

Please note: The photo-essay simply tells the story of the film in intermediate-level Italian. This is a basic, literal translation to assist Italian learners understand the text. In writing the photo-essay, we aimed for a more fluid Italian and wrote a translation to match it. We hope that this language-learning tool will be engaging and enlightening. It's no substitute for material written at a native-language level that explores the film in depth!

The images are an important part of the photo-essay. Even if you don't understand Italian, please read this translation alongside the Italian version on the blog, so that you can see the screenshots that go with the text. These visuals help us to know the movie better: they not only enrich the story, but they also show camera movements, editing, the symbols chosen by the director and thematic ideas. You will also have access to the video clips and links to other references in the blog itself.

Thank you, and enjoy!

Quai des Orfèvres

Regia di Henri-Georges Clouzot (1948)

Summary

Jenny is an ambitious singer. Maurice, her husband, accompanies her on the piano. They love each other, but Maurice is a jealous man. Their neighbor Dora, a photographer, is in love with one of them. (We'll find out later who it is.) Intrigue, bickering and murder ensue in this love story disguised as a police procedural.

The movie opens in a music shop, where a piano player, Maurice (Bernard Blier), is supposed to be accompanying a singer. But he's not paying attention.

Instead, he's watching Jenny Lamour (Suzy Delair) who, in another room, is singing, along with a distinguished-looking old gentleman. The man has his hand on her leg. Maurice goes into the room. He tells Jenny to behave, and he tells the old man to take his hand off his wife's thigh.

Watch this clip of Jenny singing and observe Clouzot's use of dissolves switching from one scene to another and to yet another.

At the end of the scene, all the people in the shop gather in the doorway to listen to the woman sing. A dissolve takes us to Maurice and Jenny's apartment, where she is singing the same song as in the prior scene. Dora (Simone Renant), their friend and neighbor, listens appreciatively.

Caption: Jenny enjoys looking at herself.

As Jenny sings "They'd all dream of being in her arms," we see a close-up of Dora. Smoke is drifting from her cigarette. This scene fades to a theater, where we see Jennie on stage. She's still singing the same song, again accompanied by Maurice.

Caption: Like Dino Risi, in Il Sorpasso, Clouzot has filled his movie with faces. Here are some people from the audience during Jenny's show.

Caption: And at the end of the performance.

Backstage after the show, eager for compliments, Jenny flirts with the house manager and other men. Maurice watches her and then leaves angrily.

The next scene opens in Dora's studio. She is photographing Jenny in a dance costume: a sexy bustier with garters, stockings and a huge plumed hat.

Dora adjusts Jenny's arm and then her leg. It seems almost as if she is caressing it.

The two women talk about Maurice. Jenny is jealous of Dora's friendship with Maurice. She feels excluded when Dora and Maurice are together. But Dora explains to her that they are just childhood friends and when they are together, all they talk about is Jenny.

Jenny says that Maurice is jealous and doesn't understand her. Dora agrees: men can never understand women. But that's not Jenny's point. What Maurice doesn't understand is that, although she wants to make it big and she would do anything for success, he is the one that she loves. She would be lost without him.

A visitor arrives at the photography studio: Monsieur Brignon, accompanied by a young woman. The man apologizes for the intrusion. Apparently, he brings in young girls for some nude photographs. Dora is disgusted by him, but she needs to work.

Brignon is delighted to see Jenny. He invites her to go to his office the following day. Dora warns Jenny about that man, but it seems he has a big movie part for Jenny that she can't pass up.

Jenny runs upstairs to her apartment, where Maurice is cooking at their little hot plate. He walks towards her. She opens her fur coat to show him that she's still just wearing her sexy costume. On the hotplate, the pot boils over...

Jenny arrives late for the show. She confesses to Maurice that she has been to see Brignon. They quarrel. She tells him that Brignon can do things for her; she wants to make money! But in the end, she apologizes and she promises she won't see him again.

However, she already planned to see the director for lunch the next day; he has a part for her in a film! Maurice forbids her from going; she insists that she will go there.

The next day, Maurice and Jenny are at home both dressed up to go to lunch. Apparently they have found a compromise: Jenny will go to the lunch and Maurice will accompany her. But Jenny changes her mind and she calls the restaurant to cancel. She and Maurice struggle to get hold of the phone. When Maurice gets it, he finds out that Brignon has reserved a private dining room for two! Angry, he leaves for the restaurant, without Jenny.

At the restaurant, Maurice enters the private dining room where Brignon is waiting. He shuts the door and the two argue loudly.

Outside the room, the waiters and management are gathered. When Maurice comes out, they hear him threaten Brignon: "Go near my wife again and I'll kill you!"

As Maurice leaves the restaurant, Jenny is arriving. He tells her that her contract has been cancelled: she will not be working for Brignon. Again, they quarrel bitterly.

We return to the studio where Dora is developing the shots that she took of Jenny. She is particularly pleased with one of the photos.

She runs to show it to Jenny, but something stops her. She looks up at Maurice and Jenny's apartment. They are at the window and they're kissing. Dora is crestfallen. Now we know for sure that she is in love with Jenny.

We hear a song, as if it were expressing Dora's thoughts: "Lovers walking arm in arm, laugh and pass by in the night. But I go my weary way, without love, without hope."

A dissolve brings us to another night and shows us the weary singer. She is in the music shop, accompanied by Maurice on the piano. The proprietor of the shop receives a phone call. He gives Maurice a message from Jenny: her grandmother is sick, she has gone to see her and may spend the night at her place.

At home, in the kitchen, Maurice pulls a pan from a hook on the wall, and a scrap of paper falls out. There's an address! It is Brignon's address.

Maurice calls Jenny's grandmother to see if she is really there. But there is no answer.

Maurice goes to the cabinet and looks for something. He finds it: a pistol.

Maurice's first stop is the theater, to establish his alibi. He tries to buy a ticket, even though he doesn't need one. The manager insists on giving him a seat, but he prefers to stand. Maurice is greeted warmly by the coat check attendant, Paquerette, and leaves his hat and coat.

When he arrives at Brignon's place, he finds the door open and goes in.

His shoes squeaking noisily, he enters a room and finds Brignon, motionless on the floor surrounded by shards of glass. Close by, there's an overturned table and a lamp.

Around the body there is a pool of blood. Maurice runs out.

As Maurice is leaving, the camera focuses on a man, who, coming out of the shadows, gets into Maurice's car. He tries to stop him, but the man starts the engine and takes off.

Jenny is with Dora. She's upset. Dora asks whether she has had another fight with Maurice. No, Jenny answers: she has just killed Brignon. She tells Dora that she went to dinner with him so that she could sign the movie contract; but, after the dinner, Brignon made a pass at her and she hit him over the head with the champagne bottle, making him fall. Jenny begs Dora not to tell Maurice anything. Dora agrees.

Putting on her coat, Dora calmly explains to Jenny that she can't go to jail. They would cut off her hair and it is cold there. She will go to Brignon's to recover the fur in her place. Jenny asks why she would do that. Dora hesitates and then replies, "For Maurice."

Meanwhile, Maurice tries desperately to get back to the theater; it's his alibi. He is unable to find a cab, and runs through the streets. Finally he takes the Metro.

At Brignon's house, Dora finds Jenny's fur. She carefully wipes off the champagne bottle and the glasses. She throws the cloth into the fire, giving Brignon a kick too, for good measure.

Maurice, meanwhile, emerges from the Metro station, just as the audience is leaving the theater. He's almost lost his alibi! He retrieves his coat from Paquerette.

We go to Dora who is rushing home. She passes through a vibrant street scene, which is reminiscent of Clouzot's set in the town in Wages of Fear (Henri-Georges Clouzot, 1953), with its push carts and stacks of boxes. In both

movies, there's a similar touch: each set is loaded with people and props to give the viewer a feeling for the time and place.

In this vibrant set, we see Maurice walking home.

Once he arrives, Maurice tells the whole story to Dora. She believes him when he insists that he did not kill Brignon. She knows it's true, because of what Jenny has told her.

Furious, Maurice says that Jenny lied to him about the visit to her grandmother's. But Dora reassures him: she goes to the phone and calls up Jenny's grandmother herself.

Meanwhile, we see Jenny at Grandma's house, explaining to her the story she's made up: that she arrived there at 5:30. The phone rings. Jenny answers and scolds Maurice for disturbing Grandma at such a late hour.

A new character enters our story. We see the modest apartment of Inspector Antoine (Louis Jovet). He is doing something at his desk; it looks like geometry. He rubs his hands together to warm them up; it's cold in there! Leaning over the wood stove, he uses the paper he has been working on to light his pipe.

He covers a sleeping figure with his overcoat. It's a little boy with dark skin.

Suddenly the doorbell rings, the Inspector opens the door and a man tells him that someone has just been murdered: he needs to go into work. He is sorry to leave. He hates to leave the kid alone right on his night home from boarding school. They were planning to have breakfast together before school, and it was so important to the boy.

It seems that the Inspector brought this boy back with him from "the colonies," where he served in the foreign legion. (Antoine will be one of our favorite movie inspectors, so we are not going to think about what he was doing in the colonies.)

To give us a sense of this man, Clouzot fills his apartment with mementos: pictures hanging on the walls, weapons, lamps, clocks and souvenirs from foreign lands.

Caption: The Inspector loves the little boy.

In the next scene, the barista in a café is talking to some customers about the murder. The police believe the murderer was a woman; they found blonde hairs on the dead man's jacket. One customer, Emile Lefort, says that he picked up a blonde in his cab that night. He didn't tell the police because he's not a snitch and anyhow, the police should do their job.

A young woman runs into an auto repair shop. She warns one of the mechanics, Paulo, that the car he stole the other night was from an area where someone was murdered. He had better get rid of it!

We return to the apartment, Jenny is telling Maurice that he has not been himself lately. Glancing out of the window, Maurice sees Inspector Antoine, who is looking for Dora. Jenny invites him to wait for her at their place.

When Dora gets home, the Inspector asks her about Brignon and the girls that he brought to her studio.

In the next scene, he shows up at a restaurant where Jenny is singing.

He tells Maurice and Jenny (with dramatic background music) that he is now aware that they knew Brignon and also that Maurice threatened to kill him. This threat, the Inspector points out, will not make a good impression in court. Maurice will need to go to the police station the next day.

The Inspector picks up other clues at the theater. He finds out that Maurice did not sit during the show; he stood in the back of the room. Paquerette tells him that Maurice left his coat with her, but the Inspector notices that all the men in standing room are wearing their overcoats.

Caption: Maurice is questioned at the police station.

Caption: One of several venues where Jenny sings. Note the richness in the frame: people, instruments, chandeliers. Observe her movements as she interacts with her listeners. And, of course: listen to the song!

After the show, Jenny finds the Inspector in her dressing room. The two trade insults. He compares her to a prostitute. Then he says she's an arriviste, which makes her even angrier.

Then she tells him about her past. She's from a desperately poor family. Her father was a laborer. He hated cops, and Jenny hates them too. The Inspector shows her the newspaper: a policeman has been murdered. He points out ironically that, if she gets murdered, she will be glad to call on the police.

When Jenny gets back to her apartment, Dora is there. Maurice is missing. Jenny is jealous and accuses Dora of hiding something from her.

Maurice finally appears, soaking wet from the rain. He looks desperately for his passport because he's going to make a run for it. Jenny comforts him and tells him that everything will be alright. She's decided to turn herself in. But Dora persuades her to wait a while.

While we hear the cynical Clouzot in the words of the Inspector, at the same time, for once, we see a kind and compassionate Clouzot because he shows us people who take care of each other.

We go back to the café, where the barista has reported Emile Lefort, the taxi driver, to the police. He explains that he did it because he wants to help the police... and he wants his reward. That's our cynical director.

In the next scene, the police chief is heading out to get a ticket for midnight mass. It's Christmas Eve. Inspector Antoine jokes about the fact that these events are always sold out. The chief responds that he'll get standing room. "Behind a column" comments the Inspector.

Clouzot uses the Inspector as a wry commentator, maybe even an alter ego, to make observations about life in certain sectors of French society. Here he characterizes religion as an entertainment commodity, like the music halls that Jenny sings in.

In the next scene, Dora is at the police station. The Inspector believes that she is the murderer. He knows that a blonde took the taxi from Brignon's place, but he can't figure out her role. Dora insists that she was home all evening, developing photos.

The Inspector brings her into a room where other blondes are waiting. Soon enough, the door opens and the taxi driver, Emile Lefort comes in. It's a lineup. The inspector asks her if he recognizes the woman he saw on the night of the murder.

One by one, Lefort looks over all of the blondes. No, he tells the inspector. She's not in this group; are there any more? The Inspector knows that Lefort knows Dora.

Antoine is surrounded by people who don't love cops. He threatens to confiscate Lefort's cab license if he doesn't identify his passenger. And so follows one of the most powerful lines in the film, spoken from one stranger to another:

"My apologies, ma'am, but we can't beat them."
And Lefort points at Dora.

Afterwards, it emerges that Paulo – the mechanic, remember? – is the one who stole Maurice's car that night. He used it in the hold-up where he killed the policeman. The Inspector questions Paulo at the police station. During the interrogation, an office worker comes in, collecting money to buy a funeral wreath for the policeman that Paulo killed. At that point, the Inspector leaves the room, telling the cops gathered there, "He's all yours."

Maurice undergoes a grueling interrogation by the Inspector. It's the postwar years and it's cold in the police station, but they make him take off his jacket. Everyone else is wearing an overcoat.

When the Inspector's little son appears, Antoine asks for more coal in the stove, but there isn't any. His son waits quietly, eventually falling asleep. Finally, the Inspector sends him off with the chief to see the Christmas creche.

Maurice finally admits that he was at Brignon's place, but he insists that Brignon was already dead when he got there. The Inspector doesn't believe him. To put more pressure on him, he presents a man who works at the railroad station close to where Jenny's grandmother lives. The man reports that Jenny arrived there late at night on the day of the murder. So now Maurice knows that Jenny lied to him about where she was that day. In the end, Maurice is put in jail.

It's Christmas Eve. Jenny is alone; she doesn't know where Maurice is. The doorbell rings and Jenny runs to answer, thinking it's her husband. But it's Inspector Antoine with his men. They've come to search the house.

Meanwhile, the woman in the cell next to Maurice tells him he's a softie, the sentimental type. She tells him that he shouldn't get so attached; maybe his wife doesn't even want to see him.

While she talks, Maurice is falling apart. He smashes his watch against the wall and uses the shattered glass to cut his wrist. As Maurice leans against the wall of his cell, with blood dripping out of his arm, the Inspector is searching for the gun at Maurice and Jenny's house.

It's Christmas morning. As the church bells peal, the woman in the cell next to Maurice bends down to get a cigarette out of her bag and sees Maurice's blood spread on the floor. She screams.

At the apartment, the cops finally find the gun. There's a phone call for the Inspector. It's about Maurice.

The Inspector then leaves and takes Jenny with him. On the way to the police station, the woman confesses that she was the one who killed Brignon; not Maurice. She describes how she hit him with a bottle, making him fall. The Inspector is disgusted that she didn't confess earlier, to defend Maurice.

Jenny makes a melodramatic entrance at Maurice's hospital room. She begs him to forgive her before she's taken away. She tells him that now he knows for sure she didn't cheat on him; no one else has the right to hold her tight, only him. She asks him not to think badly of her when she's gone.

When the Inspector tells Dora that Jenny has confessed to the murder, she replies that it's a lie, because it was she, Dora, who killed Brignon. She says that she hit him with a bottle – The Inspector adds, "and he died of a bullet in the heart."

Antoine is tired of the games of these three. Neither Jenny nor Maurice killed Brignon. Dora didn't either. But the Inspector does know that all three of them were there at the scene of the murder and he doesn't understand why.

Dora explains that she went there to recover Jenny's fox fur and also tried to erase other clues. She admits that she is in love with Jenny. The Inspector accuses her of misleading the police and Jenny may have to pay for it.

But the Inspector thinks he knows who the murderer is. He says he'll try to release Jenny. When Dora thanks him, he replies that he is just doing his job. Besides, he has taken a liking to Dora – someone else who is not so lucky in love.

At the police station, Paulo is slumped in a chair, surrounded by cops. The Inspector arrives and pressures Paulo to tell what happened that night. Antoine says that he knows that Paulo was in Brignon's apartment the night of the murder. Paulo explains that he noticed that the door was open, and so he went in to see what he could steal. Brignon was all bloody and he was screaming for help. Paulo got scared and pulled the trigger.

Antoine admits he's been wrong all along about this case. He is a classic – but complex – movie detective. He's an experienced, cold practitioner who makes cynical remarks throughout the film. But we also see the humanity in him. Like Marge Gunderson in *Fargo* (Joel and Ethan Coen, 1996), he's troubled by the human costs of crime and violence. He understands Dora and her hopeless love for Jenny. And he has his little son, who he brought back with him from the colonies. This boy has no role in the plot. Clouzot has put him there to make the Inspector a richer character and to give the spectators some sweet and hopeful moments.

Clouzot frames Maurice and Jenny's homecoming from the hospital through the archway of the entrance. Some boxes are stacked behind them; a neighbor is sweeping. Once again, the careful set design and the placement of props and extras in the background enrich the spectator's perception of the time and the place.

As they head upstairs, Jenny tells the neighbor that they don't want to be disturbed. The neighbor responds, "I understand. We'll let you sleep." Clouzot has placed this couple's apartment in a cozy little alcove, behind an archway, and he's placed protective neighbors around them. Maurice and Jenny seem safe at last.

The couple walks into their apartment; the decorated Christmas tree is in the frame. Jenny locks the door. She points out the Christmas tree to Maurice and tells him that she'll take care of him.

Suddenly the doorbell rings. It's the Inspector! Jenny is annoyed, but he's brought her fox fur; he advises her to quit leaving it around.

Antoine leaves, but then he calls to them from the street. Maurice goes to the window to find out what he wants. The Inspector tells him to come by the station the next day to make a statement.

Antoine's son is hiding behind a corner. Suddenly, for a light-hearted ending, Clouzot has him throw a snowball at Antoine. Maurice and Jenny laugh.

The Inspector picks him up for a big hug and the two walk out of the courtyard, under the arch.