

Virtual October 13, 2020 (41:7)

Jean-Pierre Melville: **LE SAMOURAÏ** (1967, 101m)

*Spelling and Style—use of italics, quotation marks or nothing at all for titles, e.g.—follows the form of the sources.  
Cast and crew name hyperlinks connect to the individuals' Wikipedia entries*



[Bruce Jackson & Diane Christian video introduction to this week's film](#)

**Zoom link for all Fall 2020 BFS Tuesday 7:00 PM post-screening discussions:**

<https://buffalo.zoom.us/j/92994947964?pwd=dDBWcDYvSlhPbk44TkswcUhiQWkydz09>

Meeting ID: 929 9494 7964

Passcode: 703450

**DIRECTOR** Jean-Pierre Melville

**WRITING** Jean-Pierre Melville and Georges Pellegrin. Some discussions of the film claim it is adapted from a Joan McLeod novel, *The Ronin*, but recent online discussions have reported difficulty or impossibility to find a record of this novel or the author.

**PRODUCERS** Raymond Borderie and Eugène Lépiciér

**MUSIC** François de Roubaix

**CINEMATOGRAPHY** Henri Decaë

**EDITING** Monique Bonnot and Yolande Maurette

#### CAST

Alain Delon .... Jef Costello

François Périer .... The Superintendant

Nathalie Delon .... Jane Lagrange

Cathy Rosier .... Valérie, la pianiste

Jacques Leroy .... Gunman

Michel Boisrond .... Wiener

Robert Favart .... Barkeeper

Jean-Pierre Posier .... Olivier Rey

Catherine Jourdan .... Hatcheck Girl

Roger Fradet .... 1st inspector

Carlo Nell .... 2nd inspector

Robert Rondo .... 3d inspector

André Salgues .... Garage keeper

André Thorent .... Policeman/cab driver



**JEAN-PIERRE MELVILLE** (b. October 20, 1917 in Paris, France—d. August 2, 1973 (age 55) in Paris, France) was a French filmmaker. While with the French Resistance during World War II, he adopted the nom de guerre Melville as a tribute to his favorite American author Herman Melville. He kept it as his stage name once the war was over. Spiritual father of the French New Wave, he also influenced the new generation of filmmakers in Asia (John Woo, Ringo Lam, Johnnie To), in Europe (Aki Kaurismäki, Rainer Werner Fassbinder), and in America (Michael Mann, Walter Hill, Quentin Tarantino, William Friedkin, Jim Jarmusch). He directed 14 films, 13 of which he also wrote: *24 heures de la vie d'un clown* (1946 Short), *Le Silence de la Mer* (1949), *Les Enfants Terribles* (1950), *When You Read This Letter* (1953 director only), *Bob le Flambeur* (1956), *Two Men in Manhattan* (1959), *Léon Morin, Priest* (1961), *Le Doulos* (1963), *Magnet of Doom* (1963), *Le Deuxième Souffle* (1966), *Le Samouraï* (1967), *Army of Shadows* (1969), *Le Cercle Rouge* (1970), and *Un Flic* (1972). He acted in 9 films: *Les drames du Bois de Boulogne* (1948 Short), *Orpheus* (1950), *Bob le Flambeur* (1956), *Girl in His Pocket* (1957), *Two Men in Manhattan* (1959), *Breathless* (1960), *Le signe du lion* (1962), *Le combat dans l'île* (1962), and *Bluebeard* (1963).

**HENRI DECAË** (31 July 1915, Saint-Denis, Seine-Saint-Denis, Île-de-France, France—7 March 1987, Paris) shot 81 films, among them *La Vengeance du serpent à plumes* (1984), *The Professional* (1981), *The Island* (1980), *The Boys from Brazil* (1978), *Bobby Deerfield* (1977), *The Light at the Edge of the World* (1971), *Hello-Goodbye* (1970), *Castle Keep* (1969), *The Comedians* (1967), *The Night of the Generals* (1967), *Hotel Paradiso* (1966), *La Ronde* (1964), *Les Dimanches de Ville d'Avray/Sundays and Cybele* (1962), *Plein soleil/Purple Noon* (1960), *Les Quatre cents coups/The Four Hundred Blows* (1959), *Les Cousins* (1959), *Le Amants/The Lovers* (1958), *Bob le flambeur* (1955), and *Les Enfants terribles/The Strange Ones* (1950).



**ALAIN DELON** (November 8, 1935, Sceaux, Seine [now Hauts-de-Seine], France) has appeared in 107 films and television series, among them *Astérix aux jeux olympiques/Asterix at the Olympic Games* (2008), "Frank Riva" (2003-2004), "Fabio Montale" (2002), *Une chance sur deux/Half a Chance* (1998), *Le Jour et la nuit/Day and Night* (1997), *Les Cent et une nuits de Simon Cinéma/A Hundred and One Nights* (1995), *L'Ours en peluche/The Teddy Bear* (1994), *Le Retour de Casanova/The Return of Casanova* (1992), *Nouvelle vague/New Wave* (1990), *Le Passage/The Passage* (1986), *Notre histoire/Our Story* (1984), *Un amour de Swann/Swann in Love* (1984), *Le Toubib/The Medic* (1979), *The Concorde ... Airport '79* (1979), *Attention, les enfants regardent/Careful, the Children Are Watching* (1978), *Armageddon/Armageddon* (1977), *Comme un boomerang/Boomerang* (1976), *Mr. Klein* (1976), *Le Gitan/The Gypsy* (1975), *Zorro* (1975), *Borsalino & Co.* (1974), *Les Seins de glace/The Icy Breasts* (1974), *Tony Arzenta/No Way Out* (1973), *Scorpio* (1973), *Un flic/Dirty Money* (1972), *The Assassination of Trotsky* (1972), *Soleil rouge/Red Sun* (1971), *Il était une fois un flic/There Was Once a Cop* (1971), *Le Cercle rouge/The Red Circle* (1970), *Borsalino* (1970), *Le Clan des Siciliens/The Sicilian Clan* (1969), *La Piscine/The Swimming Pool* (1969), *Diaboliquement vôtre/Diabolically Yours* (1967), *Le Samourai* (1967), *Texas Across the River* (1966), *Paris brûle-t-il?/Is Paris Burning?* (1966), *Lost Command* (1966), *Once a Thief* (1965), *The Yellow Rolls-Royce* (1964), *Il Gattopardo/The Leopard* (1963), *Mélodie en sous-sol/Any Number Can Win* (1963), *L'Eclisse/Eclipse* (1962), *Rocco e i suoi fratelli/Rocco and His Brothers* (1960), *Plein soleil/Purple Noon* (1960), *Christine* (1958), and *Quand la femme s'en mêle/When a Woman Meddles* (1957).

**Jean-Pierre Grumbach. From *World Film Directors, V. II*. Ed. John Wakeman. H.W. Wilson Co., NY 1988**

French director, scenarist, photographer, actor, and producer, was born in Paris, the son of a wholesale merchant. He said that he was first attracted to the entertainment world in early childhood "through reading plays which were published with photographs in the series 'La Petite Illustration.' Then I became fascinated by the circus, and after that, the music-hall," which "interested me much more than the cinema because it was endowed with words and music."

Nevertheless, Melville was given a 9.5mm movie camera and a projector when he was six years old and made his first amateur films then, shooting from a window on the Chaussée d'Antin. At that time he preferred the projector, for which he was able to rent silent comedies and Westerns, in this way laying the basis of his "cinematographic culture." Melville's "mania" for the cinema came with the coming of sound. In his early teens he would often sit in movie theatres from 9 a.m. until 3 a.m. the following morning: "I couldn't shake off this absolute *need* to absorb films, films and more films all the time." He decided at the age of fourteen to become a filmmaker himself, inspired by Frank Lloyd's 1933 Hollywood version of Noel Coward's *Cavalcade*. It was the Hollywood cinema of the 1930s that shaped Melville's taste. Years later, asked to name his principal influences, he listed sixty-three directors of that period, from Lloyd Bacon to William Wyler. His habit of directing his own movies wearing a white stetson and dark glasses was another homage to the American cinema.

Melville's formative years were not spent entirely in the darkened fantasy world of the movies; he also found time to attend the *lycées* Condorcet, Michelet, and Charlemagne. Along with other Condorcet pupils he was a member of a street gang that used the Saint-Lazaire railroad station as its headquarters: "In time we left school but continued to hang around Saint-Lazaire. I must say that by the end of 1939 we were a real gang of hooligans." Melville's loving and detailed knowledge of Montmartre and its criminal *milieu* dates from this period of his life.

In 1937, when he was nineteen, he began his obligatory military service in the French army. His service was extended by the outbreak of World War II, and there followed two years with the *Combat* and *Libération* resistance groups before Melville left occupied France to fight with the Free French. According to one account, it was in a Marseilles hotel room, just before he left France, that he first read Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, an experience so overwhelming that he adopted the author's name as his pseudonym. Melville's passion for the cinema was unabated, however. During a week's leave in London in 1943 he saw twenty-seven movies (including Welles' *Citizen Kane*, which impressed him deeply). The following year he took part in the Allied invasion of Italy and the battle for Cassino, and in 1945 he was among the first Frenchmen to enter Lyon in uniform. "The war period," he said, "was awful, horrible and ...marvelous!"

Demobilized in October 1945, Melville tried to join one of the filmmakers' unions but was refused because he had no job in the industry (and couldn't get one without a union card). He was "madly in love with the cinema" and had "a huge



cinematic baggage”—“I knew everything, even the credit titles by heart. I have always learned cinema. I have never ceased to learn cinema.” Unable to enter the industry in any conventional way, Melville simply set up his own production company and began. His first professional film was *Vingt-quatre heures de la vie d'un clown* (1946), a comedy short featuring Melville's friend Béby, one of the great stars of the French circus. It was shot on some 1942 black market filmstock and was badly fogged and “such a horror” that Melville wanted to forget it. Pierre Braunberger liked it, however, and distributed it with some success.

Melville's first feature, *Le Silence de la mer* (1948), was adapted by the director from a short story by Vercors. Published clandestinely during the German occupation, it had become something of a “bible” for the French resistance, and Vercors did not want it filmed for fear that it would be vulgarized. Melville had to agree to submit his film to a jury of former resistance fighters who would have the right to destroy the negative if they disapproved. He set to work with no union card, no authorization to buy filmstock, and ridiculously little money, shooting one day at a time, as and when he could afford it. Vercors had set the story in his own house, and it was there that much of the film was shot. After an abortive start with another cameraman, Melville had hired a man named Henri Decaë who exactly shared his tastes: “We got on so well that we did everything together: shooting, editing, dubbing and mixing.” Decaë mastered his craft on the films he made for Melville, and went on to become “cameraman to the *nouvelle vague*.”

Melville began *Le Silence de la mer* in August 1947 and finished it a year later—“the happiest year of my life, I must admit,” in spite of “total penury.” It was seen and approved by Vercors’ “jury” in October 1948 and released the following year. The film studies the relations between an old Frenchman and his niece (Nicole Stéphane) and the German officer who is billeted with them during the German occupation. The German (Howard Vernon) is a musician, a sensitive and cultured idealist who gradually wears down the hostile silence of his hosts and wins the girl's love. By then, however, he has learned the ugly truth about Hitler's intentions in France. His ideals shattered, he leaves to die on the eastern front.

Vercors' story is almost entirely a monologue spoken by the officer and essentially uncinematic, as Melville recognized. Tom Milne wrote that “Melville's solution, which was later taken over and polished to perfection not only by Bresson but by Dreyer in *Gertrud*, was to use his images as notations to the presence of an unwritten melody: ‘I wanted to attempt a language composed entirely of images and sounds, and from which movement and action would be more or less banished. So I conceived the film a little like an opera....’ His

words which increasingly cry out for the right to be silent; *her* silence, increasingly crying out for the power of speech; the uncle's calm voice bridging the gap with a veiled, neutral



commentary; the sense of absolute stasis in which the German's awaited arrival every night, simply to stand in the doorway and think aloud, exploded like a tidal wave of movement in the still, quiet sitting-room. In *Le Silence de la mer*, everything happens beneath the surface. There is a touch of Racine about...[the film], a tang of pure poetry which is unique in Melville's work, except perhaps for his second film, *Les Enfants terribles*.”

It was not only Bresson and Dreyer who learned from the technique Melville originated in his first feature—the combination of commentary and images also anticipates a number of younger directors, including Godard. And *Le Silence de la mer* so impressed Jean Cocteau that he invited Melville to direct the film version of his novel *Les Enfants terribles*. Cocteau and Melville worked together on the adaptation, which was made very cheaply, mostly on location and with little-known actors. Decaë was again the director of photography and, instead of commissioning an original score, Melville made brilliant use of music by Bach and Vivaldi, at that time a striking innovation....” Truffaut saw it twenty-five times as a young *cineaste*. Years afterwards Melville explained how, on his small budget, he had contrived so many striking effects: the “crane” shot of Elizabeth's suicide was in fact taken from a rising elevator, and other extraordinary shots employed the huge mobile stages of the Théâtre Pigalle. ...

*Quand tu liras cette lettre* (1953) was by contrast an expensive international coproduction. Melville took it on to prove that he could handle such an assignment, and to finance the building of the studios (on the Rue Jenner in Paris) where his subsequent films were made. The movie was written by Jacques Deval, for once without Melville's collaboration. ...

Melville's lighthearted first attempt at the gangster genre which had “formed and deformed” his childhood was *Bob le Flambeur* (Bob the Gambler, 1956), which was mostly shot on location in Montmartre. Melville worked on the script with Auguste Bebreton, who had already written two classics of the genre, Jacques Becker's *Touchez pas au grisbi* and Jules Dassin's *Du Rififi chez les hommes*. Melville's film tells the story of an aging gambler (Roger Duchesne) who sets out to bring off one final coup by robbing the casino at Deauville. The job is planned but at the last moment Bob Montagné hits a winning streak in the casino and quite legally breaks the bank he had intended to rob. It is well that the caper is not put into operation, since Bob has been betrayed by his young protégé Paulo (Daniel Cauchy) and Paulo's perverse teenage girlfriend Anne (Isabelle Corey), whom Bob secretly loves.

This very profitable and successful movie remains one of the most likable of Melville's films, as well as one of the

most personal. It reflects not only his admiration for the Hollywood gangster movies of the mid-1930s but also his nostalgia for Montmartre in the same period. A writer in the London *Times* called Melville (who speaks the film's commentary himself) "a sort of Runyon of Pigalle, fascinated by the life of the night streets, the cars and neon signs, the law-defying citizens." The themes of friendship, loyalty, and betrayal introduced in *Bob le Flambeur* were to recur repeatedly in Melville's work. What this film did for Montmartre, his next film did for the sleazier purlieu of New York. *Deux hommes dans Manhattan* (1959), which followed after two abortive projects had been abandoned, is an

almost documentary piece about a search by two journalists for a missing French diplomat. The slim story line, which turns on a question of journalistic ethics gave Melville an excuse for a delighted exploration of the city, "a love letter to New York." The director did much of the location shooting himself from his own script, and also allowed himself a lead role as one of the two journalists.

By this time Melville was established as "the spiritual father" of the *nouvelle vague*—an influential innovator, soaked in cinema lore, who had demonstrated the possibility of making completely original films uncompromised by any kind of dependence on the entrepreneurs and money-men of the French movie industry. It is a mark of the affection and respect in which he was held that Godard gave him a part in *Breathless* (as a literary celebrity holding a press conference) and included a reference to *Bob le Flambeur* in the same movie.

Unfortunately, Melville derived little satisfaction from finding himself the idol of an *avant-garde* coterie, and regarded many of the *nouvelle vague* directors as incompetent amateurs. He wanted the kind of success achieved by his heroes, the Hollywood directors of the 1930s, and this he did not have. Melville himself believed that it took fifteen years to learn the art of filmmaking and, as Roy Arnes says, at this stage in his career it was not entirely clear whether he was "a true professional or simply a gifted amateur working in 35mm. His very versatility seems to have led some critics to suggest the latter." In 1961, with *Léon Morin, prêtre* (*Leon Morin, priest*), Melville announced that he intended forthwith to make films that would be commercially successful as well as artistically uncompromising.

*Léon Morin, prêtre* is in fact far from being an obvious candidate for success at the box office, though it was financed by a major production company (Carlo Ponti and Georges de Beauregard's Rome-Paris Films). The film is set during the German occupation and is related in tone and subject matter to *Le Silence de la mer*. Based on an autobiographical novel by Béatrix Beck, it is the account of a young widow's

developing love for the handsome, unconventional young priest who tries to comfort her. The priest (Jean-Paul Belmondo) sets out to convert her and Barny (Emmanuelle Riva), who is an anti-clerical communist, sets out to seduce him: it is the priest (or God) who wins the contest.



The action is seen through the eyes of the woman. There are very few close-ups and the priest remains an enigmatic and slightly ambiguous figure, secure in his faith but well aware of his physical attractions. Henri Decaë's low-key photography was much praised and John Coleman found the camerawork endlessly inventive and the editing equally effective, "matching Morin's no-nonsense brusquerie with a series of swift, extinguishing fades and kindled reentries....

Sheer technique, the adroit use of the woman's voice in commentary, and the tough, sustained brilliance of both Belmondo's and Emmanuelle Riva's performances conspire not only to lift a somewhat ornate script...into that place in art where things are temporarily plausible; they also permit the director to touch in the finest atmospheric landscape of France under the occupation that has yet appeared on the screen." David Robinson pointed out that here, as so often in Melville's "*cinéma de flâneur*," the casual way in which scene seems to follow scene is deceptive. What seems at first only curious observation in fact conceals a very firm narrative structure; and it is this certainty of the dramatic progress which gives such hypnotic interest to the spiritual exposition of *Léon Morin, prêtre*."

The most obvious difference between Melville's first five films and the more "commercial" ones that followed is that the latter benefited from performances by stars—actors, as he said, with that "something else extra" that "shows in their direct, dynamic impact on the public." Jean-Paul Belmondo lent that quality to the two movies that followed *Léon Morin*. In the gangster film *Le Doulos* (*Doulos—the Fingerman*, 1963) he is an informer, torn between his loyalty to a friend on the run (Serge Reggiani) and his equal commitment to a ruthless detective (Jean Desailly). The *doulos* dies for betraying his friend but, with typical Melvillean ambiguity, it remains less than certain that he did so.

Although *Le Doulos* is set in Paris, the décor (by Daniel Guéret) is full of affectionate reminiscences of the American gangster movie. The police headquarters is a copy of one in Mamoulian's *City Streets*, one of the earliest gangster films, and the stable scene at the end is a direct reference to the close of Huston's *The Asphalt Jungle*. Melville explained that "these details are sufficiently dissimulated not to shock the French spectator. I'm not trying to bewilder him at any price. What is important is that he feels a sort of magic, due to this unaccustomed décor, that he submits to it without noticing it."

...

Melville's cycle of gangster movies resumed with *Le Deuxième souffle* (*Second Breath*, 1966), a major critical and commercial success...The picture was based on a novel by José Giovanni, as was Becker's *Le Trou*, which Melville regarded as the greatest French film ever made. In its stylistic rigor and its ethical concerns, *Le Deuxième souffle* evoked comparisons with both Becker and Bresson (to which Melville replied, "I'm sorry, but it's Bresson who has always been Melvillean.").

The essentially romantic notion of honor among criminals is carried further in *Le Samouraï* (*The Samurai*, 1967), whose hero is a hired killer, Jef Costello (Alain Delon). Secure in the knowledge that he has an unshakeable alibi provided by his mistress (Nathalie Delon), Costello walks into a nightclub and carries out a contract killing with precise, ritualistic efficiency. He owes this efficiency to the fact that he is a totally alienated personality, incapable of feeling—Melville called the film "an analysis of a schizophrenic by a paranoiac, because all creators are paranoiac." The washed-out colors in Costello's room—an attempt to make a color film in black and white" contribute powerfully to this sense of emotional alienation, as does the opening sequence in which we see Costello stretched out on his bed alone. In Rui Nogueira's invaluable *Melville on Melville*, the director explains that in this scene, "instead of simply resorting to the now almost classical technique of a track back compensated by a zoom forward, I uses the same movement but with stops. By stopping the track but continuing the zoom, then starting the track again, and so on, I created an elastic rather than classical sense of dilation—so as to express this feeling of disorder more precisely."

But Costello is also "an 'innocent' in the sense that a schizophrenic doesn't know he's a criminal"—a warrior in love with his craft. At the nightclub where he executes his "contract," he is seen by an enigmatic and beautiful black pianist (Cathy Rosier). He knows that he should kill her too but, tempted into feeling, he fails to do so. For this offense against his warrior code, there is only one punishment. The girl inadvertently betrays him and Costello is assigned to murder her. He goes after her, but with an empty gun, and is shot down in what Nogueira calls "one of the great *hara-kiris* of the cinema." Tom Milne regards *Le Samouraï* as the most accomplished of Melville's films.: "The impossibility of love, of friendship, of communication, of self-respect, of life itself: all the themes from Melville's work are gathered up in one tight ball in *Le Samouraï*...."

Melville considered Alain Delon one of the most accomplished actors in France, and he used him again in *Le Cercle rouge* (*The Red Circle*, 1970), along with André Bourvil, Yves Montand, and François Périer (who had given a notable performance in *Le Samouraï* as the shrewd policeman). *Le Cercle rouge* was one of the most profitable of all

Melville's films. The director said that all his original scripts were "transposed Westerns," and *Le Cercle rouge*, the story of a robbery was precisely that, "with the action taking place in Paris instead of the west, in our own time rather than after the Civil War. And with cars replacing the horse." Delon also appears in Melville's relatively insignificant last film *Un Flic* (*Dirty Money*, 1972).



Long respected as an important forebear of the *nouvelle vague*, Melville has been recognized increasingly as a master in his own right, and as a director almost unique in his ability to show "that the cinema, for all its technical complications, can still be an extremely personal art." Tom Milne has drawn attention to several paradoxes in Melville's work, including the fact that his films "are

invariably and unmistakably French, no matter how much inspiration they draw from American models," and that, "like so many supposedly tough, cynical observers of a predominantly masculine milieu...Melville is at heart a tender romantic"—there is in all his heroes as they struggle to meet their own impossible standards, "a sort of purity." Melville said: "A film is first and foremost a dream, and it's absurd to copy life in an attempt to produce an exact recreation of it."

Melville was a romantic in his life as well as his work, but an increasingly disenchanted and bitter one. He became a communist when he was sixteen and ceased to be one in August 1939 when Stalin signed his pact with Hitler, ending up "wary of any political credo." Nor did he have any religious faith, though when he made *Léon Morin, prêtre* he still believed in a "great edifice of universal brotherhood which must one day be erected." Increasingly he came to believe that "if there are two of you, one betrays." His disillusionment even spread to his colleagues in the French film industry, and he found it harder and harder to recruit artists and technicians who shared his compulsive perfectionism. He never lost faith in the movies themselves, however, and told Nogueira that for him "the cinema is a sacred thing, and it's the ceremony, the service celebrated during the shooting, that governs everything else."

Melville died of a heart attack at the age of fifty-five. According to David Robinson, the director "with his stocky form, his impishly poker face, his choice of clothes and his fondness for overgrown Fords," had himself "rather the look of a French film gangster." Roy Armes wrote that Melville was "a night-bird, a man who only really came to life after eleven in the evening." He lived with his wife and three cats in an apartment where, during the day, "everything is closed up. Not a ray of light filters into my room. It is 'claustrophilia' to the last degree."



**from Jean-Pierre Melville 'An American in Paris.' Ginette Vincendeau. bfi publishing. London 2003**

The details of Jean-Pierre Melville's life are sketchy and ambiguous—he deliberately cultivated mystery, and the meagre sources that exist are mostly interviews, with all the possibilities for biases, exaggerations and contradiction that such encounters contain.

Melville was born Jean-Pierre Grumbach on 20 October 1917. His ancestors were Eastern European Jews who had settled in Belfort, in Alsace, in the 1840s. Several generations of Grumbachs were butchers in the old part of the city. They were a close-knit, extended family: Melville's parents were first cousins. His father, a businessman, moved to Paris where Jean-Pierre was born. He grew up in rue d'Antin in the ninth *arrondissement* in central Paris, in a cultured, bourgeois-Bohemian environment, and a family with socialist leanings. Although he would later move to the right, Melville declared that he was 'a Communist from the age of 16, in 1933, until 25 August 1939. After that I stopped being a Communist. I am not religious either.' Melville's family was sufficiently unconventional to give young Jean-Pierre a Pathé Baby camera in 1924 for his seventh birthday, and soon after a projector which delighted him even more since it enabled him to view recent releases on 9.5 mm. according to Jean Wagner. Starting in February 1925 he shot a number of films during his youth; by 1939 he had totalled the equivalent of thirty features in various non-theatrical formats. ...

On the one hand, there is no doubting Melville's bravery in joining the Free French, however modest his part and however much he played it down, claiming that 'being in the Resistance if you're a Jew is infinitely less heroic than if you're not.'

...His 'schooling' in the Parisian left-bank culture also clearly left a mark on his beliefs: 'I'm wary of any political credo, and I have no religious beliefs whatsoever. So what I have left is morality and...conscience,' an 'existentialist

philosophy' that can, as we will see, be traced in many of his films.

...Melville's perfectionism and obstinately independent stance came at a price which is directly reflected in his filmography: 'just' thirteen features in twenty-four years

...When Nogueira suggested that 'The line from the Book of Bushido with which you open [*Le Samouraï*]'— "There is no greater solitude than that of the Samurai, unless perhaps it be that of the tiger in the jungle"—might apply equally well to your situation as an independent film-maker outside the industry....' Melville replied enthusiastically: 'Absolutely!'—unsurprisingly perhaps, since this so-called quote from the Book of Bushido was his own invention.

...With his last three gangster films, *Le Samouraï*, *Le Cercle rouge* and *Un Flic*, Melville reached the apogee of his career as a popular film-maker. ...*Le Samouraï* is, for many, Melville's masterpiece, the culmination of his artistic achievements as well as a film of exquisite beauty....Delon's character and performance in these three films also concentrates the set of larger paradoxes that pertain to the three films as a whole: they were Melville's most austere stylistically and most extreme in their depiction of masculinity, yet they were also his most popular at the box office; they were simultaneously his most avant-garde and his most mainstream, his best loved by the audience, and most savagely pilloried by critics.

One question these films pose, therefore, is of their attraction for a wide 'family' audience, given their bleak vision of masculinity and, concurrently, erasure of femininity.

#### LE SAMOURAÏ: MELVILLE'S MASTERPIECE

Melville's most famous film has been described as both a 'remake of Frank Tuttle's *This Gun for Hire* (1942) and as based on a novel by Joan MacLeod called *The Ronin*. Melville alludes to the Graham Greene novel on which *This Gun for Hire* is based and Robert Bresson's *Pickpocket* (1958) as inspirations. The film's title and the post-credit quote 'from the Book of Bushido' (actually by Melville) evidently refer to the Japanese tradition of the samurai (and ronin). ...Technically though, it appears, despite this plethora of sources, that *Le Samouraï* was, as Melville says, 'an original story', although two different scripts have survived, one of them bearing the mysterious mention 'based on Jean-Pierre Melville's novel.'...

Melville sent Delon the story of *Le Samouraï*, which he had written 'with him in mind'. What happened next, as recounted by Melville and confirmed by Delon's biographers, has become legend: "The reading took place at his apartment.[...] Alain listened without moving until suddenly, looking up to glance at his watch, he stopped me: "You've been reading the script for seven and a half minutes now and there hasn't been a single word of dialogue. That's good enough for me. I'll do the film. What's the title? "*Le Samouraï*", I told him. Without a word he signed to me to follow him. He led me to his bedroom: all it contained was a leather couch and a samurai's lance, sword, and dagger."

...With almost two million viewers in France, *Le Samouraï* (which came out on 25 October 1967) was a hit. However, in contrast to its current elevated status, its critical reception in 1967 was tempestuous. While Michel Cournot in *Le Nouvel Observateur* judged *Le Samouraï* to be 'a very banal gangster



story, nothing more....Delon's face looks like that of a bloated Henry Fonda, listless and witless', Jacques Zimmer in *Image et son* made the lofty claim that '*Le Samouraï* is like a Picasso: three bold strokes of breathtaking simplicity, fifty years of work, a hundred sketches...and the talent of the master'. The two camps were roughly of equal weight, with the mainstream press tending toward the positive, and the specialist journals towards the negative. Insults in one camp matched the extravagant praise of the other.

Although these polemics have died down, *Le Samouraï* has continued to attract extreme views. For Bertrand Tavernier (an earlier supporter of Melville, but writing this in 1978), with *Le Samouraï*, 'You are in a cinema which copies or reproduces another cinema, without the slightest relationship with French society, while in 1996 the film-maker John Woo wrote: 'Melville is a god for me.[...] *Le Samouraï* is one of the foreign films which had the most influence on Hong Kong cinema, especially that of the younger generation'....

Delon's exceptional good looks and the controlled virility of his performance merged the taciturn toughness of Clint Eastwood with the more ordinary minimalism of Jean Gabin. This version of masculinity, as we have seen, informs earlier Melville gangsters, such as those played by Belmondo and Ventura....Delon pushes the Melvillian hero towards an extreme of androgynous beauty, and a cool, almost cruelly smooth surface....The specular aspect of Delon's performance meshed with Melville's concern with the identity of the gangster as *image*. Delon as both object of the gaze and narrative agent embodied the *homme fatal*, the *femme fatale* and the male protagonist of film noir rolled into one.

...Melville's Franco-American hybrid is, as ever, tongue in cheek: as Jef approaches the poker players in order to construct his alibi, the soundtrack begins with accordion music and ends with American radio. It is thus with some justification that Melville said, 'I make gangster films, inspired by gangster novels, but I don't make American films, even though I like the American *films noirs* better than anything.'

The title and opening quote also explicitly introduce the notion of Jef as samurai, and implicitly as part of a larger paradigm of warriors, from contemporary wars to Hollywood cinema. Of Jef's clothes in *Le Samouraï* Melville said: 'It's a man's get-up, an echo both of the Western and of military uniform. And there guns too, it all springs from the barrack-room. Men are soldiers.

Although Jef is more akin to the 'ronin' (the wandering, lordless warrior), he is a 'samurai' in that he abides by a code of conduct inspired by the Bushido. As David Desser explains, samurai films emerge from a culture in which there is approval of suicide and self-sacrifice, and celebration of the 'nobility of failure', elements which find a clear equivalent in *Le Samouraï*. Desser and other writers on Japanese cinema show that the myth of the samurai/ronin has a social function in Japan: to resolve—through death—conflicts that arise from the contradictory pulls between overbearing duty and personal inclination or feeling. As with his appropriation of American cinema, Melville's take on the samurai/ronin tradition largely empties it of this historic/social context—for instance, one cannot easily identify 'feelings' or 'emotions' in Jef Costello—but retains its bleak underpinning. It is possible to see the samurai within Melville's nihilistic, 'existentialist' approach to

a meaningless post-war world. The interest in the samurai and Japanese culture and cinema in general also denotes a fascination with the exotic, as witnessed by Melville's extensive use of orientalism in his décors (see Rey's apartment), a fascination which permeated French culture in the 1960s, culminating in Roland Barthes' book *L'Empire des signes* (1970). The narrative similarity between the samurai narrative and *Le Samouraï* is clear from Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto's account of an early script of *The Seven Samurai* (1954) as 'One day of a samurai's life: he gets up in the morning, goes to work at a castle, makes some mistakes on the job, and goes home to commit *seppuku*, or ritual suicide. But recourse to the samurai must also be seen as the appropriation of a narrative structure and ethical framework whose origins confer credibility and prestige on an excessively masculine, death-driven form.

*Le Samouraï*, a colour film, paradoxically inhabits an even sparser and more melancholy universe than *Le Doulos* and *Le Deuxième souffle*. Famously Melville talked of making 'a black and white film in colour' and substituted xeroxes of bank notes in the opening scene to mute the colour further. The narrow blue-grey palette of the film matches not only Jef's blue eyes, but his grey and black outfits and his two Citroën DS cars, his room in shades of grey only relieved by the pink and blue Evian bottles and packets of Gitanes. But what makes *Le Samouraï* special is the combination of this colour range with other features of *mise en scène* such as composition and editing....

As composer François de Roubaix said, "The first reel of 'Samouraï' contains exactly three words, on the other hand there is a lot of music whose role it is to prepare the spectator and define the character. The fatality which attaches to Jef Costello must be perceived on the level of music."



Cinephilia & Beyond's "[Jean Pierre Melville: Life and work of a Groundbreaking Filmmaking Poet](#)" is the best one-stop site for information on Jean Pierre Melville and *Le Samouraï*. It contains interesting comments on both by Sven Mikulec, Oliver Bohler's 2008 documentary *Code Name: Melville*, an essay about Melville by the great director John Woo (originally published in *Cahiers du cinéma*, 1996), and much more. Here is the John Woo part:

*In Melville's films, like in mine, characters are caught between good and evil; and sometimes, even the worst gangsters can behave in the noblest fashion...*

Melville is God to me.

*Le Samourai* was the first of his films that I saw. It was released commercially in Hong Kong in the early seventies and immediately turned Alain Delon into a major star in Asia. We had seen Delon in *Rocco and His Brothers* and *Purple Noon*, but *Le Samourai* made him popular among the general audience.

In fact, it changed a whole generation of filmgoers.

Before that movie, younger audiences in Hong Kong just enjoyed Cliff Richard, Elvis Presley, and the martial arts films; life seemed simple and easy. When *Le Samourai* was released, however, it was such a huge hit among the young that their whole lifestyle began to change. The film had an impact on fashion, too. Take myself, for instance: I was almost a hippie, wearing long hair... Right after I saw *Le Samourai*, I decided to cut my hair like Delon and started wearing white shirts and black ties.

*Le Samourai* was also our introduction to Jean-Pierre Melville. When I first saw the film, it was a shock to me: Melville's technique and his cool narrative style were incredibly fresh. I felt like I was watching a gangster film made by a gentleman. I was already working in the Hong Kong film industry at the time. I had been shooting experimental films, but I was primarily an assistant director to Chang Cheh. French cinema had already made a strong impression on my generation, especially the new wave films of Truffaut, Godard, Chabrol, and Demy. Before *Le Samourai*'s release, we could see these French films only through the art house circuit. I remember Jacques Demy's *Umbrellas of Cherbourg*, René Clément's *Purple Noon*, and *Jules and Jim* by Truffaut...

Then came Melville.

What Melville and I have in common is a love for old American gangster films. Although Melville was basically doing gangster films, the big difference between his work and the American films of that period was in his almost intellectual approach to the genre. Although they're shot in a very cold way, Melville's films always make us react emotionally. Melville is very self-controlled when he tells a story, and I find this fascinating. In my films, when I want to convey an emotion, I always use a lot of shots, extreme close-ups sometimes combined with dollies. On the contrary, Melville shoots in an almost static way, letting the actors deliver their performance, and thus allowing the audience to fully

experience what is going on in each scene. As a result, his films are both psychologically and intellectually extremely involving.

I love how Melville managed to combine his own culture with Eastern philosophy. And that's why the Hong Kong audience was so responsive to his movies. Melville often used Eastern proverbs in the opening titles of his films. He understood Chinese philosophy even more than our own people. I think that I relate to his movies because his vision of humanity is so rooted in the Eastern tradition. His characters are not heroes; they are human beings. In the gang world, they

have to stick to the rules, but they remain faithful to a code of honor that is reminiscent of ancient chivalry. In Melville's films, there's always a thin line between good and evil. His characters are unpredictable. You never know what they're going to do next, but it's always bigger than life. You cannot use any formula, any moral standards, to sum up his heroes.

Jef Costello (Delon), in *Le Samourai*, reminds me of a classic Chinese medieval character: he was a very famous assassin, poor and wild and ruthless, who was hired to kill the king. This assassin would do anything for his friends, and even for his foes. In this particular story, the assassin fails to murder the king, in order to save a friend, and is killed in the end, just like in *Le Samourai*.

I believe that this connection I have with Melville also has to do with the fact that I was influenced by existentialism in the fifties and sixties. To me, Melville's movies are existentialist, as you find in the loneliness of the characters played by Yves Montand in *Le Cercle Rouge* and Alain Delon in *Le*

*Samourai*. Nobody cares for them, nobody knows who they are; they are loners, doomed tragic figures, lost on their inner journey.

His other influence is, of course, Greek tragedy, which had a strong impact on my films as well. My characters, like Melville's, are sad and lonely, almost disconnected from reality; they always die in the end. But despite his heroes' tragic fate, I don't think that Melville was a pessimist. Although they look cool and self-contained, his characters are passionate and care about each other. The great thing about friendship is that you can really love someone without feeling the need to let him know; you just do what you can do for him. Even if you die in loneliness, and no one knows about it, it doesn't matter—you have done what you had to do. Melville's characters behave like that, and I believe that he was a man who always cared for others.

Technically, I love the way Melville builds the tension before the action. I'm thinking of that scene on the bridge in *Le*





*Samurai*, where Delon has a meeting with a man who is supposed to give him money, but the whole thing is a trap. They both wait on the bridge. They're walking toward each other, and nothing really happens, but there's this dangerous feel throughout the scene, which is terrific. Suddenly, Melville cuts to a wide shot, you hear a gunshot, and he cuts back to Alain Delon, who is already wounded. In classic genre scenes of this type, you'd usually have a different setup, with a huge gunfight at the end. Melville



prefers to play this in a very subdued, almost poetic, way.

I've always tried to imitate Melville. Even in my first film, *The Young Dragon*, a kung fu piece, I tried to use Melville's approach to characters, by injecting a sense of dark romanticism that was seldom found in the kung fu genre. After that film, I wanted to direct more films in the Melville style, but the studios kept asking me to do comedies.

It was when I got a chance to do *A Better Tomorrow*, in 1986, that I was really able to use Melville's style and technique, since it fit with the film's genre, a contemporary urban thriller. I based Chow Yun-fat's performance, his style, his look, even the way he walked, on Delon in *Le Samouraï*. In Hong Kong, you never saw people wearing raincoats, so it was a surprise to see Chow Yun-fat in this kind of outfit. It was all part of the Melville allusions throughout the film.

In *A Better Tomorrow*, there is a long scene where Chow Yun-fat goes into a restaurant to do a hit. He first conceals a gun in the corridor, then walks into the room, kills a man, and, as he leaves, uses the gun he had first planted to cover himself. The whole feeling of this scene was inspired by *Le Samouraï*; in particular, the moment right before Delon gets killed, in the nightclub, as he attempts to "shoot" the singer, carrying a gun that actually has no bullets.

The closest films I did to Melville's in my career are without a doubt *The Killer*, *Hard Boiled*, and *Bullet in the Head*. I would say that *The Killer* is the one that stands out as the most "Melvillian." I of course used a whole segment from *Le Samouraï* in the opening sequence: it was inspired by the scene where Delon arrives in the nightclub and looks at the singer while entering the room.

In 1988-89, during the promotion of *The Killer*, I remember talking to the press and saying that the film was a tribute to Melville, and I was shocked to find that almost nobody had heard about him or *Le Samouraï*. To my great surprise, the young generation did not know about him.

Now, Melville is the new big thing, maybe because people like Quentin Tarantino and me often talk about him.

Whenever I am at a film festival, I always mention Melville's name, and I guess that has aroused some interest in him. When I toured the United States with *The Killer*, I was amazed to see that the American film buffs knew so much about Melville.

Whoever watches Melville's movies will realize how different he is from American filmmakers. He was a very spiritual director, with a unique vision.

**David Thompson:**  
"Le Samouraï:  
Death in White  
Gloves" (Criterion  
Essays, 2005):

Tone and style are everything with *Le samouraï*. Poised on the brink of

absurdity, or a kind of attitudinizing male arrogance, Jean-Pierre Melville's great film flirts with that macho extremism and slips over into dream and poetry just as we grow most alarmed. So the implacably grave coolness of Alain Delon's Jef Costello is audaciously mannered, as he puts on white gloves for a killing and announces that for him "principle" is merely "habit." (The film deserves one moment, one shot, of him alone in his room, when the impassive noirist suddenly collapses in unexplained laughter.) Whereas, as we see him stretched out on his bed, the source of a silent spiral of cigarette smoke, like a patient, tidy corpse-in-waiting, he is not just Delon, or some against-type Costello minus Abbott. He is the distilled essence of cinema's solitary guns for hire, suspended between the somnambulant calm of Lee Marvin in *Point Blank* and the self-destructive dedication that guides Robert Bresson's priest in *Diary of a Country Priest*.

And in that strange juxtaposition you have so much of Melville: the French Jew who changed his real name (Grumbach) to that of the New England author; the defiantly lone operator in postwar French cinema (for years, Melville had his own studio, which burned down during the shooting of *Le samouraï*; did all that cool inspire heat?); the assiduous admirer and imitator of American tropes; and the tough guy who could appreciate Jean Cocteau and Bresson as easily as he could Dashiell Hammett and Django Reinhardt. You can imagine Melville's rapture (a spiritual condition, not just professional satisfaction) when he outlined the story to Delon, only to be interrupted by the actor after ten minutes with, "This story has no dialogue so far—I will do it." And then, finally, in mute recognition of kindred feelings of honor, Delon revealed his own room to Melville, with a samurai sword as its only piece of decor and its omen of fate.

It has always been a vital French tradition to film the commonplace, the clouded ordinariness of the *banlieue*, and make it poetic; this is a motif that reaches from Louis Feuillade and Jean Vigo, through Marcel Carné and Cocteau, to Melville, Georges Franju, and Jean-Luc Godard. It is the

atmospheric that lets us know we are in a city very like Paris, but in the mindscape of dream, too. Consider the auto shop where Jef has new plates put on his stolen cars: it is a twilight alley on the edge of town, where clouds gather in the desolate sky, dogs bark, and the mechanic never speaks. That stealthy treatment of place was evident in Melville's early films—in *Le silence de la mer* as well as in the greatest Cocteau film ever made, *Les enfants terribles* (directed by Melville from Cocteau's novel and screenplay). It is there in *Bob le flambeur* (such a threshold to the new wave) and, of course, it is there in *Le samouraï*, a film in which Henri Decaë's elegant color scheme is obsessed with gray, white, and black, the hues of classic still photography. And stillness is everything in this film, just as its hero wants to be a pool untouched by ripple or tremor.

As Melville himself said, when asked to explain the curious detachment of his films and his minimal attempt to fabricate decor or underline the photography: "I don't want to situate my heroes in time; I don't want the action of a film to be recognizable as something that happens in 1968. That's why in *Le samouraï*, for example, the women aren't wearing miniskirts, while the men are wearing hats—something, unfortunately, that no one does anymore. I'm not interested in realism. All my films hinge on the fantastic. I'm not a documentarian; a film is first and foremost a dream, and it's absurd to copy life in an attempt to produce an exact recreation of it. Transposition is more or less a reflex with me: I move from realism to fantasy without the spectator ever noticing."

And sometimes that ease is problematic: some true admirers of Melville's (like Bertrand Tavernier) complained that *Le samouraï* was nearly comically removed from French realities. "Why not?" Melville might ask, when that freedom allows us time to sink into the dream and absorb the many divergent ideas that exist in the simple claim: "Alain Delon is Jef Costello in *Le samouraï*."

Take Delon first: the enigmatic angel of French film, only thirty-two in 1967, and nearly feminine. Yet so earnest and immaculate as to be thought lethal or potent. He was also close by then to the real French underworld: it was in the years right after *Le samouraï* that Delon and his ex-wife, Nathalie (his uncertain lover in the film, but looking like a sister), were caught up in real-life scandals of association with criminal circles. (And don't forget that when *Le samouraï* was released in the U.S., after the sensation of *The Godfather*, in 1972, it was retitled *The Godson*!) Delon is not so much a good actor as an astonishing presence—no wonder he was so thrilled to

realize that the thing Melville most required was his willingness to be photographed. As for "Jef," it is American but bitten off and slightly futuristic; Jeff is also the name Robert Mitchum bears in *Out of the Past*. As for "Costello," it could certainly be a reference to Frank Costello, the actual mobster. And then there is *samouraï*, a word that was far more novel and

exotic in the 1960s, and a promise of American modes being seen through a glass of Japanese ritual.

What is a samurai? When he wears a fedora as crisp as glass and a pale trench



coat that could have been sculpted by Brancusi? He is doomed. He is an icon out of his time. He is a hired killer, yet he is a last emblem of honor in a shabby world of compromise. He is a man who believes in tiny adjustments to the perfect shadow cast by the brim of his hat, who exults in the flatness with which he can utter a line, and who aspires to the last lovely funeral of brushes on a drummer's cymbal. His essence is in timing, gesture, and glance. And he is as close to the eternal spirit of the poet as, say, Cocteau's Orpheus.

I made the comparison earlier with John Boorman's *Point Blank* and Lee Marvin. And I think that it is important. Nearly forty years after these two films were made, the crime film has gone through such lurid flights of exaggeration and stylization, and has succumbed to such terrible, unfelt violence, that they may seem nearly Etruscan or Greek in their cultural provenance. And that is largely because the two directors had such faith in the natural dreamscape of film, and such reverence for the codes of honor or perseverance that could make a criminal's life seem heroic. Marvin, in *Point Blank*, and Delon, in *Le samouraï*, are immense cinematic forces who are hardly there or credible in literary or realistic terms. We may decide that both films are the last dream of their central characters. But then consider how rich they are in ambivalence and how much they say about our urge to experiment with the "other" life—the life of crime—through dream and film.

The story line of *Le samouraï* is intricate yet very simple, and quite predictable. Jef is doomed. Like us, he wonders why the nightclub pianist (Cathy Rosier) does not give him away, for she has seen him in the act. Does she love him? In a way, yes, but she is also a kind of Death figure who has selected him as Her next client. And She chose him earlier, as their two cars paused together at a traffic light. That pianist is a throwback (black, but wearing white; wearing black, but in a white chair) to the angel of death (Maria Casarès) in *Orpheus*.



Yet in its acting out, this “contract” ennobles and redeems Jef. It doesn’t matter that the story is slight and unmotivated. The movie can be followed, over and over again, like music, because its configurations are so mysterious, so averse to everyday explanation. Everything is in the playing or the enactment. Seen again now, *Le samouraï* looks like a film from an earlier age, one made at a time when great films were

necessary (and regular), because they demonstrated and fulfilled the nature of the medium. Now that the medium is in ruin or chaos, *Le samouraï* looks as abstract, yet as beautiful and as endlessly worthy of study, as the Giotto frescoes in the basilica in Assisi. That which seemed fanciful has become an eternal and luminous lesson in how men behaved when they believed behavior mattered.

**COMING UP IN THE BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS, FALL 2020, SERIES 41:**

Oct 20: Sergio Leone, *Once Upon a Time in the West/C'era una volta il West*, (1968)

Oct 27: Andrei Tarkovsky, *Solaris/ Солярис* (1972)

Nov 3: Werner Herzog, *Aguirre, the Wrath of God/Aguirre, der Zorn Gottes* (1972)

Nov 10: Richard Rush, *The Stunt Man* (1980)

Nov 17: Wim Wenders, *Wings of Desire/Der Himmel über Berlin* (1987)

Nov 24: Krzysztof Kieślowski, *Three Colors; Red/ Trois couleurs: Rouge/ Trzy kolory. Czerwony* (1994)

Dec 1: Charlie Chaplin, *The Great Dictator* (1940)

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