L'ENFER D'HENRI-GEORGES CLOUZOT

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From a review by A.O.Scott, New York Times:

The legend of the lost masterpiece is a staple of cinematic lore, and every so often material surfaces to give credence to the myths. The recent restoration of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* brings today's audience a big step closer to seeing that groundbreaking film in the form its director intended, and the combination of archival digging and serendipity has shed light on many other significant works that have been forgotten or compromised.

But what about those putative masterworks that were never actually finished? These movies constitute a special, speculative case, and one of them is the subject of *L'Enfer d'Henri-Georges Clouzot,* a fascinating documentary by Serge Bromberg and Ruxandra Medrea. It is, in effect, a making-of documentary about a movie that was never made — a movie that was supposed to revolutionize the art form and that survives, in the limbo between intention and realization, as an intriguing possibility.

In 1964, Clouzot was an acknowledged titan of French cinema, venerated for films like *The Raven (*1943), *Quai des Orfèvres* (1947), *The Wages of Fear* (1953) and *Les Diaboliques* (1955). It had been four years since he had made a film, and in that time his traditional methods had been challenged by the iconoclasts of the New Wave. Piqued by their bravado and impressed by Federico Fellini's *8½*, Clouzot conceived an ambitious project — to be called *L'Enfer* — a story of sexual jealousy and psychological instability that would encompass an array of new and radical techniques.

Mr. Bromberg, who serves as an unseen narrator, explains how, following a tip from Clouzot's widow, he found 85 film cans containing some 15 hours of footage. There were some completed scenes (though no soundtrack survived) and hours of tests that the meticulous director had conducted to assess everything from costumes to camera lenses to complicated optical effects. *L'Enfer d'Henri-Georges Clouzot* punctuates these with readings from Clouzot's script, with Bérénice Bejo and Jacques Gamblin taking roles originally played by Romy Schneider and Serge Reggiani, and with candid, informative interviews with members of the crew.

They recall an enterprise that started with great promise and enthusiasm and gradually came undone. Reggiani, an actor described as having "a face like a carved chestnut," was to play Marcel, a hotel owner driven to the brink of madness by the suspected infidelity of his young wife, Odette, played by Schneider, an Austrian-born actress who at the time was one of France's biggest movie stars. The setting was a real hotel under a railroad viaduct that crossed a vast man-made lake, and the shooting was complicated by the fact that the lake was about to be drained by civil engineers.

Before that, though, there was great anticipation, a large budget — Columbia Pictures promised "unlimited" support — and a sense on the part of everyone involved that this was a historic work in the making. Clouzot prepared not only carefully detailed storyboards, but also a color-coded system of notation indicating changes in the protagonist's mood and a set of obsessively precise sound-design instructions. Once shooting began, he alternated between black and white and color, creating effects that would turn the lake's water blood-red and alter the skin tones of the actors.

The images that have made it into Mr. Bromberg's and Ms. Medrea's documentary are tantalizing and frequently beautiful, if sometimes bizarre. Some of the most compelling are the relatively realistic shots of people grouped in outdoor settings, reminders of Clouzot's gift for clear, fluid, emotionally resonant composition. You can't help but wonder how these scenes would have been juxtaposed with the wilder passages in which the images are distorted to reflect Marcel's growing mental disorder. You also can't help but think that any movie with Schneider, wearing blue lipstick and a white bathing cap, swinging her hips as she rides on water skis would be something to see.

But *L'Enfer d'Henri-Georges Clouzot* is as much as you'll see of it. As the production grew in scale — to a state of grandiosity conveyed by the French word "Hollywoodien" — Clouzot grew more demanding, more obsessive and harder to work with. The crew and cast that had so eagerly signed on grew restless and alienated, and Mr. Bromberg and Ms. Medrea's film ends sadly, as a work that could have been either a towering monument of cinema or a fascinating folly.