

Le Samourai

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Abstract

Jean-Pierre Melville (born Jean-Pierre Grumbach) was a unique figure among postwar French directors. His film *Le Samourai* represents an intriguing interpretation of *film noir*. On the one hand, because of Melville's fascination with the American cinema, it borrows heavily both in story and style from its American *film noir* predecessors. It does, however, offer much to set it apart and cannot, by any means, be considered simply derivative. It successfully combines American *film noir* influences with a distinct Melvillean vision to produce a film of great impact. Melville adroitly utilizes the central metaphor of the film and the main character's mental state as vehicles to realize such key concepts as *minimalism, cinema of process, ritual, lack of strict adherence to reality, descriptive narration, amoral worldview, and death-driven destiny*. These combine to produce a film that many consider to be Melville's masterpiece—a film of exquisite beauty.

Key Words: cinema, film noir, Jean-Pierre Melville

Introduction

Jean-Pierre Melville (1917–1973) directed thirteen feature films between 1947 and 1972, most of them ranking among the best in postwar French cinema. In particular, his brilliant gangster films *Bob le flambeur* (1956), *Le Doulos* (1963), *Le Deuxième souffle* (1966), *Le Cercle rouge* (1969), and especially *Le Samourai* (1967), with their cool, minimalist *noir* style are defining instances of the French *policier*. A great Americanophile, the idiosyncratic Melville, who renamed himself after the writer Herman Melville, used to drive round Paris in the 1960s in a Stetson hat and a huge convertible American car. (Vincendeau 2009, <http://www.noiroftheweek.com/2009/01/le-samoura-1967.html>)

Jean-Pierre Melville (born Jean-Pierre Grumbach) was a unique figure among postwar French directors. Like many of the French New Wave directors, he was self-taught. His first

film classrooms consisted of movie theaters, where he often saw up to five films a day during the 1930s. Most of the films he saw were classic American cinema, and they left a lasting impression upon him. Among the many things he learned from them was the importance of telling an entertaining story and using star power when possible. This lesson served him well during his film-making career.

For virtually all his directing career, he was an outsider. Because he lacked any formal education or training in film, from the beginning he was forced to work outside of the mainstream French film industry. In retrospect this was probably a blessing, since it freed him to do things his own way. He established his own film studio in the 1950s and had virtually complete control over all aspects of film production, thereby attaining the status of *auteur*.

His place in postwar French cinema was somewhat paradoxical. On the one hand, his early work, with its use of nonprofessional actors and naturalistic shooting locations, gained favor with such New Wave directors as Godard and Truffaut. He was, in fact, often referred to as the father of the New Wave. His later work, however, largely because of its use of big name stars and commercial success, was considered by those same New Wave directors to be a sell-out.

According to Melville biographer Ginette Vincendeau, the thirteen feature films and one short film Melville directed fall into five categories:

- Stylistic Exercises: *Vingt-quatre heures de la vie d'un clown*—short film (1945), *Les Enfants terribles* (1950), and *Quand tu liras cette lettre* (1953).
- Melville's War (reflecting Melville's war-time participation in the French resistance): *Le Silence de la mer* (1949), *Léon Morin, prêtre* (1961), and *L'Armée des ombres* (1969).
- Between New Wave and America: *Bob le flambeur* (1955), *Deux hommes dans Manhattan* (1959), and *L'Aîné des Ferchaux* (1963).
- Série Noire: *Le Doulos* (1962) and *Le Deuxième Souffle* (1966).
- The Delon Trilogy: *Le Samouraï* (1967), *Le Cercle rouge* (1970), and *Un flic* (1972).

Among these films, those in the last two categories reflect most clearly what might be called Melville's *film noir*. Among his *film noir*, his 1967 *Le Samouraï* stands out. It was a commercial success that met with both critical praise and condemnation—praise from the popular press and condemnation from more 'artistic' corners. More importantly, though, "*Le*

Samourai is, for many, Melville's masterpiece, the culmination of his artistic achievements as well as a film of exquisite beauty." (Vincendeau 2003, p 175)

The purpose of this paper is twofold: (1) to consider *Le Samourai* as *film noir* by stressing its borrowings from American *film noir*, and (2) to suggest a surprising source for the "exquisite beauty" of the film.

Melville's *Film Noir*

Borrowings. In making *Le Samourai* Melville is clearly influenced by earlier *film noir*—American in particular. Upon a cursory viewing, then, one might be tempted to simply accept *Le Samourai* as a knock-off of American *film noir*, to view it as yet another cleverly conceived crime story surrounded by all the appropriate stylistic trappings of *film noir*: chiaroscuro lighting and dutch angle shots, for example. The basic plot of *Le Samourai* might support this view.

The Story. Working for an anonymous client, contract killer Jef Costello methodically and meticulously plans and carries out the murder of the intended target, a nightclub owner named Martey. After the murder, Jef is arrested by the police as part of a general round up of suspects. Although he had been seen by the nightclub's piano player just after he killed Martey, for some reason she refuses to identify him in a police lineup. Thanks to Jef's elaborately prepared alibi involving both his girlfriend and an unwitting gentleman friend of hers, the police are forced to release him.

Just the fact that Jef was arrested, though, is enough for the client to want him out of the way. When Jef meets his contact to collect payment for the successful murder, the contact wounds Jef in an attempt to kill him. Jef sets about to get to the client before the client can get to him. He contacts the piano player, thinking she is his best hope of finding the client, but he gains no specific information from her. All the while, the police superintendent refuses to accept Jef's alibi. Accordingly, he puts a tail on Jef and has his room bugged.

In what seems to be an attempt to placate Jef, the client sends his contact to pay Jef for the first murder and to hire him for a second. Jef accepts the second contract. In an elaborate high tech chase through the Paris metro, Jef manages to lose the police. He then goes through the same methodical preparations as in the first murder. It turns out, though, that instead of immediately fulfilling the second contract, he seeks out the client. After killing

him, Jef goes to the nightclub to carry out the second contract—to kill the piano player. As he raises his gun, he is shot by the police, who have been watching the nightclub. When the police superintendent examines Jef's gun, he finds that it is not loaded.

One can easily imagine this plot in a Hollywood-produced film. In fact, it is generally accepted that the basic plot of *Le Samourai* is loosely modeled on Frank Tuttle's 1942 *film noir* classic *This Gun for Hire*. This film is the story of a contract killer who carries out his contract. The client, in turn, tries to double cross him by framing him for a robbery. Raven, the killer in this film, then searches down the client and kills him. Raven, who rants about his dreams and clearly fears contact with human beings, is clearly unbalanced. His only 'soft spot' is for cats. Even though Jef is not as theatrical as Raven, he too is clearly unbalanced. His soft spot is for birds. Raven has a deformed left forearm; Jef is wounded in his left forearm.

Other Borrowings. Additionally, there are props and scenes lifted directly from American cinema. Jef's trench coat and hat, for example, were modeled on the standard attire in many American gangster films of the 1930s and 1940s. Two scenes, in particular, recall American cinema. The police lineup scene was inspired by a similar scene in John Huston's 1950 *The Asphalt Jungle*, one of Melville's favorite American films. The killing scenes, in which Jef outdraws his opponents, recall any number of American Western gunfights. The careful planning and meticulous execution of the robbery scene in *The Asphalt Jungle* remind one of Jef's *modus operandi* when planning and executing a hit. Jef's cool, unhurried demeanor is reminiscent of Doc Riedenschneider (in *The Asphalt Jungle*).

Because of Melville's fascination with and borrowings from American cinema, one might think that Melville's *film noir* in general, and *Le Samourai* in particular, would be derivative. On the surface, this might seem true, but when we search for root of the "exquisite beauty" of *Le Samourai*, we can see that Melville's depiction of *film noir* in this film goes much deeper than simple plot and style.

Melville's Vision. Granted that elements of *Le Samourai* are inspired by or borrowed from American cinema; nevertheless, Melville's vision of *film noir* goes deeper than his being a mere copycat. He envisions an underlying unifying element in the world presented in *Le Samourai*. This unifying element is, in turn, the source of what Ginette Vincendeau considers to be the "exquisite beauty" of the film. It is the premise of this paper that the unifying element is nothing more than Jef Costello's psychosis. Support for this view is given by Melville

himself in his interview with Rui Nogueira. Melville describes the rationale behind the opening scene:

I like the idea of beginning my story with a kind of meticulous, almost clinical, description of a hired killer, who is by definition a schizophrenic. Before writing my script, I read everything I could about schizophrenia—the solitude, the silences, the introversion. (Nogueira 1971, p 126)

Melville is selective in the symptoms that he chooses for Jef to exhibit, and not all of the symptoms are necessarily symptoms of schizophrenia. The symptoms, though, can serve as a guide to understanding both Jef and, more interestingly, the film as a whole. The major symptoms Jef exhibits are alogia (lack or decline in speech), lack of emotion, social withdrawal, repetitive/ritualistic behavior, disconnect from reality, delusions, and suicidal thought. These symptoms serve to elucidate many aspects of the film.

Minimalism. Biographer Ginette Vincendeau's uses the term 'minimalism' to encapsulate a central element in *Le Samourai*, and an examination of Jef's psychological state can help us understand this. The film is minimalistic on many levels. First of all, in dialog. In other words, Jef's alogia. Melville recounts this story of a script reading he did with Alain Delon in order to persuade Delon to accept the role of Jef:

The reading took place at his [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 and there hasn't been a word of dialogue. That's good enough for me. I'll do the film." (Nogueira 1971, p 129)

Much of the film thus takes place with little dialogue, especially on the part of Jef. The opening scenes of the film illustrate this. *Le Samourai* opens to the sound of passing traffic and the chirping of a bird. We see a barren room lit by the light from two long windows. At first glance the room appears empty except for a bed, birdcage, and dresser, but when we see smoke rising above the bed, we realize the bed is occupied. The barrenness of the room, the light and shade of the scene, the dingy starkness of the walls, and the skewed angles of the ceiling present us at once with a striking visual image. The man, Jef Costello, rises from the bed and proceeds to the door. Before the door he pauses at the mirror to take stock and

to prepare himself to go out. As he gazes at himself in the mirror, he slowly and methodically puts on his trench coat and hat, finishing by running his thumb and forefinger across the front brim of his hat with a flourish. He quickly turns and exits the room.

Still in silence, Jef descends to the street and calmly surveys the scene. When a man exits his car, Jef strolls over to the car, gets in, and places a huge ring of keys on the seat beside him. One by one he carefully places keys in the ignition and tries to turn them, all the while staring coolly through the front windshield. When he turns the fifth key, the engine starts. He drives to a garage where a man closes the garage door behind him and proceeds to change the license plates on the car. He then supplies Jef with a fake vehicle registration and a gun. Jef pays and drives away. All of this is done without a word.

Jef drives to an apartment building, enters an apartment occupied by a woman, and speaks his first words:

Jef: "Tonight I got here at 7:15 and left at 2:00 a. m."

Jane: "Impossible. Weiner just got back. He phoned to say he was coming at 2:00."

Jef: "Then I was here from 7:15 to 2:00."

Jane: "I like it when you come here because you need me."

Jef: [silence]

Having established an alibi, he leaves. He drops by a hotel to tell a group of card players that he will be there a 2:00 a. m.

Jef: "How long will you be here?"

Man: "We rented the room for the night."

Jef: "I'll be here at 2:00. Save a seat."

Man: "Bring cash in case you lose."

Jef: "I never lose. Not really."

Jef pulls up to a curb, leaves the car engine running, and gets out. He enters Martey's, a nightclub. Not checking his hat or coat, he passes through a restroom to get to the back offices. When he emerges in the back hallway, he is wearing white gloves. He enters an office. This exchange follows:

Martey: "Who are you?"

Jef: "It doesn't matter."

Martey: "What do you want?"

Jef: "To kill you."

In a gunfight reminiscent of an American Western, Jef outdraws the nightclub owner. Martey falls to the floor dead, and Jef turns to leave the room.

At this point approximately fifteen minutes of the film have elapsed, and there has been a total of just twelve lines of dialogue. Jef has uttered forty-four words.

A second aspect of *Le Samurai's* minimalism is visual. There are two worlds in *Le Samurai*: Jef's world and the 'real' world. Jef's world, as best seen in his apartment, is barren and stark, bereft of any ornamentation; i.e., a reflection of his withdrawal from the world. Outside of Jef's apartment is the 'real' world of 1967 Paris—noisy, gaudy, and out of control. But because Jef's enters the real world with restrained, controlled movement and demeanor that are reflective of his lack of emotion, however, he carries with him a constant expression of visual minimalism.

A third variety of minimalism involves Jef's minimal involvement with others. His lack of emotion and social withdrawal mean that he never expresses any feelings—even with his 'girlfriend'. In keeping with this, he never touches her.

Process and Ritual. Observers of Melville's work often note that Melville's work can be viewed as a 'cinema of process'. This means that much camera time is spent focusing on the step-by-step details of doing something. Most often this is done in silence⁽¹⁾. This is especially true in Melville's *film noir* and there are many examples of this in *Le Samurai*: Jef's stealing the car, the changing of the license plates at the garage, etc. With respect to Jef, however, perhaps the allied expression 'ritual' is more accurate. A ritual does, of course, consist of a series of actions—a 'process', as it were—but there is a difference. For the schizophrenic, the ritual is a method of coping, a method of relating to the world. While *Le Samurai* is filled with rituals, perhaps the most memorable ritual (mentioned above) is the one performed as Jef dons his trench coat and hat in preparation to leave his apartment. Each time he leaves his apartment, he must pause to run his fingers across the brim of his hat. It is a compulsion.

Rituals play a crucial role throughout *Le Samourai*. In a certain sense, all of the film revolves around rituals. Jef's killing method is done as a ritual. His stealing of a car—as he places the ring of keys on the car seat and slowly tries them one by one—is a ritual copied by the police when they break into Jef's apartment to place the bug. The police have other rituals: 'round up the usual suspects', 'the lineup', 'tail him', 'intimidate the witness', etc. In fact, the film ends with Jef committing ritualistic suicide by performing his 'murder ritual' with an unloaded gun.

Disconnect. Just as Jef suffers from a disconnect from reality, so too do certain aspects of the film. It's as though the story in the film is, on one level, skewed by Jef's psychosis.⁽²⁾ Some obvious examples come to mind. First, the quickdraw murder scenes. Jef faces his victim, hands out of pockets. The victim's gun is already drawn and ready to fire, yet somehow Jef draws and fires. It also stretches credulity that the Paris police would mobilize virtually the entire police force to keep track of a man who is simply suspected of killing a probably unsavory nightclub owner.

Disconnect informs Melville's work in yet another way. One facet of Jef's disconnect and his lack of emotions is that he doesn't try to explain or judge actions. Melville echoes this by his tendency to be descriptive rather than explanatory. In other words, he limits himself to describing people and events rather than trying to explain them. A comparison with *This Gun for Hire* can make this clearer. In *Le Samourai* Jef Costello is obviously not a 'normal' man. After all, he coldly kills people for a living. Melville meticulously chronicles his methods and actions, but there is never any attempt to analyze and explain in words why he does these things. The only explanation given for his actions is that he kills people for money—hardly a deep psychological insight. Raven, the contract killer in *This Gun for Hire*, on the other hand, offers up his own explanation for his turning killer: "Every night I have a dream . . . I dream about a woman . . . She used to beat me." The reasons he became a killer are explained as a reaction to an early childhood experience. There is nothing like this in *Le Samourai*.

Along a similar vein, Melville offers us no sense of right or wrong—no good guy and bad guy. Of course, Jef's killing for money certainly can't be seen as a 'good' act, but Melville relates it in such a matter of fact way that we sense no condemnation. He relates it as Jef would. In addition, we would expect the police to represent justice, but, for example, as the superintendent tries to intimidate a witness, he declares, "The truth is what I say it is." Melville's rendition of the film doesn't allow us to see an absolute right or absolute wrong. Again, *This*

Gun for Hire provides a counterpoint. Made during World War II, this film incorporates within the plot a strong pro-American, anti-Japanese bias. Even Raven, the maniacal killer, is eventually persuaded to seek redemption by putting his life on the line as he fights a conspiracy by America's foes.

Rather than positing right and wrong as the focus or driving force in *Le Samourai*, Melville gives us a story and a life driven by destiny—a destiny prescribed by strict adherence to duty, rules, form, and ritual. Following this destiny leads inevitably to death. Melville's title choice is therefore understandable: “. . . 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.” (Vincendeau 2003, p 183) Jef, the samurai, stays true to his destiny, and, by doing so, inevitably embraces death.

Delusion. Jef's delusion—the delusion that permeates the world of *Le Samourai*—is expressed by the title of the film. Jef as a samurai is the central metaphor that explains his attitudes, worldview and actions. These, in turn, serve to create the order and the exquisite beauty of the film. Jef lives a life based on Melville's conception of the samurai and *bushido*⁽³⁾: a life defined by a strict code of conduct and honor. To Jef's psychotic mind, his suicide by police is the inevitable conclusion of his delusion.⁽⁴⁾

Conclusion

Le Samourai represents an intriguing interpretation of *film noir*. On the one hand, because of Melville's fascination with the American cinema, it borrows heavily both in story and style from its American *film noir* predecessors. It does, however, offer much to set it apart and cannot, by any means, be considered simply derivative. It successfully combines American *film noir* influences with a distinct Melvillean vision to produce a film of great impact. Melville adroitly utilizes the central metaphor of the film and the main character's mental state as vehicles to realize such key concepts as *minimalism*, *cinema of process*, *ritual*, *lack of strict adherence to reality*, *descriptive narration*, *amoral worldview*, and *death-driven destiny*. These combine to produce a film that many consider to be Melville's masterpiece—a film of exquisite beauty.

[Notes]

- (1) Of course, this ties in to alogia.
- (2) Another feature of Melville's *film noir* is that it is not tied to reality. "I never work in realism, and I don't want to." (Nogueira 1971, p. 69)
- (3) There is no evidence that Melville did extensive research into the Japanese samurai, so his view of samurai was most probably based on the depiction in Japanese movies of the 1950s and 1960s.
- (4) The ending of the film as originally shot showed Jef dying with a smile on his face. Apparently this was changed when Melville found out that Delon had died with a smile on his face in an earlier film.

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