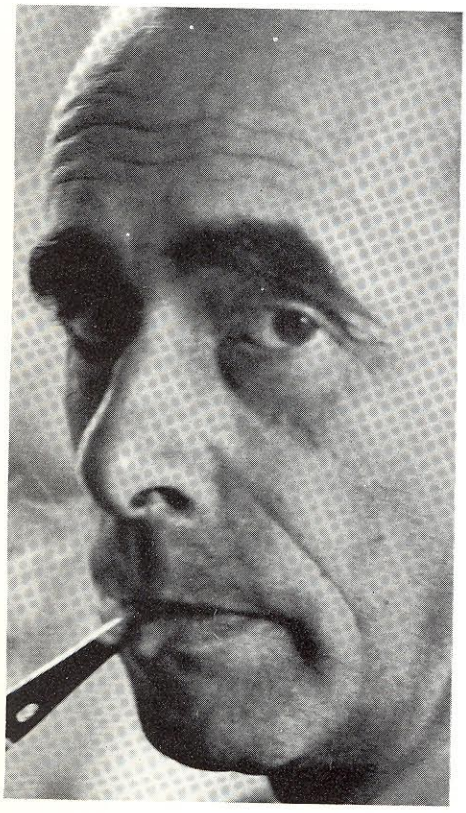
# CINEMA

VOL. 5 NO. 4 ($1.25 OUTSIDE NORTH AMERICA)

$1.00

# An Interview with Henri-Georges Clouzot

by Paul Schrader



**Several years ago you told a reporter that a film for you always began with a certain image. What was your point of departure in *La Prisonniere*, and from what in your experience did it derive?**

In *Manon* it was the overcrowded train scene. I started with that. And this time I started with the end of the picture, the hallucination, the nightmare. I started with the dream and made the picture for the dream. But it's very difficult to say where an image comes from. You remember the scene in *The Raven* where the light was going here and there? I was skiing and I fell down and lay there for five minutes. I saw the shadow going on the snow back and forth and I knew that I had to write a scene which used that image. From the black and white of the snow I thought of the swinging lamp. So you never know how an image comes.

**How long had you been working on the script of *La Prisonniere*?**

I worked on the script of *Hell* very long, and we started to shoot and I got a heart attack in the middle of the shooting. When I was writing *Hell* I went to the museum and saw the first big exhibition of pop art, and I first wanted to make a short film about it six years ago. I wrote two scripts for *La Prisonniere*. The first was just a thriller. There were two characters involved. One was a professional photographer; one was Stan, the same man as in *La Prisonniere*. Then I went to *Blow-Up* and it was exactly the same character. So I had to change everything and I did it very quickly, perhaps two months, not more.

**In 1965 when you were hospitalized following the aborted shooting of *Hell*, *Variety* quoted you as saying you had discovered a new color technique which would enable a more psychological use of tint without interferring with the reality of the image. Did you employ this in *La Prisonniere*?**

No. I had an idea but it was impossible to do in a movie, but I used it in photography. I was supposed to make an album about nudes because I was very sick and I thought I could never make a picture again, so I had to earn my living.

**You have always used chiaroscuro to reveal character. In fact, you once said, "For me the great rule is to push the contrasts as far as they will go. To move the spectator I always aim at emphasizing the chiaroscuro, opposing light and shade." How has color complicated your rule of lighting?**

You have to choose between chiaroscuro and color. If you are going to work with the shadow and the light then you have to be very careful with the color. In black and white you work with greys, but if you are going to use color then you have to get the light very flat. Otherwise it is too close to the reality. It looks like it was carved. When they shot *Gone With the Wind* you had at the same time color and chiaroscuro.

**Could you have conceived *La Prisonniere* in black and white?**

I don't think so.

**What struck me about *La Prisonniere*, like so many of your films, is that it is totally perverse. You seem to create a film consisting only of antagonists.**

I wanted this picture to be unbearable. I think that vice is something unbearable and we have to stand it. You can't imagine what is vice if it is bearable. For me it's Hell, really. I wanted the viewers to feel this way. I like the people to be as ashamed as the girl is.

**Do you sympathize with any of the characters?**

No, I don't think so. All three of them are very vicious. I don't share the feelings of any of the characters.

**Death always gets her due in your films. The end result of the revelation of character is always murder or suicide . . .**

It's absolutely true. I never committed suicide, or any attempt, but I thought of that. I think when you have seen this kind of picture you are not ready to commit suicide. I'm against suicide; I'm against perversion too.

**Underneath the fatalistic structure of your films, there seems to run an undercurrent of love and friendship. In fact, love is most often expressed by pain and suffering.**

It is true. What can I say?

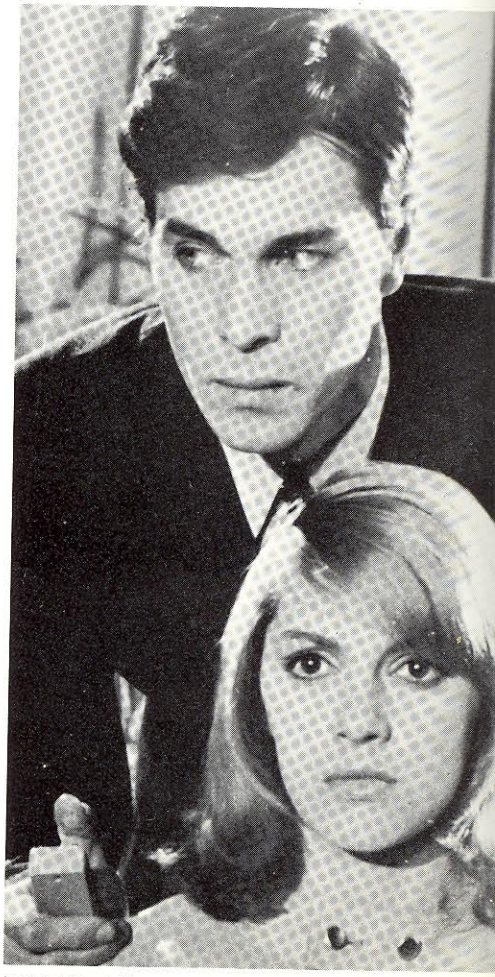
**Regarding this point, *La Prisonniere* seems most similar to your 1949 film, *Manon*. I have two quotes, the first from *Manon*, the second from *La Prisonniere*. Manon said, "Nothing is sordid when two people love each other." And in *La Prisonniere* Jose said, "When you're in love nothing you do is dirty. When you're not everything is."**

You are quite right. You are the only one to make this point and you are quite right. I love *Manon*. *Manon* is a picture I made with all my heart—and this one too. But I really haven't any message to give. When I start writing a script I don't know how it will end. When I look back at the picture I still can't say whether it came out or not.

**Do you feel José died at the close of *La Prisonniere*?**

I don't know. How could I know more than you do? She is always in love with Stan. She

Bernard Fresson



Laurent Terzieff

Elisabeth Wiener

is the prisoner.

**Was your method of filming the same in *La Prisonniere* as in your earlier films: the meticulous script, the lack of improvisation, the lack of covering . . .**

Hollywood covers everything. I never cover. It's not as economical as it may seem because I shoot very fast, but after that I take a lot of retakes. And if I'm not happy with it I retake the whole thing. It may be the acting or the writing. Sometimes I'll rewrite a scene and reshoot it. It's not so economical, but it's not as expensive as it could be.

**There were some shots which looked improvised in *La Prisonniere.***

There was only one: the sequence with the boats. The whole sequence was improvised. I had no idea when I came there that I would make such a sequence, but then I saw the boats. That happened in *Wages of Fear* also. I wrote a scene with the oil pool, but when I came to location the ship was just on the other side. I said it could be much better and I changed everything. But ordinarily I can't put changes in. When I'm changing something I'm changing the whole work—even the dialogue.

**The *Mystery of Picasso* was improvised however?**

Oh yes, sure. I had prepared what I wanted. You know, I first met Picasso when I was twelve, fifty years ago. So I knew exactly what I could get out of him.

**What about the TV documentary footing in *La Prisonniere* which Jose runs on the Movieola?**

That was improvised, because I didn't know what the girls would say. Those were not actresses, but women talking about their own private lives. I asked a social worker if she had any girls like that in her district and she said, "Not one, I have twenty." They were speaking in such a way that I had to cut it because it was impossible to show.

**The TV footage brings up another contrast which is featured in many of your films, the contrast between two worlds. In *La Prisonniere* the public voyeurism of TV viewers was compared to the cloistered and perverted voyeurism of Stan. Did you also mean to contrast the worlds of vice and pop art?**

Not at all. I feel that it's quite the contrary. Stan hasn't any pop art in his flat. He has surrealistic art, which is much closer to vice. That's why I characterized him as a villain.

**Going back a bit, when you first started in motion pictures did you intend to be a director of crime and violence films?**

I always intended to be a director. Crime and violence? That's difficult to say. I think that it was unconscious. But as soon as I started it was about crime.

**Do you feel your chronic ill health has influenced the morbidity of your subject matter?**

Perhaps. I don't think so.

**How did you actually begin in pictures?**

I started as an editor, which is very important. I am always in the cutting room. I think you can't write properly unless you are an editor. I always have the cutting in mind when I'm shooting. Very often I look at my watch and say it's good for twenty seconds and not more.

**Yourself and Jean Renior were the first French directors to make detective and police films. Before this the detective genre was considered inferior, was it not?**

That's right. It was considered like a "B" picture. And when it started with *Quai des Orfevres* I wanted to make a real picture. And I said if I didn't get the money I would quit. I like the police film because when the audience is kept by the suspense you can use anything you like and they won't understand it. So you get the impact you like and at the same time you can go here and there.

**You have always had difficulty with your public image. First there was the temporary blacklisting after *The Raven* was released by the Nazi-run Continental Company . . .**

Yes, but's that incidental that the picture was released in Germany or anywhere else.

**Later you said on one occasion that your films after *Les Diaboliques,* notably, *The Spies,* were not well received because the public wanted horror in the same style as in *Les Diaboliques.***

That's true. But I am free, so I could shoot *The Spies* if I like. I have been very weak on these occasions. I had another ending and the distributor wanted me so much to make a "reasonable" ending that I gave up. And it was stupid.

**I have detected a certain animosity between yourself and the *Cahiers du Cinema* critics.**

That's true and I don't know why. I'm very friendly with Truffaut and Godard, but the whole *Cahiers* is against me and I don't know why. The review of *Les Diaboliques* was awful, but the business was very great. I don't read *Le Cahiers* at all. I'm not interested. They are only interested in making films for 20,000 people.

**Who do you feel is guilty of this? Renais? Godard?**

I love *Marienbad* and *Hiroshima,* but for me *Muriel* was nothing. I liked the beginning of *La Guerre est Finie,* but not the sex scenes. I like Godard very much. There are always dull things in his films, but you can find ten fascinating minutes. But since *Pierrot le Fou,* I like him rather less. *Weekend* didn't work at all in France. I wanted to see it but when I went to the theater they told me it was over.

**Because of your style and subject matter you have often been compared to Hitchcock. Yet I have always found one large difference in that Hitchcock feels that a director should not leave the viewer with unrelieved tensions.**

Yes, he feels that you have to relieve the audience from time to time. And that's true in a way. When I made *Quai des Orfevres* I did it, *Les Diaboliques* too. But not in *La Prisonniere.*

**Several scenes in *La Prisonniere* reminded me of *Persona*, particularly the conversational sex scene and the image where the two faces merge into one.**

*Persona* is a wonderful film. But we are all working. We don't know what someone else is doing.

**Who do you think has influenced your film-making the most?**

You may not understand, but I think I have been deeply influenced by Chaplin.

**Renoir?**

Not at all. Although I like him very much.

**Some time ago you wanted to do a film version of Kafka's *The Trial.* What did you think of Orson Welles' version?**

I could not get the rights to *The Trial.* I enjoyed Welles' film very much but I don't think it was Kafka's story at all. Tony Perkins was the wrong man. I would have been much closer to the book. I like Orson's style very much but I think it's very far from Kafka.

**Are you working on a new film?**

I have an idea about the shape, not the story.

**Do you consider your obligations as a filmmaker today in *La Prisonniere* and your new film, any different than they were twenty years ago?**

No, I think it is exactly the same. Perhaps now we have more film. But I want only to tell a story. I think movies are entertainment. If at the same time you can get across something that you feel, that is perfect. First you have to tell a story, and that is why I disagree with many of the new directors. They don't care about the audience. ★