

# CLOUZOT'S L'ENFER

## AND THE IMPORTANCE OF TAKING RISKS



Originally published: AP Engine, March 9, 2010 by Daniel Fawcett

In 1964, director Georges Henri Clouzot was given an unlimited budget and complete creative freedom to make *L'Enfer*. He was fifty-seven years old and had made many successful films.

What does a director in such a privileged position do? A more commercially minded person, a more sensible person, would have played it safe and made something to mirror past successes. But Clouzot with his uncompromising nature was determined to make a hugely experimental film. *L'Enfer* was never completed, after only three weeks of filming the production was stopped.

This was partly due to having to replace a lead actor. It was partly because the lake on which they were filming was being drained. But finally it was because the director suffered a heart attack. These were the reasons but the ultimate cause was the personality of Clouzot. Described as tyrannical, obsessive and controlling, his desire for perfection was comparable to that only of Stanley Kubrick and it was this which eventually halted production for good.

The only way we can see any of *L'Enfer* is in Serge Bromberg's documentary which presents us with actors' screen tests, visual effects tests, scenes shot for the movie and extracts from the script read and filmed specifically for the documentary. It gives an insight into what *L'Enfer* might have been like but I wonder if having it presented in this way, alongside the story of production, offers more profound insights than the finished film itself might have offered. Clouzot's process will forever be read alongside the film's story; his reality alongside the film's reality. We cannot help but analyse how the film's subject-matter relates to the world of the director.

For me, art's purpose is to reveal human truths: it should aid us in the exploration of ourselves. Great filmmakers are pioneers and explorers who readily accept the ever-present risk of making bad or unfinished films. This kind of risk taking requires guts, especially if a filmmaker plans to work again, many great careers have ended or at least been

threatened through experimentation (Michael Powell, Orson Welles and Terry Gilliam for example). It is only with these risk-takers that the medium has any chance to grow and change. Only with them do new ideas and new processes evolve. Clouzot had mastered the formal language of cinema and he was in search of something more.

Critics are always trying to decide whether a film is good or bad and we all have our own criteria by which we rate a film's merit but maybe we should throw out this kind of thinking. Indeed, we must when looking at a film such as *L'Enfer* because it does not exist. It is a partial work, the subject of a documentary but not a 'complete' work. This is fascinating, that we cannot fully see Clouzot's study of obsession and jealousy means that we must project our own ideas onto it. It is an open question urging us towards our own explorations.



There are many famous unfinished films by great directors. I'm not saying failing to finish a film makes it great! But what we could learn from the way directors like Orson Welles and Terry Gilliam work is that the fact they push for something means that they do not always guarantee themselves success. We are lucky that we have Bromberg's documentary as an insight into the production of *L'Enfer*, but it ought to be a lesson for filmmakers. All too often young filmmakers claim influence from the greats but make films that are bland and lacking in personality. This is a result of taking influence from the superficial elements of a film rather than its essence – the attitude the maker has towards his work. To make a film that is personal is to make a film in a way that is personal. The process must be your process and this will be reflected in the finished film, for a work speaks more of its maker than he or she would probably wish! Let your madness come through; expose yourself; dare to put yourself in the picture with all your ugliness for the sake of all. Make your quest a noble task; make your film honestly and risk failure in every sense of the word: you may yet make a truly great film...

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