

The **FILMCLUB**® Guide to...

Le CORBEAU (1943)



In a small town, a town like any other, evil is at work.

What's it about?

A dark and daring allegory about a nation under occupation, French classic *Le Corbeau* was made when the country was being controlled by the Nazis – and has the distinction of having angered both ends of the political spectrum. In an unnamed small town, poison pen letters are being sent by someone calling themselves *Le Corbeau* (“the raven”). Their main target is the seemingly respectable Dr Germain – but soon the net widens and neighbours and friends turn against each other as more and more secrets are dragged into the open. An anti-fascist film made in wartime by a French crew working for a Nazi-run production company, this compelling paradox is now rated a masterpiece, but nearly cost its director his career...

Who made it?

Director Henri Georges Clouzot was known as the “French Hitchcock” for his mastery of the thriller genre. Born in 1907, he worked as a screenwriter for 10 years before making his first film as a director in 1942. He died in 1977.

Pierre Fresnay (Dr Germain) was born in Paris in 1897. Against the wishes of his parents, he decided to become an actor and made his stage debut at the age of 14.

Ginette Leclerc (Denise) acted in over a hundred films from her debut in 1932. Because of the number of crime dramas she appeared in, she once referred to herself as the “most murdered woman in French cinema.”

The production

The making of *Le Corbeau* was both remarkable and unremarkable. There were no specific incidents on set, but what passed for normal was very different then – with rationing, air raids, and the Nazis breathing down the necks of the cast and crew.

Backstory

France was occupied by the Nazis when the film was shot, influencing every practical and artistic decision made. The production company, Continental, was German run – so the script was censored and the film-makers were accused of “collaboration” for continuing to work on the project. The subject matter mirrored the time and place in which the film was being made – informing on friends, colleagues and neighbours was encouraged by the Germans. It is estimated that millions of letters of denunciation were sent during the Nazi occupation of much of Europe, leading to torture, execution and deportation to concentration camps.

The reviews

“A shrewd glimpse into the heart and mind of Vichy France, disclosing a kind of 20-century Salem.”

The Guardian

“One of the greatest French movies of the Second World War years.”

BBCi Films

“A superb noir thriller.”

The Observer

“A masterful blend of dark misanthropy and small-town hysteria.”

Movie Gazette

Look out for

“Poison pen” is a well-chosen term – in *Le Corbeau*, the letters are like a disease that affects everyone. Eventually, even the pieces of paper themselves seem like an infection. At a young man’s funeral, as the entire town walks behind the coffin, a letter falls from a wreath and flutters to the floor. As they scatter to avoid touching it, the reaction of the townsfolk brilliantly captures the power this letter writer has gained, and how far the “infection” – the disease of fear and distrust – has spread. The result is a tense, chilling and brilliantly economic scene.

What happened next?

Though a success with the public, the film had a bitter legacy. The Nazis were angered by its anti-informant stance, while the postwar government banned it for being “unpatriotic” in its depiction of small-town corruption. Clouzot himself was blacklisted and did not make another film until 1947 – but during the 1950s attracted huge international acclaim for films such as *Les Diaboliques* and *The Wages of Fear*.

Talking points

How does the director achieve a sense of menace and hysteria?

It could never happen here. Or could it ...?

Do you think the “raven” represents the Nazis, the French people who informed on their neighbours, or both?

Review starter

War isn't all guns and explosions, it has another side, quieter but just as deadly ...

Imagine a world where grassing up your mates is the law, not a choice ...

This French film noir uses the mystery of some poison pen letters to expose the darker side of human nature...

What we think

A brilliant, bitter cinematic dispatch from occupied France – where betrayal and self interest were everyday events, encouraged by the government.