

# Lives of Quiet Desperation, Broken By an Explosion

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**M**ost writing about Henri-Georges Clouzot's film, *Le Salaire de la peur* (*The Wages of Fear*) describes it with the epithet "thriller." While this genre is broad, a thriller is typically a suspense-filled adventure with fast-paced action, red herrings, and cliffhangers; such fictions usually star a hero who must overcome incredible opposition to defeat an evil villain. Few of these elements exist in *The Wages of Fear*: the pacing is extremely slow, action is infrequent, and no specific villain challenges its wandering, aimless heroes. There are no red herrings as in Agatha Christie novels, and there are no Hitchcockian cliffhangers; nevertheless, the film is universally categorized as a thriller because of Clouzot's extraordinary use of suspense.

The situation is ripe for disaster: four desperate men, two trucks packed with nitroglycerin, a three-hundred mile journey, and perilous terrain. An American oil company's Latin American wellhead has caught fire, and the executives decide to use the unemployed, dislocated European immigrants to solve the problem, as union laws would never let them use their native Latin American workers for such a deadly task. The executive O'Brien (William Tubbs) has the men compete to "win" the job of driving two trucks carrying a ton of nitroglycerin between them to the fire. This nitroglycerin could immediately extinguish the blaze, but being an extremely combustible explosive, especially with such volume packed so densely, the slightest bump on the trip over the hazardous trail could send up an entire truck in a massive ball of flame. Within those parameters, Clouzot creates obstacles that push these men to the brink of madness. Every knowing shot of a wheel teetering over the edge, a foot easing down onto the accelerator, or a bead of sweat dripping from the cowardly Jo's (Charles Vanel) forehead builds terror in the audience (I'm fairly sure I didn't breathe for the hour those scenes lasted); we are prepared, at any moment, for a deafening explosion to shock us from our seats. However, when a truck does explode, Clouzot does not startle us with it,

though he easily could. Instead, a gust of wind blows away the tobacco Jo is rolling, and the camera reveals the cloud of smoke in the distance that we know can only belong to Bimba (Peter van Eyck) and Luigi's (Folco Lulli) truck. This scene hits me not with a blast of adrenaline, as a part of me expected, or with a surge of empathy, as another part hoped for, but with a grim, resigned sinking in my stomach. Staring at the smoke that must mean his friend is dead, a weary Mario (Yves Montand) grumbles with a gruffness that is only skin deep, "Forget it. They took a chance, and lost. That's life." Mario pushes on, determined not to look back, and barrels toward his destiny. His need to detach himself from all empathy to perform his task resonates deeply with me in a way that a conventional, shocking explosion would not have.

Clouzot centers the plot of *The Wages of Fear* on a quest characterized by the insanely perilous pursuit of money. Snatching up the dubious opportunity to perform this foolhardy job for two thousand dollars, the four men have a feverish resolve that reminds me of the gold-diggers in John Huston's *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, driven to paranoid madness by greed and the dangers of their quest. The men in both of these films are strangers in a foreign land, and they have no resources: no money, no job, and crucially, no way to escape. They are listless, unemployed, and contemptuous of themselves and everything around them, at least until this impossible task for money gives them direction. They would not fit into our standard image of heroes, because, although they cleverly draw on what few resources they have to achieve their goals, we view those goals as base, not virtuous.

However, one difference between Humphrey Bogart's character in *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* and Yves Montand's in *The Wages of Fear* is that the first is driven by greed, the second by desperation. Bogart may be poor, but he is not without prospects; it is his cynical defeatism that keeps him from ever transcending his situation. Each time he gets his hands on money, his mind jumps to how soon he will lose it, not to how he could use it to liberate himself. Although he complains about his inability to get a job, when he finally earns enough at least to escape the town, he decides to take up prospecting instead, where an ever-growing lust for riches, coupled with a paranoid suspicion of his companions, leads to his downfall. Bogart is very much in control of his situation: if he is detached from his bustling surroundings, it is by his own design. For the men in Clouzot's film, what they are willing to do blurs with what they are forced to do to gain some semblance of control over their lives. The characters in *The Wages of Fear* are utterly disenfranchised, and the American neo-capitalists exploit their situation, getting them to agree

to a suicide mission for pay. Thus, what motivates these men to accept isn't so much the money itself, but the ability it would give them to escape their terrible situation.

Their employers see their powerlessness and take advantage of their desperate frustration, giving the trapped men a way out. While seemingly empowering them with a chance to transcend their limited resources, the Americans have actually boxed them into a situation in which compliance is the only means for survival. If a conventional thriller's powerful and affluent villain exists in *The Wages of Fear*, the Americans fill that role, although the "heroes" do not have the insight to realize they are under attack and to respond accordingly. The men would rather face death than the tedium of their helpless and meaningless existence in this strange country; inevitably, once their task is completed, they all meet death. Clouzot's commentary on the exploitation of the disenfranchised resonates more powerfully than his proficient building of suspense or his depiction of a dangerous quest for money, but he pulls all of these elements into a fascinating, fatalistic tapestry of tragic destruction; the characters are marched slowly to an inevitable doom.

The low thunder of a drumroll rumbles in the distance of the film's soundtrack, like the precursor to an execution. This characteristically European sound morphs into vaguely ethnic percussion, and later Spanish-sounding guitars, which the percussion soon overpowers. Beetles writhe on the ground, tangled in a string. Desperate and unable to escape, they futilely thrash about, as a small child is revealed squatting over them, dangling the string from a stick and jerking it up and down, torturing the frenzied insects still attached. A vulture calmly surveys the scene. Dust blows up freely from the infertile ground, and a dry heat settles on the townspeople who bustle around doing jobs, running errands. However, a group of men, whose inactivity immediately identifies them as foreign, lie in the shade of a saloon, their legs stretched out in front of them in repose. For one man, only his bandaged foot and inactive leg are visible. Sloth and immobility fill the air around them, a separate bubble from the stir of movement and activity in the village.

These men are quite literally on their last legs. Luigi's lungs are filled with cement, and while he has been handed a literal death sentence, the others face death as surely as he. These men are used to standing up tall, proud and sure, dependent on no one and nothing; but in this country, their legs atrophy. Unable to run from their agonizingly motionless station, their legs serve no purpose, and so they sprawl out, miserably inactive. In attempts to

regain some composure and compensate for their helplessness, Mario and Jo will often cockily throw a leg up on a chair or table, a taunting display of assured disinterest that thinly veils the loathing they feel for their ineffectuality. Having nothing to lose, the men see the journey as a final, desperate attempt to gain control, to be self-sufficient, to get back on their feet. Through the sole arena in which they still have control, their meticulously skilled handling of the trucks, the men hope to achieve broad and liberating control over their lives and destiny. In the meantime, their tense legs hold the balance of life or death in the trucks; a spurt of acceleration, a too-sharp jab at the brake, and the trucks will explode.

Above all else, however, these men's legs are symbols of their masculinity; as they strive for independence and self-sufficiency, they are also striving to regain and reassert their manhood. A masculine competitiveness is embedded in our image of driving, truck driving even more so, and with the added threat of death (by explosion, no less), these trucks become the ultimate opportunity to establish one's manhood. The culturally omnipresent heroes of traditional thrillers are impeccably masculine, and men such as these inspire a need in many to meet that fictional standard. But when men like Jo merely affect that level of courage for show, they often unravel into effeminate cowards, revealing their fear and false arrogance to the world. Cocksure of himself as a man, Jo romanticizes himself behind the wheel of the truck. When O'Brien describes the contest for the terrible journey, Jo stares at him, an enchanted grin on his face. Attracted more to the competition than anything else, Jo desperately wants to prove his superior masculinity to the other potential drivers. Yet when told he is too old to drive the trucks, he interprets that as being told that he is not enough of a man, and he steals the position of the fourth driver.

Jo is strong in a bar, standing behind a gun to threaten an easy target, but on the road, nothing stands between him and death but a foot on the accelerator. Controlling the truck, the driver's legs are the embodiment of his nerve. Jo loves the idea of the peril of the trucks and all the brute masculinity they represent, until they actually set out on their journey. Under the pressure of the trip, Jo freezes up; when behind the wheel, he fails to drive ably, and he tries to escape whenever possible. He cannot function because his shame at being found useless isn't strong enough to overcome his paralyzing fear of death. He's not really seeking mobility; in fact, he would comfortably rest disenfranchised, for he only wants stability. Always quick to shoot off his mouth or draw a weapon to assert himself, when the time comes to demonstrate his true character, Jo falters, revealing himself a coward as he constant-

ly puts the quest in jeopardy. When wading through a deep pool of oil as Mario drives behind, Jo slips, panics, and falls in the path of the truck. Now scornful and disgusted by his partner, and knowing that losing momentum in the muddy pit means losing the truck, Mario does not hesitate to drive over Jo's leg. Broken and useless, literally emasculated, Jo abandons any further attempt to live and drifts off weakly and quietly. Jo's arrogant front only conceals his fear of appearing effeminate; this false manhood, derived for comparison and competition, cannot sustain itself under actual pressure.

Hearing that Mario survived his hazardous journey and delivered the nitroglycerin, his lover Linda (Věra Clouzot), overcome with joy, dances a Strauss waltz with an elderly doctor, and soon many of the bar's clientele are swept up in her excitement. Meanwhile, Mario playfully swerves the truck back and forth across the road with childlike, reckless abandon, delighting in his skill and mastery over the truck, and also over himself; he celebrates his newfound liberation from the restraints of that white-knuckled, precise driving. He casts a look at the Parisian Metro ticket that he keeps on the truck radio, rejoicing in the knowledge that he has won the freedom to leave his prison to return to his home. The camera tilts and lurches, though his blissfully ignorant grin is unshakable from his face even as he nears a curve in the road and the camera inches dangerously near the edge of the cliff. In the bar, a dancing woman precariously balances a basket of groceries on her head, and Linda places a hand to her forehead. As her legs go out from under her, back on the road, Mario realizes that he too has lost control. The truck crashes through the rock guardrail, and we see Mario's shocked and terrified eyes, before the truck tumbles over and over, chunks of steel flying free like so many toothpicks. The tangled mass lies smoking at the bottom of the cavern, enfolding and trapping Mario in its wreckage. The truck's siren sounds; the engine, severed from its home, burns; Mario's eyes, still frozen in an expression of horrified comprehension, are now still and lifeless. The debris of the truck, his sole hope for freedom and his ultimate downfall, burns around him. The Metro ticket, his dream just out of grasp, lies loose in his limp, outstretched hand, streaked with what could be either blood or oil, as fire flickers menacingly in the foreground.

Mario's wild driving suggests a boyish lack of restraint, but also a very adult hunger to assert his masculinity, if only to himself. While he swerves from curb to curb in a celebration of his freedom and potent strength, as any innocent child might, darker causes boil under the surface. The horror of what his American employers made him do for his freedom has taken a heavy toll on Mario: the overwhelming, constant fear of an explosion, witnessing

three friends die, and the constant need to keep cool and detached despite these burdens, tested his very definition of himself as a man. This overpowering pressure slowly built up over the course of his journey, and he releases it in a reckless, almost insane way. Characteristic of a great thriller, the camerawork informs the audience that Mario is in much more peril than he realizes, but the camera might have lurched similarly in the scene where the Americans pitched Mario the job. In a twist of tragic irony, Clouzot reveals that he did use a red herring after all: the nitroglycerin that Mario feared throughout the journey proved innocuous compared to the Americans' emotionless capitalism. Mario never realized that their carelessness could kill him even after the explosives were removed from the truck, because while he assumed he was only putting his body at risk, the ordeal they put him through tested his very mind and soul. In the end, the cold thoughtlessness of the Americans drove Mario off that cliff. Adding such unconventional elements to those more conventional to the thriller genre, *The Wages of Fear* explores the outrageous injustice that the powerful can inflict on the weak. Clouzot provides grim insight into the proud nature of the disenfranchised: their terror to appear afraid and their desperate striving to regain their manhood by emancipating themselves from their social immobility ultimately cost them everything.

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#### **WORKS CITED**

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