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Focus on Film  
#4 1970

# LE SAMOURAÏ

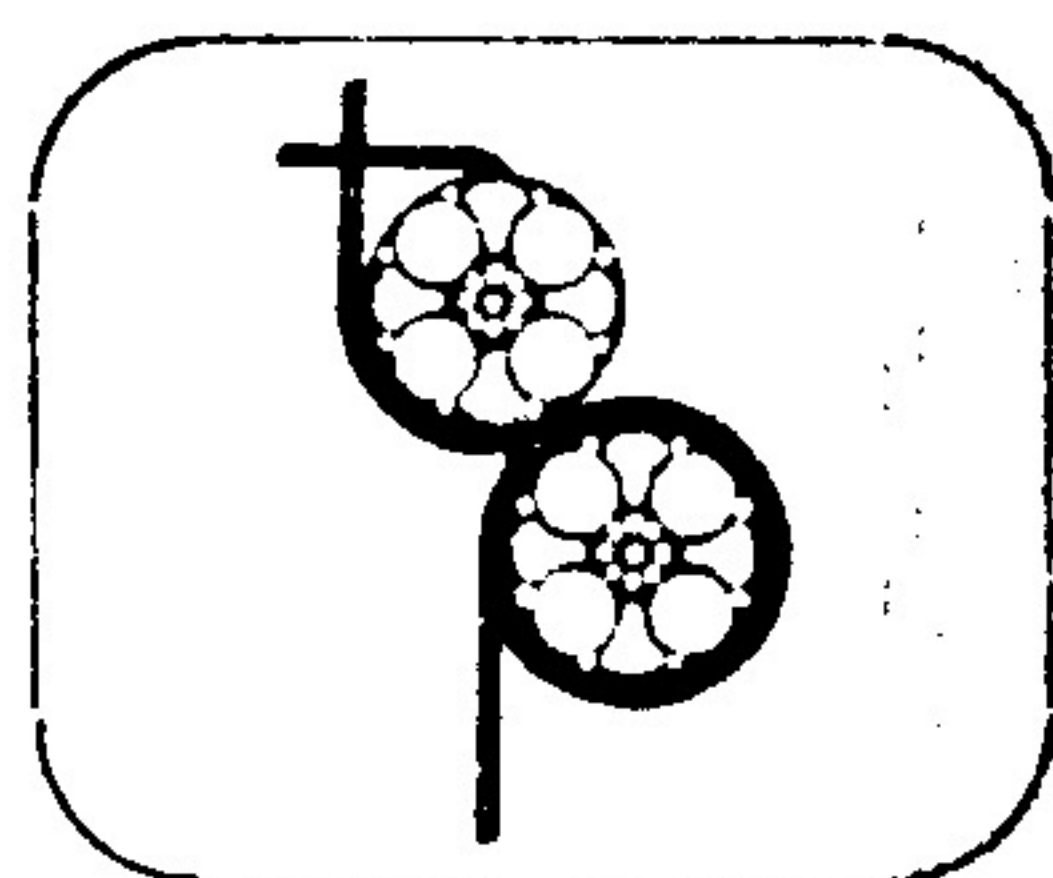
REVIEW BY TOM MILNE

THE IMPOSSIBILITY of love (*Léon Morin, Prêtre*), of friendship (*Le Doulos*), of communication (*Le Silence de la Mer*), of self-Flambeur): where you have two people as Melville says, one respect (*Deux Hommes dans Manhattan*), of life itself (*Bob le* betrays. The only refuge from this betrayal is in solitude; but solitude, given man's instinctive need for human contact, leads him back in a vicious circle to betrayal again. So in one way or another, answering this double need to be alone and to share that aloneness, each of Melville's heroes constructs a fragile cocoon — like Paul in *Les Enfants Terribles*, who uses screens to build himself the alluringly impermanent room within a room that acts like a flypaper to attract the three people he is trying to escape — which may be a means of defence against other people, but may also be a means of luring them into orbit.

In the opening sequence of *Le Samourai*, a man lies stretched out on his bed, almost invisible in the darkened room. He is Jeff Costello (Alain Delon), a hired killer; and he is, as Melville himself puts it, already "laid out" in death. There is a soft squeaking noise which turns out to be a budgerigar in a cage; a faint glow which proves to be a burning cigarette; otherwise darkness as of the grave until one's eyes grow accustomed to the light and the gunman gets up from the bed, slowly and deliberately, death set in motion. And as Jeff Costello sets out to lay the groundwork for his next contract, the execution of a man in his backstage office at a nightclub, the film proceeds on two perfectly married levels, one realistic, one mythological.

On the narrative level, *Le Samourai* is a classic gangster movie, redolent of night, of gleaming city streets, of fast cars and guns weighed down by

THE WORLD OF JEFF COSTELLO (ALAIN DELON). BELOW, WITH JACQUES LEROY.



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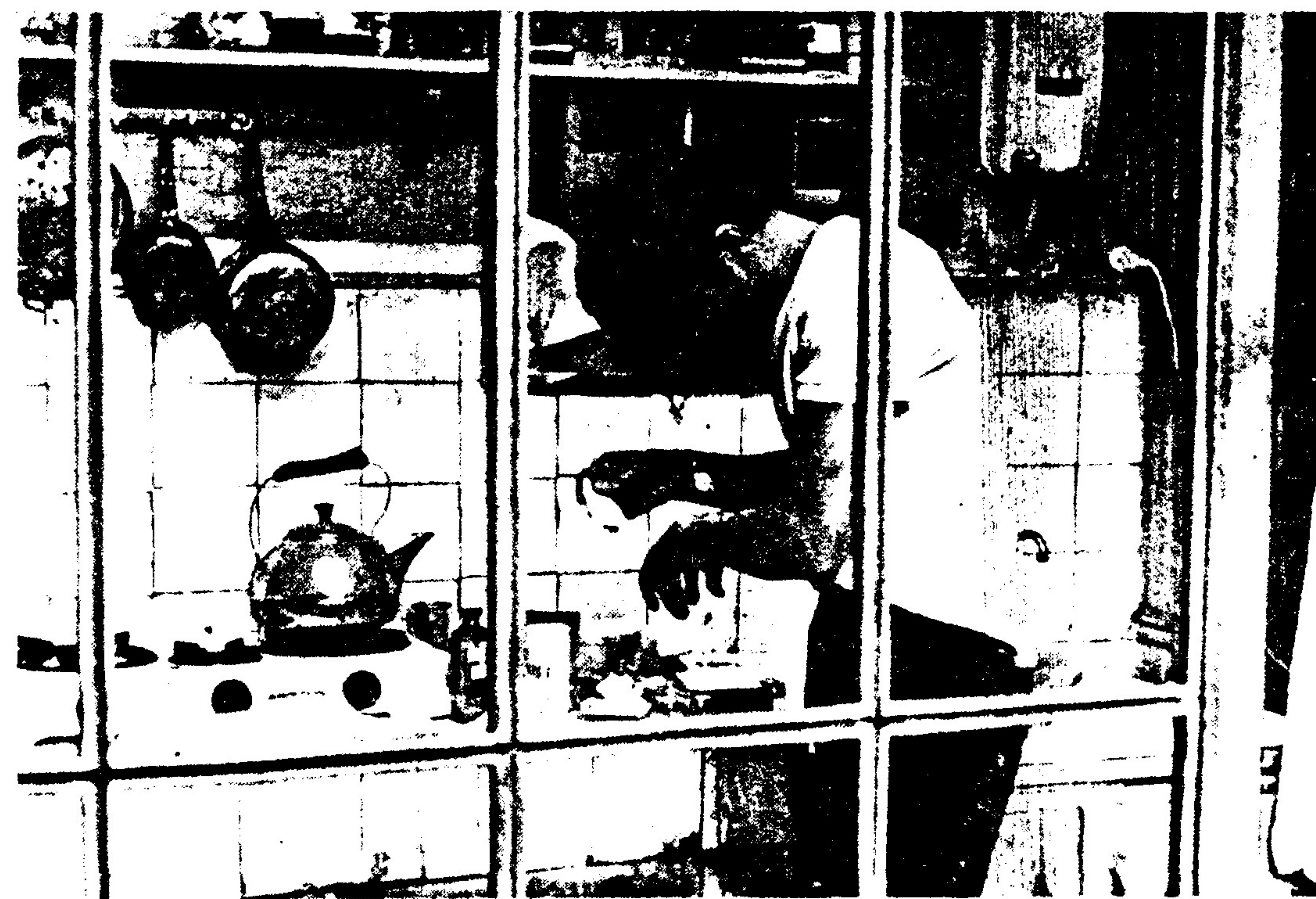


silencers, as the lone wolf killer — the samurai of the title — lopes steadily and disdainfully through a battery of police line-ups and interrogations, of encounters with syndicate hoods on lonely railway bridges and in the silence of his own room, never moving an inch from his chosen trail. His girl Jane Lagrange (Nathalie Delon) waits with dogged devotion in the luxurious apartment paid for by another lover, resigned to serve him in the only way he asks, by establishing an unshakeable alibi. The contract is executed, with clean, cold-blooded efficiency, in a nightclub where Jeff strolls backstage, pulls the trigger, and strolls out again, pausing only to stare neutrally at a girl who happens to cross his path. The dénouement comes with Jeff lying dead on the nightclub floor — shot down by the police as the lights go out and the drummer indicates that the show is over by beating his equivalent of the theatrical *trois coups* on his drums — after a fantastic pursuit through the

LEFT, JEFF AND HIS GIRL JANE (NATHALIE DELON).  
BELOW LEFT, JEFF HOLED UP WITH THE CARD GAME.  
BELOW RIGHT, JEFF DRESSES THE BULLET WOUND.

Métro by a pack of policemen which is organised like a veritable hunt, with beaters to flush the game, trackers with communication devices to hold the trail, and guns to seal every exit.

Melville handles the characteristic elements of the gangster thriller so brilliantly that the single-minded chase which forms the backbone of the film — first of the victim by Jeff, then of Jeff by the police — is strong enough to sustain interest in its own right as a subtly choreographed ballet of stealthy figures stalking the streets, listening at doors, placing bugs, suddenly whipping out guns from the depths of their trench coats. But the real fascination of the film lies in Melville's obsession with actions, with the way things are done. The first two reels, virtually without dialogue, are devoted exclusively to Jeff's alibi, and one watches almost hypnotised, at first understanding nothing but still fascinated, as this man of whom one knows nothing steals a car (patiently trying ignition keys, one by one, from a huge bunch in his pocket), drives off to have the number plates changed in a desolate little back street

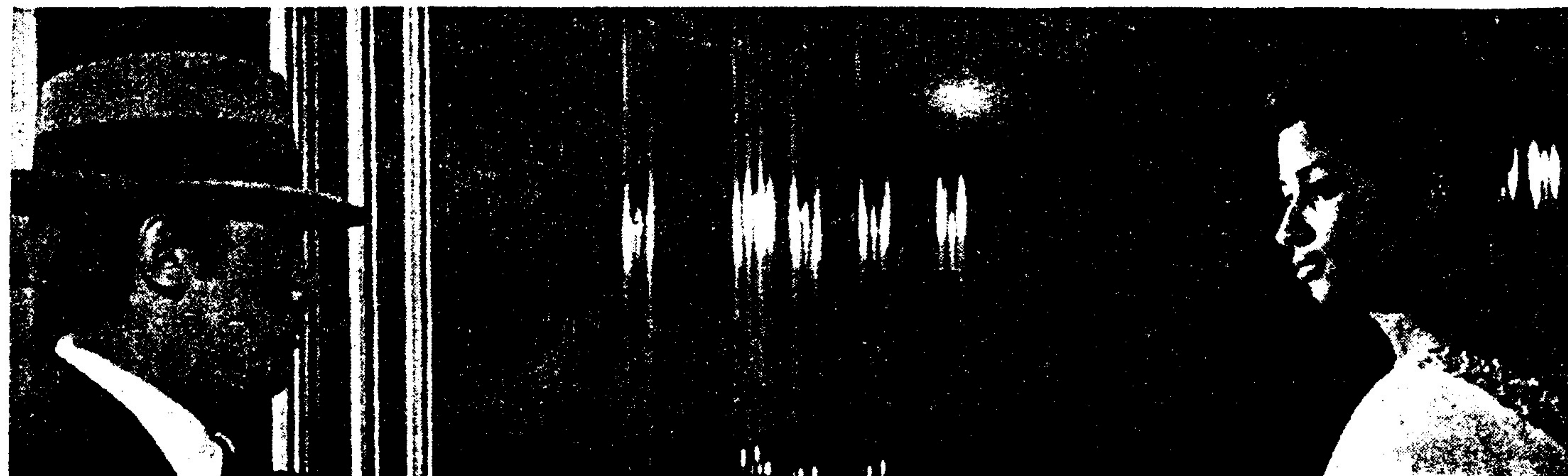




garage, visits his girl, looks in on a card game, ditches the car and steals another, has its plates changed, executes the contract, returns to Jane's apartment to be glimpsed leaving as her other lover arrives, and finally holes up with the card game. Gradually, like the lump of clay on a potter's wheel which suddenly begins to take shape, the incidents form a pattern, and the last master-stroke is given to the exquisitely complex alibi when one realises that it hinges on the evidence of Jane's wealthy lover: a stranger might be mistaken about the identity of the man seen in the hallway of Jane's apartment house, but Jeff knows that the police will believe his evidence since he has everything to gain if Jeff is jailed. So in betraying Jeff to the police, the rival in fact gives unassailable confirmation to his alibi.

Like the second great set piece of the film — the tailing of Jeff through the Métro — this sequence hinges on Melville's meticulous observation of the precise, self-absorbed gestures and movements of a man alone and sufficient unto himself, whether he is hunter or hunted. Essentially, Jeff is a schizophrenic (the character was built up from medical case histories), a man incapable of guilt or remorse, incapable even of falling in love, because he watches his own actions and emotions from the standpoint of an interested but dispassionate observer, maintaining the same cool, unwavering detachment whether saying a last farewell to Jane, dressing a bullet-wound in his own arm, or returning to the nightclub to see the girl who knows he committed the murder but who has shielded him from the police, and with whom he has found a kind of loving. It is hereabouts that the mythological level comes into play.

This girl, a pianist in the nightclub, haunts Jeff because he should have killed her as the only witness to his crime, but didn't; and because she should have shopped him to the police, but didn't. So far, so conventional, but to Jeff she is a mysterious, unattainable ideal, as alien to his world as Cocteau's Princess was to the earthy reality in which Orphée wallowed in domestic bliss with Eurydice. As in *Orphée*, the only meeting place for an impossible love



JEFF AND THE PIANIST (CATHY ROSIER).

is in death; and where Orphée was called to the underworld by a beautiful white woman dressed in black, Jeff is lured there by his ravishing black pianist in a robe of dazzling white. But in Melville's world even fairytale romances are beset by betrayal and by a re-affirmation of the essential solitude of man. Jeff discovers that the pianist has indeed betrayed him, though inadvertently. Involved in some way with Jeff's employer — perhaps as his mistress — she knows too much to be allowed to live, and is duly assigned to Jeff as his next contract. He carries it out calmly and faithfully, but with an empty gun, and is shot down by the police. It is a marvellous, indefinable moment: the harakiri of the samurai who has failed, the last gallant gesture of the knight errant, the helpless cry of despair of the sick man who wants to feel but cannot.

Traditionally, the world of the gangster film is a chiaroscuro one, bounded by night and the city, but this has gone largely by the board since colour became the rule rather than the exception in the cinema — one has only to think of the musical comedy aura of *Borsalino*, or even the subtler palettes of *Bonnie and Clyde* and *The St. Valentine's Day Massacre*. Melville, however, is an exception. From its opening sequence, *Le Samourai* might almost be a black-and-white film; then one notices that the packet of cigarettes, the banknotes, the labels on the bottles of Evian water in Jeff's room, have been

drained of their colour to give them a listless, atonal quality; and consistently throughout the film the colours have been so muted into a range of soft blues and greys that the moment when the pianist in her white dress drifts up a staircase to disappear down a white corridor comes as a visual shock as though two screaming colours had been matched together. This mutation of colour in *Le Samourai* is not simply a trick, but a visual equivalent to Jeff's steely, passionless mind. In him and around him, cold and toneless, Paris becomes a city of shadows, as silent and mysterious as Cocteau's *zone de la mort*: a place, in fact, where one is not in the least surprised to find Death herself waiting, beckoning the lonely samurai into her arms with her alluring promise of peace and companionship.

## CREDITS

Career details follow for names in bold type. *Dir/sc*: **Jean-Pierre Melville** (the novel by Joan McLeod). *Ph*: **Henri Decaë** (in Eastmancolor). *Art dir*: François de Lamothe. *Ed*: Monique Bonnot. *Mus*: François de Roubaix. *Prod*: Filmel/C.I.C.C./Fida Cinematografica. *Dist*: Target (U.K.). 105m.

*With* **Alain Delon** (*Jeff*), François Périer (*Inspector*), Nathalie Delon (*Jane*), Cathy Rosier (*Valérie*), Jacques Leroy (*Gunman*), Michel Boisrond (*Wiener*), Jean-Pierre Posier (*Olivier Rey*), Catherine Jourdan (*Cloakroom attendant*).

Focus on LE SAMOURAI



# JEAN-PIERRE MELVILLE

This most 'American' of leading French film directors was born October 20, 1917, in Paris. Interested in film-making from an early age when he was given a Pathé-Baby projector and later a Pathé-Baby camera, he made his first 'film' with the camera at the age of eight. It is said that a viewing of the film *Cavalcade*, when he was 15, finally made Melville determined to become a professional film director. After serving in the War, he founded his own production company in November 1945. He made *Quand Tu Liras Cette Lettre* to raise the money to buy his own studio. It is the only film that he was not heavily involved in writing as well as directing. *Bob Le Flambeur* is the first of his underworld films, and *Léon Morin Prêtre* and *L'Armée des Ombres* are the only films since to escape from the world of crime, darkness, and the city which so fascinate Melville. An occasional actor, he has appeared in his own *Deux Hommes dans Manhattan* and also *Les Drame du Bois de Boulogne* (short) (1948), *Orphée* (1949), *Un Amour de Poche* (1957), *A Bout de Souffle* (1959) and *Landru* (*Bluebeard*) (1962).

Films as director:

1945: *Vingt Quatre Heures de la Vie d'un Clown* (short). 47: *Le Silence de la Mer*. 49: *Les Enfants Terribles* (*The Strange Ones*).

1953: *Quand Tu Liras Cette Lettre*. 55: *Bob Le Flambeur*. 58: *Deux Hommes dans Manhattan*.

1961: *Léon Morin, Prêtre*. 62: *Le Doulos* (*The Fingerman*), *L'Ainé des Ferchaux* (*Magnet of Doom*). 65: *Le Deuxième Souffle* (*Second Breath*). 67: *Le Samouraï*. 68: *L'Armée des Ombres* (*The Shadow Army*).

1970: *Le Cercle Rouge*.

# HENRI DECAE

This brilliant French photographer first gained international attention (along with Raoul Coutard) for his work on the films that made up the *nouvelle vague*. Born July 31, 1915, at Saint-Denis in France, he produced, directed and presumably photographed many shorts between 1941 and 1944; began his career as a photographer of feature films with Jean-Pierre Melville in 1947; and went on to do distinguished work, not only with Melville but with Chabrol and Malle especially, among others. He has not always shown too much concern with the artistic potential of the films he has undertaken (unlike Coutard), but his images — whether in monochrome or colour — are invariably polished and exciting to watch.

Known shorts:

*Hommes et Bêtes*, *Un Homme à la Mer*, *Sous les Palmes de Marrakech*, *Bons Baisirs de Dinard*, *Cher Vieux Paris!*, *La Lutte contre le Gaspillage*, *Vacances blanches*, *Evitez le Désordre*, *Caroline au Pays Natal*, *Escale à Paris*, *Marrakech Capitale du Sud*, *Le Mellah de Marrakech*, *Caroline du Sud*, *Avec les Gents du Voyage*, *La Beauté de l'Effort*, *Le grand Cirque s'en va* (co-ph.), *Un Monde troublant*, *L'homme et la Bête* (co-ph.), *Stock-car à tout casser!* (co-ph.), *Navigation Marchande*, *Cowboys Français*, *L'Egypte Eternelle*, *La grande Terre*, *Mer Caraïbe*, *Radio Toutou vous parle*, *Village de la France-Australe*, *Coueurs de Brousse*, *Propre à rien*, *Antoine l'Aventureux*, *Confidences d'un Piano*, *De Bouche à Oreille*, *Neuf à trois ou la Journée d'une Vedette*, *Piano Mon Ami*, *Les plus beaux Jours*, *Robinson*, *La Voix des Anches*, *Bois et Cuivres* (co-ph.), *Le Chateau du Passe*, *Les Cuivres à la Voix de l'Or*, *Trente-huit... huit*, *Images de Hier et d'Aujourd'hui* (co-ph.),

*L'Enfant au Fennec*, *Carnaval Sacré* (never released).

Features:

1947: *Le Silence de la Mer*. 49: *Les Enfants Terribles* (*The Strange Ones*).

1950: *Bertrand Coeur de Lion*. 51: *Au Coeur de la Casbah*, *La Course de Taureaux* (co-ph.), *Si Ca Vous Chante*. 52: *Crève-coeur*, *L'Or des Pharaons*.

1955: *Bob Le Flambeur*. 56: *S.O.S. Noronha*. 57: *Le Désir mène les Hommes* (*Desire Takes the Men*), *Ascenseur pour l'Echafaud* (*Lift to the Scaffold/Frantic*). 58: *Le Beau Serge*, *Les Amants* (*The Lovers*), *Les Cousins*, *Les Quatre Cents Coups*. 59: *Un Témoin dans la Ville*, *La Sentence*, *A Double Tour* (*Web of Passion/Leda*), *Les Bonnes Femmes*, *Plein Soleil* (*Purple Noon*).

1960: *Che gioia vivere/Quelle joie de vivre*. 61: *Léon Morin Prêtre*, *Vie privée* (*A Very Private Affair*), *Les Sept Péchés Capitaux* (*Seven Capital Sins*) (episodes by Godard, Demy, Vadim only). 62: *Cybèle ou les Dimanches de Ville-D'Avray* (*Sundays and Cybele*), *L'Ainé des Ferchaux* (*Magnet of Doom*), *Le Jour et l'Heure*. 63: *Dragées au poivre* (*Sweet and Sour*), *La Porteuse de Pain*. 64: *La Tulipe Noire* (*The Black Tulip*), *Les Félics* (*The Love Cage/Joy House*), *La Ronde* (*Circle of Love*).

1965. *Week-end à Zuydcoote* (*Weekend at Dunkirk*), *Le Corniaud* (*The Sucker*), *Viva Maria*. 66: *Hotel Paradiso*. 67: *Night of the Generals*, *Le Voleur* (*The Thief of Paris*), *The Comedians*, *Le Samouraï*. 68: *Diaboliquement Vôtre* (*Diabolically Yours*). 69: *Castle Keep*, *Le clan des Siciliens* (*The Sicilian Clan*). 70: *The Only Game in Town*, *Hello-Goodbye*, *Le Cercle Rouge*.

(Henri Decaë's shorts researched by Erique J. Rebel.)

# ALAIN DELON

Born November 8, 1935 (1936?) in the Paris suburb of Sceaux, this

leading young French star is currently riding high with his success in French gangster films and the interest stirred by his involvement in a murder investigation and divorce from his wife, Nathalie Delon. *Plein Soleil* and *Rocco and his Brothers* are the two films that brought Delon international recognition and a not very successful entry into Hollywood films. He now has his own production company, Adel.

1957: *Quand la Femme s'en Mêle* (*Send a Woman When the Devil Fails*), *Sois Belle et Tais-toi* (*Be Beautiful But Shut Up*). 58: *Christine*, *Faibles Femmes* (*Women are Weak/Three Murderesses*). 59: *Le Chemin des Ecoles* (*The Way of Youth*), *Plein Soleil* (*Purple Noon*).

1960: *Rocco e i suoi Fratelli* (*Rocco and his Brothers*). 61: *Che gioia vivere/Quelle joie de vivre*, *Les Amours Célèbres* (episode 'Agnès Bernauer'), *L'Eclisse* (*The Eclipse*). 62: *Le Diable et les Dix Commandements* (*The Devil and the Ten Commandments*) (episode 'L'Inceste'), *Mélodie en Sous-Sol* (*The Big Snatch/Any Number Can Win*), *Il Gattopardo* (*The Leopard*). 64: *La Tulipe Noire* (*The Black Tulip*), *Les Félics* (*The Love Cage/Joy House*), *L'Insoumis*.

65: *The Yellow Rolls-Royce*, *Once a Thief*. 66: *The Lost Command*, *Paris Brûle-t-il?/Is Paris Burning?*, *Texas Across the River*. 67: *Les Aventuriers* (*The Last Adventure*), *Histoires Extraordinaires* (*Spirits of the Dead*) (episode 'William Wilson'), *Le Samouraï*. 68: *Diaboliquement Vôtre* (*Diabolically Yours*), *Girl on a Motorcycle*. 69: *Adieu l'Ami* (*So Long, Pal*), *La Piscine* (*The Sinners/The Swimming Pool*), *Jeff*, *Le Clan des Siciliens* (*The Sicilian Clan*). 70: *Borsalino*. Not yet released: *Le Cercle Rouge*, *Die Boss Die Quietly* (suspended mid-production).

Delon also began *Marco Polo* in 1962 but it was later re-started without him.



## FOURTH ISSUE

### LE SAMOURAI

Since our review appeared, this film has changed distributor and been circuit-released as a supporting feature to *A Town Called Bastard*, the programme being the first release of a new company called Scotia-Barber. Tom Milne has this to say:

Any resemblance between the film I reviewed and the version distributed in Britain by Scotia-Barber is almost coincidental. 1) The Scotia-Barber print is an English version, with Alain Delon lisping broken English (his scenes were evidently shot in two versions) and everybody else dubbed to excruciatingly Americanised effect. 2) The exquisite colour styling of the original has paled to insignificance in what looks like a second-hand dupe. 3) Nine minutes have been cut and two absolutely crucial scenes

have disappeared entirely: Jeff's return to the night club to see the pianist, and his abrupt departure when the barman jokes about murderers returning to the scene of the crime; and the police inspector's visit to Jane Lagrange to threaten her with the vice squad unless she betrays Jeff. Both are key moments leading up to and explaining Jeff's "suicide", and without them *Le Samourai* makes very little sense. Other cuts, relatively minor, remove part of Jeff's confrontation with Olivier Rey and the beginning of the police identity parade (which now starts not with the ageing deadbeats pulled in by the dragnet but much too baldly with Jeff himself). Why do we tolerate such butchery?

(#7 1971)