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In a career-defining performance, Alain Delon plays Jef Costello, a contract killer with samurai instincts. After carrying out a flawlessly planned hit, Jef finds himself caught between a persistent police investigator and a ruthless employer, and not even his armor of fedora and trench coat can protect him. An elegantly stylized masterpiece of cool by maverick director Jean-Pierre Melville, *Le samouraï* is a razor-sharp cocktail of 1940s American gangster cinema and 1960s French pop culture—with a liberal dose of Japanese lone-warrior mythology.

Restored in 4K by Pathé and the Criterion Collection at L'Immagine Ritrovata from the 35 mm original camera negative.

LE SAMOURAÏ

A FILM BY **JEAN-PIERRE MELVILLE**

France | 1967 | 105 minutes | Color | In French with English subtitles | 1.85:1 aspect ratio

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PRODUCTION HISTORY

After shooting *Le doulos* (*The Informant*) in 1962, Jean-Pierre Melville set his sights on adapting another Pierre Lesou novel, *Main pleine*. For the lead character, he envisioned Alain Delon, who, over the past several years, had become one of France's most talented young actors. But, with his career on the rise, Delon turned down Melville's offer in anticipation of prestigious projects in the United States.

Then, in 1966, following the success of Melville's *Le deuxième souffle* (*Second Wind*), Delon contacted the director to see if they could finally work together. Melville pitched Lesou's book once again, even though Michel Deville had adapted it two years before as *Lucky Jo*. Upon discovering that he couldn't re-obtain the rights to the story, Melville mentioned an original script he had cowritten in 1963 with Delon in mind. (Scholar Ginette Vincendeau notes that while Melville's script has been described as a remake of the 1942 American noir *This Gun for Hire*, and as an adaptation of Joan MacLeod's novel *The Ronin*, the former only served as inspiration, while the latter looks to have never existed. That an apocryphal book would be credited as the basis for Melville's film isn't so unusual: the director was not averse to inventing fictitious sources for his work, such as a quote allegedly from the Bushido featured in the opening credits of *Le samouraï*.)

In a book-length interview with scholar Rui Nogueira, the director describes the epiphanic moment when he read the screenplay aloud in Delon's apartment: "With his elbows on his knees and his face buried in his hands, 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 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." The pair's immediate connection would fuel two more films—*Le cercle rouge* (*The Red Circle*, 1970) and *Un flic* (*A Cop*, 1972)—as well as a father-son relationship that would endure until Melville's untimely death in 1973.

Jef Costello, the protagonist of *Le samouraï*, would become one of the defining roles in Delon's storied filmography. The preternaturally cool, Zen actor (Melville once stated that "there was something Japanese about" Delon, according to Vincendeau) epitomizes the enigmatic solitude and laconic impassivity of a hired killer whose exacting methods verge on the ritualistic and whose warrior's code sets him apart from the modern world. But the character also serves as a metaphorical stand-in for Melville himself, a rigorous iconoclast within the French film industry who confessed to Nogueira that "artistic creation, especially in the cinema, demands an exemplary life to compensate for the craziness and disorder it entails . . . Undue disorder in one's daily life excludes all possibility of creativity."

At the beginning of his career, Melville became an independent filmmaker after his application for an assistant director's certificate



CAST

Jef CostelloAlain Delon
SuperintendentFrançois Périer
Jane LagrangeNathalie Delon
Valérie, the pianistCathy Rosier
Man in the passagewayJacques Leroy

CREDITS

Directed byJean-Pierre Melville
Written byJean-Pierre Melville
ProducersRaymond Borderie
Eugène Lépicièr
Director of photographyHenri Decaë
Music byFrançois de Roubaix
Production designFrançois de Lamothe



was rejected; later, to exert control over all aspects of his work, Melville built Studio Jenner in the 13th arrondissement of Paris. Sadly as well as symbolically, the studio burned to the ground on June 29, 1967, during the shooting of *Le samouraï*. The conflagration not only destroyed Melville's archives but also took the life of the film's female bullfinch, Jef's sole friend and an emblem of the assassin's simultaneous individualism and entrapment. Standing in the ashes of the miniature empire he had forged with his own blood, sweat, and tears, Melville was forced to complete the project at Studios de Saint-Maurice.

Such tragic events dogged the production of *Le samouraï*. Melville cast Delon's wife, Nathalie, in her debut screen role, as Jef's girlfriend Jane Lagrange, because the director thought they looked "like brother and sister." In their final scene together, Costello kisses Jane's hair as he closes his eyes, a gesture intended to express the killer's wordless farewell to his lover, but Melville later said the actors seemed to be "saying goodbye for real." Indeed, that same evening, husband and wife agreed to separate. Another authentic *au revoir* was given by André Garet, who appears as Roger the safecracker in Melville's *Bob le flambeur* (*Bob the Gambler*, 1956) and in this film as the garage mechanic who helps Costello to swap the license plates on his stolen cars. "Although he was very ill," Melville told Nogueira, Garet "agreed to do this small part in *Le samouraï* to please me. After the shooting was finished, he just had time to dub himself before going into hospital to die. When he says, 'I warn you, Jef, it's the last time,' he knew he was dying. Delon learned of his death the day he came to record his reply to this line, and his 'All right' is spoken like a farewell."

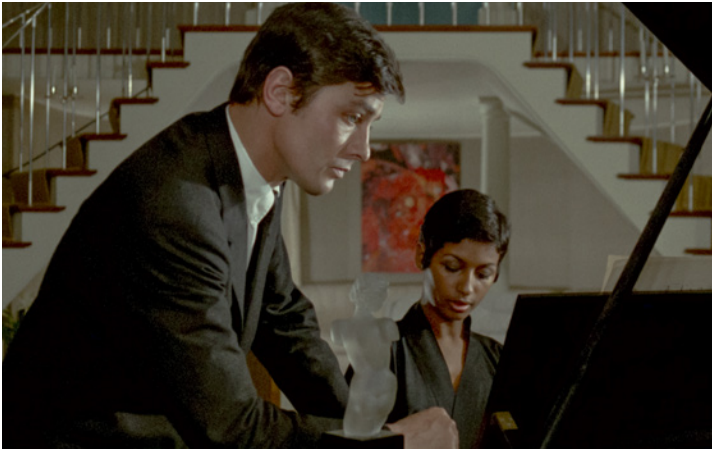
Le samouraï's reflection of real-life loss and mortality is fitting, considering the melancholic fatalism that suffuses Melville's work, which frequently revolves around men who become resigned to death. In this sense, *Le samouraï* is "Melville's purest film," to quote Nogueira, since fatalism oozes from every frame. Nowhere

is this more effective than in the film's bleakly monochromatic palette. "I wanted very cold colors for *Le samouraï*," Melville explained. "With this in mind, I carried out a series of conclusive experiments . . . My dream is to make a color film in black and white, in which there is only one tiny detail to remind us that we really are watching a film in color." For the stunning, three-minute opening shot—which shows Costello in bed, smoking listlessly within his tomblike apartment—Melville and his longtime cinematographer Henri Decaë refuse even that "one tiny detail" of color that might otherwise offer respite from the steel-gray world's pervasive isolation and entropy. In fact, Melville went so far in desaturating his film's table-setting scene that he photocopied paper currency into black-and-white facsimiles for Delon to handle while his character prepares for a job.

Also crucial to the opening shot's efficacy is Melville's use of the dolly zoom, first realized by filmmaker Alfred Hitchcock and cameraman Irmin Roberts on the set of *Vertigo* (1958). Melville put his own spin on this trick, in which the camera moves backward while a zoom lens magnifies the depth of field: "Instead of simply resorting to the now almost classical technique of a track back compensated by a zoom forward, I used 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 . . . disorder more precisely. Everything moves, but at the same time, everything stays where it is."

Legendary for his perfectionism, Melville nevertheless filmed two different endings for *Le samouraï* and did not decide which one to use until the editing process. In the first, which was part of the original script, Costello dies with a smile on his face after having committed "suicide by cop" in order to prevent himself from killing Valérie (Cathy Rosier), the beautiful pianist who becomes a target when she witnesses Jef leaving the scene of another murder. The smile suggests that Jef's act of self-sacrifice—undertaken because





he has fallen in love with her—allows the hit man to become truly human for the first time, though only at the moment of his death. The second version depicts Jef dying with the same expressionless countenance he has worn throughout the narrative—despite performing a noble deed, Jef remains an inscrutable samurai to the bitter end. Melville opted for the latter, though a production still in which Jef smiles appears frequently, as in Nogueira’s book. The scholar suggests that Melville made his choice because, in another recent film, Delon’s character had died with a grin on his face.

Le samouraï performed extremely well (with 1.9 million tickets sold) upon its release in France on October 25, 1967, cementing Melville’s box-office appeal. But, as Vincendeau points out, the film divided the French press: mainstream reviewers praised Melville’s latest, masterly take on the crime genre, while increasingly political critics (e.g., those writing for *Positif* and *Cahiers du cinéma*) denounced it as empty escapism, which seemed to distance the director’s work from the concerns of the average moviegoer. Melville had always admitted that his films were stylized, near-

surreal renderings of American noir and gangster pictures, and these inspirations were bizarrely flipped back onto *Le samouraï* when it debuted in the United States as *The Godson* (1972), the title changed (and its dialogue English-dubbed) so that it could ride the coattails of *The Godfather*. Ironically, *Le samouraï*’s atmospheric abstraction of noir and gangster-movie iconography has proved as influential as anything from Francis Ford Coppola’s juggernaut. In fact, its detachment from the realities of 1967 France—its function as a crime-drama archetype, rather than as a naturalistic narrative with specific sociological insights—has granted *Le samouraï* a cross-cultural resonance among an impressive roster of top-tier international filmmakers, who have adapted it to varying degrees: Walter Hill (*The Driver*, 1978), John Woo (*The Killer*, 1989), Luc Besson (*Léon: The Professional*, 1994), Jim Jarmusch (*Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai*, 1999), and David Fincher (*The Killer*, 2023). Almost six decades on, Melville’s meticulous direction and Delon’s eerily poignant performance have not only sustained *Le samouraï*’s cinematic legacy but also its universality, transcending cinema and touching the realm of myth.

JEAN-PIERRE MELVILLE FILMOGRAPHY

- 1946 *24 heures de la vie d'un clown* (*24 Hours in the Life of a Clown*) (short)
- 1949 *Le silence de la mer* (*The Silence of the Sea*)
- 1950 *Les enfants terribles* (*The Terrible Children*)
- 1953 *Quand tu liras cette lettre* (*When You Read This Letter*)
- 1956 *Bob le flambeur* (*Bob the Gambler*)
- 1959 *Deux hommes dans Manhattan* (*Two Men in Manhattan*)
- 1961 *Léon Morin, Priest* (*Léon Morin, prêtre*)
- 1962 *Le doulos* (*The Informant*)
- 1963 *L'ainé des Ferchaux* (*Magnet of Doom*)
- 1966 *Le deuxième souffle* (*Second Wind*)
- 1967 *Le samouraï* (*The Samurai*)
- 1969 *Army of Shadows* (*L'armée des ombres*)
- 1970 *Le cercle rouge* (*The Red Circle*)
- 1972 *Un flic* (*A Cop*)

