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## BY J. HOBERMAN

**HORSE THIEF.** Directed by Tian Zhuangzhuang. Written by Zhang Rui. Produced by Xi'an Film Studio. Distributed by the International Film Circuit. At Film Forum 1, through January 19.

**LIFE IS A DREAM.** Written and directed by Raul Ruiz, after the play *La vida es sueño* by Pedro Calderón de la Barca. Produced by La Maison de la Culture du Havre/Institut National de la Communication Audiovisuelle. Distributed by the International Film Circuit. At Film Forum 1, through January 19.

**LE DOULOS.** Written and directed by Jean-Pierre Melville. Produced by Georges de Beauregard. Distributed by Interama. At Film Forum 2, January 8-14.

Speaking of dreamtime and the big sleep, next door at Film Forum 2 for a week starting Friday, is a pristine print of Jean-Pierre Melville's 1962 *Le Doulos* (The Informer). This tricky, attitude-drenched thriller, originally released here (dubbed and cut) as *Doulos the Fin-german*, stars then nouvelle vague icon Jean-Paul Belmondo, flushed with insolent confidence as a professional stool pigeon and thug of mystery.

*Le Doulos* unfolds in Melville's characteristically austere and heavily encoded demimonde—a bleak, black-and-white terrain inhabited by petty thieves and tawdry blondes. Paris, or rather those industrial outskirts that reminded Melville of Manhattan, is virtually empty except for these posturing lowlifes. The melancholy action is scored to cool vibraphone doodles, punctuated by the ceremonial display of key totems (trench-

coats, cigarettes, revolvers) and interspersed with sudden spasms of violence: There are eight fatal shootings, six of them point blank.

Melville was not just a father figure for the French new wave (and more: Volker Schlöndorff was the assistant director on *Le Doulos* and Bertrand Tavernier the unit publicist), he saw himself as a sort of ascetic warrior priest. As steeped in ritual as Tian's Tibet, Melville's underworld is similarly governed by primitive emotions, rigorous classicism, and the veil of illusion. Appearances are deceptive by definition—the only constant is the underlying misogyny. *Le Doulos* is a movie in which just about everything proves false. Belmondo's divided loyalties are never entirely resolved and even the opening epigram (Celine's "one must choose—die, or lie") is self-servingly truncated.

The most Americaphilic of cineastes, Melville named himself after the author

of *Moby Dick*, drove a Ford Galaxy, affected a Stetson, idealized William Wyler, and fetishized Hollywood gangster flicks: *Le Doulos*'s specially designed phone-booths and venetian blinds are self-consciously American; the police station where Belmondo is interrogated in a bravura nine-minute take was copied from one in Rouben Mamoulian's *City Streets*. At its best, this odd mix of Warner Brothers and Rossellini has a forceful, adolescent lyricism: a world-weary killer under a suburban streetlamp, scratching out a shallow trench to stash his gun; a tragic closeup of a black car drenched by a hyperbolic cloudburst.

The universe weeps when toughs die—meanwhile, let's hear it for the Film Forum, where the Chinese new wave rubs elbows with the proto-nouvelle vague, where the Ruiz and *The Rose King* play, where seldom is seen *New York* magazine, and admission's still five bucks all day. ■