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LE SAMOURAÏ (1967) 101 min.

Directed by Jean-Pierre Melville
 Based on the novel *The Ronin* by Joan McLeod
 Script by Jean-Pierre Melville, Georges Pellegrin
 Produced by Raymond Borderie, Eugène Lépiciér
 Original Music by François de Roubaix
 Cinematography by Henri Decaë
 Italian title: *Frank Costello, faccia d'angelo* (Italy)

Alain Delon Jef Costello
 François Périer The Superintendent
 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 (20 October 1917, Paris, France—2 August 1973, Paris, heart attack) directed 14 films and wrote 15 screenplays. The films he directed were *Un flic/A Cop* (1972), *Le Cercle rouge/The Red Circle* (1970), *L'Armée des ombres/Army in the Shadows* (1969), *Le Samouraï* (1967), *Le Deuxième soufflé/The Second Breath* (1966), *L'Aîné des Ferchaux/Magnet of Doom* (1963), *Le Doulos/The Finger Man* (1962), *Léon Morin, prêtre* (1961), *Deux hommes dans Manhattan/Two Men in Manhattan* (1959), *Bob le flambeur* (1955), *Quand tu liras cette lettre* (1953), and *Les Enfants terribles/The Strange Ones* (1950).

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 (8 November 1935, Sceaux, Seine, France) has acted in 90 films. Some of them are *Le Retour de Casanova* (1992), *Le Passage* (1986), *Un amour de Swann* (1984), *Monsieur Klein* (1976), *Zorro* (1975), *Scorpio* (1973), *Traitement de choc/Doctor in the Nude* (1973), *Un flic/A Cop* (1972), *The Assassination of Trotsky* (1972), *Le Soleil rouge/Red Sun* (1971), *Le Cercle rouge/The Red Circle* (1970), *Borsalino* (1970), *Girl on a Motorcycle/ Naked Under Leather* (1968), *Paris brûle-t-il?/Is Paris Burning?* (1966), *Once a Thief* (1965), *The Yellow Rolls-Royce* (1964), *Il Gattopardo/The Leopard* (1963), *L'Eclisse/The Eclipse* (1962), *Rocco e i suoi fratelli/Rocco and His Brothers* (1960), *Plein soleil/Purple Noon* (1960), and *Quand la femme s'en mêle/When a Woman Meddles* (1957).

From World Film Directors, V. II. Ed. John Wakeman. H.W. Wilson Co., NY 1988

“Melville,” Jean-Pierre (Jean-Pierre Grumbach). 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 Monmartre 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 blackmarket 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 *cinéaste*. 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 Armes 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 Samourai* (*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 Samourai* 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 Samourai*...."

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 Samourai* 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 disenchanting 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 Samourai*]—“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 Samourai*, *Le Cercle rouge* and *Un Flic*, Melville reached the apogee of his career as a popular film-maker. ...*Le Samourai* 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 SAMOURAI: 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 Samourai* 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 Samourai*, 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 Samourai", 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 Samourai* (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 Samourai* 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 Samourai* 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 Samourai* has continued to attract extreme views. For Bertrand Tavernier (an earlier supporter of Melville, but writing this in 1978), with *Le Samourai*, '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 Samourai* 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 Samourai* 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 Samourai*. 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."

COMING UP IN BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS XIII, FALL 2006:

- Oct 17 Roman Polanski **Chinatown** 1974
- Oct 24 Robert Altman **M*A*S*H** 1970
- Oct 31 Fred Zinnemann, **The Day of the Jackal** 1973
- Nov 7 Emile de Antonio **In the Year of the Pig** 1969
- Nov 14 Bob Rafelson, **Five Easy Pieces** 1970
- Nov 21 Nicolas Roeg **The Man Who Fell to Earth** 1976
- Nov 28 Spike Lee **Do the Right Thing** 1989
- Dec 5 Peter Greenaway **Prospero's Books** 1991

COMING UP IN THE UB FORUM ON TORTURE

(Wednesdays 5:30-8:00 p.m., Center for the Arts 112, UB North Campus)

10.11 **Amy Goodman** (5 - 7:30PM at Slee Hall)

10.18 **Ian Olds**

10.25 **Bruce Jackson & Newton Garver**

11.01 **Eddo Stern**

11.08 **Nina Felshin**

11.15 **Jennifer Harbury & Ezat Mossallanejad**

For details on topics and speakers go to <http://www.acsu.buffalo.edu/~cgkoebel/tor.htm>

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...for the series schedule, annotations, links and updates: <http://buffalofilmseminars.com>

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