as the truth is what you make of it. Moreover, Clouzot takes Preminger's idea a step further as in *Anatomy of a Murder*, it is clear that the Manions are to be disliked: Lt. Manion is quick-tempered and violent and Laura Manion is sensual and provoking. Dominique Marceau is a likeable version of Laura as she becomes more and more vulnerable when the story progresses. The temporary insanity claimed by Manion's attorney is therefore more credible in the case of Dominique Marceau, making *La Vérité* even harder to pinpoint. Perhaps this is the issue that Clouzot overlooked as the subtle approach that he took increases the ambiguity to such an extent that a plainly ambiguous movie seems easier to grasp in terms of theme and motif as the acceptance of ambiguity would be the only option. In other words, Clouzot's inspiration is clear; yet his execution goes beyond general comprehension. This affects *La Vérité*'s commerciality as the theme is not new and due to the subtlety the story is not particularly exciting. However, poor timing does not equal poor quality. If *La Vérité* had been released before *Anatomy of a Murder*, the tables would have been turned, as Clouzot would have been the one to first address such a controversial issue.

Solely looking at commerciality, Preminger also made a good decision on a stylistic level by integrating jazz music rather than Clouzot's classical music that increases the traditional feel for which Clouzot received criticism.

Comparing the plot outcome of both movies, a fundamental resemblance is the disquieting ending as one wonders whether it is justifiable that Biegler wins the case. Moreover, did he even win or is he in fact the loser as the Manions have played him for a fool? As it seems, neither Preminger nor Clouzot find any winners in the current legal system.

Additionally, Clouzot drew inspiration from Wilder's *Witness for the Prosecution*. This movie, set in London, easily has one of the best plot twists of all time. When the truth is finally revealed, the spectator is in for a surprise. Clouzot, known for his own surprising twist ending in *Les Diaboliques*, was perhaps equally impressed and borrowed Wilder's truth theme and the jealous rage that leads Christine to take up a knife and stab her husband to death although she loved him so dearly that she constructed an intricate scheme that served to his acquittal. Drawing a parallel between this movie and *La Vérité*, an evident similarity is the presence of a captivating female protagonist giving a splendid performance. Yet, Christine, played by Marlene Dietrich, initially seems in full control of the situation and her emotions, being a lot older and more experienced than Dominique. Clouzot, therefore, changes the emphasis of the film to a continuous moral dilemma as he makes the viewer more and more aware of Dominique's despair and increasingly intensifies the viewer's degree of sympathy for Dominique. However, in sharp contrast to Bardot in Dietrich's acting. Whereas Bardot plays a role that is very close to her personal life; Dietrich transforms into a Cockney woman so remarkably well that she is unrecognisable. Although not a native speaker of English, her Cockney accent is flawless and utterly convincing. Wilder had two choices to play the scene, either he would make viewers "aware in advance that the Cockney

harlot was Christine's invention" to generate suspense; or "the viewer might be left in the dark as to the real identity of the mystery woman" to cause surprise (Phillips 205). Wilder opts for surprise and with success as some still claim that it cannot be Dietrich playing the character. When comparing this surprising climax to Clouzot's climax the difference in mood and tone between the two films becomes clearly discernable: Clouzot prefers cynical and contemptuous suspense when Dominique hears *The Firebird* and rushes off to spend a night with Tellier, whereas Wilder chooses for cynical surprise and adds a dose of humour. Specifically the love-hate relationship between Sir Wilfrid and his nurse Miss Plimsoll offers a substantial amount of comic relief.

Similar to Clouzot, Wilder's male character, too, plays with women's feelings for which both men pay with their lives. In fact, Wilder's Leonard influences the perception of Tellier as he could be characterised as another Leonard Vole and, therefore, arguably deserves to die by the hands of the woman who put everything on the line to help him. Wilder shows sympathy for Christine as the movie ends with Sir Wilfrid preparing himself for her defence. Clouzot implicitly shows sympathy as well as he allows Dominique to state that she will join Tellier. Now she will finally have him to herself. However, Clouzot's plot twist is again very subtle and as the murder was long committed and Dominique has a tendency of attempting suicide, it is neither as surprising as Wilder's, nor as exciting. Moreover, Wilder adds another element of suspense in the form of Charles Laughton's outstanding impersonation of Sir Wilfrid and his feeble health. In fact, Laughton is so convincing that one keeps wondering whether he will make it to the end of the trial. This health theme to add suspense distantly correlates with Dominique's final suicide attempt and the following, yet brief uncertainty about her survival. In contrast to Sir Wilfrid, Dominique soon breathes her last breath and never hears the jury's verdict.

Although it shows that Clouzot had clearly watched his contemporary filmmakers closely, the fact that he lost prior initiative with *Les Espions* remains. Moreover, with *La Vérité* he finds himself in the same situation as, once again, his American-based peers got ahead of him. Both Preminger and Wilder had already delivered the audience two excellent courtroom dramas from which Clouzot borrowed certain elements. Surely, one could argue that questioning the legal system and specifically the *crime passionnel* verdict must be the privilege of a French director and, although *La Vérité* never reaches the status of *Witness for the Prosecution* and *Anatomy of a Murder*, Clouzot's intentions to confront the French public with these considerations are legit, but unfortunately too late and too subtle from a commercial point of view and too traditional from a French perspective.

At this point in time, *Nouvelle Vague* is the standard in France and even in his own country, Hitchcock's fame surpasses that of Clouzot as Hitchcock's "status in the French critical pantheon rose higher than Clouzot's when he was consecrated by the New Wave directors Truffaut, Chabrol and Rohmer" (Lloyd 9). Of course, Clouzot had a counteroffensive in mind. He aims to make a film that will be completely different from his prior movies. In fact, he aims to create the ultimate suspense thriller. He rounds up his regular crew to start doing tests, receives an unlimited budget from the American Columbia Pictures, chooses the immensely popular *Sissi* star Romy Schneider and starts shooting *L'Enfer* (*Inferno*), a film that will depict jealousy in its most extreme forms, supported by dramatic sound and innovative use of light and colour increasing a psychedelic effect. However promising, the film would never be completed as Clouzot is forced to abandon his work when he suffers a heart attack on the set and is hospitalised. The project is aborted and after his death in 1977, all that remains of *L'Enfer* are 185 cans of film and Clouzot's regret over never making his most important film, until his second wife, Inès Clouzot, gets stuck in an elevator together with Serge Bromberg. They get acquainted and Inès gives him the cans with

footage, which he uses to compose a documentary on the film, entitled *L'Enfer d'Henri-Georges Clouzot (Henri-Georges Clouzot's Inferno)*. It is released in 2009 and it gives the viewer a fascinating look behind the scenes of a film that, according to its crew, should have revolutionised cinema by its unique distinctness and exceptional experimentation. Regardless whether this is true or not, what is definitely distinct and exceptional is Clouzot's modus operandi; never asking anyone's feedback, Clouzot keeps reworking every shot and every line of dialogue. As clearly stated on the script, Clouzot is the author, the director and the producer of this film and being the captain on his ship, he demanded complete control. Unfortunately, this ship would turn out to be his Titanic (the real ship; not the movie) as they went down together. Clouzot's ultimate suspense thriller sank under the weight of his ambition. However, the pieces that Bromberg recovered look, indeed, very promising.

Who knows, perhaps Clouzot was right all along and in that case, it is inevitable that the world would miss out on the greatest film ever made, as the misanthropic fatalist would probably argue that is bound to happen. Additionally, humanity would quite possibly not have been able to appreciate and value its greatness anyway due to the inability to reject social conventions and the conformity to traditional social values that Clouzot criticised so openly in his prior films, such as *Le Corbeau* and *La Vérité*, but for which he remained misunderstood. On the other hand, instead of a commercial success the psychedelic wrapping could have finally convinced and attracted the New Wave crowd that judged Clouzot for his classic directing style and finally give him their artistic credibility. We can only guess, but let's just hope that the cynicism of these speculations would have offered Clouzot solace.

## 2.4 Clouzot's Pursuit

During his career Clouzot is recurrently inspired by the successes and popularity of contemporary European filmmakers. Starting with the comparison of him and Hitchcock, Clouzot seems unable to shake the feeling that he needs to change his course to remain relevant. Although Hitchcock has to give in and admit defeat with *Les Diaboliques*, he strikes back with nothing less than major classics, such as *North by Northwest* and *Psycho* (although critics initially found a variety of elements to dislike about this landmark in the thriller genre). Clouzot, in turn, attempts to keep up and tries his hand at the spy genre. However, unlike *North by Northwest*, *Les Espions* fails to satisfy, whereas *Psycho* supersedes *Les Diaboliques* in artistic acknowledgement and weight.

Clouzot turns to Preminger and Wilder to serve as sources of inspiration. Amply borrowing different elements of style and theme results in the French equivalent *La Vérité*. Yet, opposed to *Anatomy of a Murder* and *Witness for the Prosecution*, Clouzot's courtroom drama is basically neglected by critics. Strikingly, Clouzot's sensation of impending irrelevance is discernible throughout the film. In fact, the entire plot of *La Vérité* is founded on Clouzot's interpretation of his fixation, as the two Marceau sisters exhibit extreme rivalry in order to turn the other irrelevant. Just as Hitchcock and Clouzot, the sisters are bound to each other whether they want to, or not; moreover, although they desire to steer clear of the other, they have a mutual interest to the point that Dominique would rather have her lover dead than married to her sister. In short, although they seem from different worlds, they are continuously confronted and compared with each other, accumulating into a battle of power with Tellier's approval as the first prize.

Interestingly, *La Vérité* knows no winners. Apart from some sympathy that Clouzot shows Dominique when he allows her to forgive her sister despite the fact that Annie never asked for her forgiveness and certainly does not wish to receive it, everyone loses. Justice is

never done and the matter will never be settled. Was Clouzot perhaps aware that he was fighting a pointless battle?

Just as Dominique Marceau, Clouzot was initially denounced before he was praised and desired when a new light was shed on *Le Corbeau*. Similar to Dominique, Clouzot gained the initiative when the audiences adored him. However, akin to Dominique, his choices influenced by his admirers resulted in him attempting to conform to standards that were outside his comfort zone and expertise, forcing him to turn to borrowing and even copying from other filmmakers with *Le Mystère Picasso*, *Les Espions* and, paradoxically, *La Vérité*.

Although both quality and subject matter of these works remain solid, the fact remains that they do not provide new or innovative cinema as Clouzot is lagging behind his commercially successful colleagues. Therefore, Clouzot's only competitor is time, which again resembles Dominique's experiences as she explains how Tellier had loved her and how she became to love him, but how they never love each other at the same time.

Indeed, Clouzot had fallen victim to poor timing, causing him to lose initiative and, thus, allowing the American-based filmmakers to get ahead of him and take over by releasing the courtroom drama first. Yet, the truth is that *La Vérité* would have been missed if Clouzot had refrained from creating it as nothing says French like a *crime passionnel* drenched in an ample dose of Clouzotesque cynicism and pessimism. Moreover, in contrast to Preminger and Wilder, the spectator of *La Vérité* are invited to take on a complex task as Clouzot assigns them an unsolicited role in his film as independent critic of moral justice, much like a juror. Instead of simply unfolding the drama as it were an American production, Clouzot strongly urges the viewer to engage in the trial as idly watching the film is near to impossible due to its inconclusive subtlety. In other words, Clouzot asks for an active-reflexive commitment to his pursuit and, although watching *La Vérité* is everything but a tiresome



chore, he does expect the viewer to put in effort and contribute by taking a standpoint through active reasoning and reflective thinking. In this sense, *La Vérité* mimics Sidney Lumet's *12 Angry Men* (1957) when juror #8 (Henry Fonda) votes "not guilty" as a result of logical reasoning. By asking critical questions, he convincingly manages to place the suspect's alleged guilt into perspective. Although *12 Angry Men* does not feature an actual courtroom trial, it does picture the process of thought that *La Vérité* so adequately triggers without hearing any juror's contemplations. Seemingly, reaching a verdict without eleven other jurors should be easy as pie; however, Clouzot serves his pie in fragmented slices filled with ambivalent stuffing, adding a topping of emotional manipulation, for example by Maître Guérin objections, arguing that one must be capable of love to judge it.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, *La Vérité* is unduly neglected by the critics as a result of poor timing causing Clouzot to lose initiative as the film is released after the American trials of passion. This, however, does not diminish the quality as Clouzot does an outstanding job at delivering a film that explores a ground-breaking technique of triggering the viewer's thoughts to such an extent that the viewer is assigned an external, yet active and significant, role rather than being more or less limited to a mere spectator getting the story handed on a platter. Moreover, if the viewer accepts Clouzot's proposition that every human being is potentially capable of committing murder, regardless of age and gender, then this same viewer is addressed as a participating moral agent, confronted with the line between right and wrong becoming very thin. In fact, concepts like morality and justice truly blur when Clouzot's persuasion of the audience's involvement gradually grows to the ultimate point of indication that it is society that is the true murderer. Thus, this trial is not merely set up to show the viewer how the

accused is judged; instead, Clouzot holds up a mirror to his audience and slyly lures the viewer to take a look and reflect. By means of his inconclusive subtlety, Clouzot asks for an active-reflexive commitment to his pursuit and he expects the viewer to put in effort and contribute by taking a standpoint through active reasoning and reflective thinking. In other words, in Henri-Georges Clouzot's *La Vérité* it is, in fact, the viewer's moral judgement that is on trial rather than the accused as nothing tells the truth like a long, hard look in Clouzot's mirror; a mirror showing the viewer a frank reflection of reality without a fog of assumed morality.

Sadly, the critics achieve a consensus on the case, and the verdict is not what Clouzot had been aiming for as up until this day, the innovative nature of *La Vérité* has never truly been recognised. Clouzot passed away at the age of seventy, "shamefully under-appreciated in his own country". Fortunately, appreciation for his films starts to grow as "Clouzot's reputation has been somewhat restored and we can see his legacy for what it is – a priceless collection of masterfully made films including the progenitor of the modern psychological thriller" (Watson). As an advocate of Clouzot's films, I hope that many current and future filmmakers will find inspiration in his work and that Clouzot's poor timing, instead of being too late merely means that he was too early. Let's just hope that soon the moment comes when the time is right.

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