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Samourai, Le (The Samurai)

France/Italy, 1967 **Director: Jean-Pierre Melville**

Cert—A. *dist*—Scotia-Barber. *p.c*—Filmel/C.I.C.C. (Paris)/Fida Cinematografica (Rome). *p*—Eugène Lépicier. *p. manager*—Georges Casati. *asst. d*—Georges Pellegrin. *sc*—Jean-Pierre Melville. Based on the novel *The Ronin* by Joan McLeod. *ph*—Henri Decaë. *col*—Eastman Colour. *ed*—Monique Bonnot, Yolande Maurette. *a.d*—François de Lamothe. *m*—François de Roubaix. *sd*—René Longuet. *l.p*—Alain Delon (*Jeff Costello*), François Périer (*The Inspector*), Nathalie Delon (*Jane Lagrange*), Cathy Rosier (*Valérie*), Jacques Leroy (*The Gunman*), Jean-Pierre Posier (*Olivier Rey*), Catherine Jourdan (*Hat-check Girl*), Michel Boisrond (*Wiener*), Robert Favart (*Barman*), André Salgues (*Garage Man*), Roger Fradet (*1st Policeman*), Carlo Nell (*2nd Policeman*), Robert Rondo (*3rd Policeman*), Georges Casati (*Damolini*), Jack Leonard (*Garcia*), André Thorent (*Policeman*), Jacques Deschamps (*Police Clerk*), Gaston Meunier. 7,763 ft. 86 mins. *Original running time*—95 mins. *Dubbed.*

After setting up an intricate alibi, Jeff Costello, a hired killer, fulfils a contract by killing the proprietor of a nightclub. He is seen coming out of the dead man's office by Valérie, the club's beautiful coloured pianist; but when he is arrested on suspicion, she deliberately fails to pick him out of the identity parade. Unable to shake his alibi, the police inspector in charge of the case is forced to release him, though convinced that he is guilty. Shaking off his police tail, Jeff goes to the payoff rendezvous, but is met and wounded by a gunman. Returning to the nightclub, fascinated by Valérie but uncertain whether she chose not to betray him or whether she was ordered not to, he asks her to put him in touch with his unknown employers. She agrees to try, but does not answer when she telephones for the information; and the gunman reappears, this time with the payoff money and—explaining that 'they' thought he had bungled the job when he was arrested—an offer of a new contract. Jeff accepts, but forces the gunman to reveal the name and address of the man who is paying for his services. After killing the man, Olivier Rey, he goes to the nightclub to fulfil his second contract: to kill Valérie. The police are lying in wait, and shoot him dead as he aims his gun at her. But his gun is not loaded . . .

Jean-Pierre Melville has never had much luck with distributors in this country. *Le Samourai* is only the fourth of his twelve feature films to have achieved public screening in Britain, and the version showing here does an effective sabotage job in this superb marriage of styles and legends: an American gangster thriller translated into a pure classical French mould, and a classic revenge story turned into pure mythology by the delicate appropriation of Cocteau's image of Death as a beautiful woman who lures the willing hero to his doom. Not only is this version of *Le Samourai* hideously dubbed and released in a duped print which destroys the superb colour-styling of Jeff Costello's Paris as a chillingly twilit, blue-grey hell, but it is cut to what might reasonably be called ribbons. Unhappy but minor excisions have removed the beginning of the police identity parade, with its revelation of the grotesquely sad and motley crew of deadbeats turned up by the dragnet (the parade now starts baldly with Jeff's appearance), and have also cut short the scene of Jeff's confrontation with Olivier Rey. More seriously, two key sequences have been removed altogether: the scene in which the police visit Jane Lagrange, Jeff's girl, and threaten her with the vice squad because she refuses to betray him; and the sequence in which Jeff is drawn irresistibly back to the nightclub to see the pianist, but is so irritated by the barman's knowing joke about murderers returning to the scene of the crime that he immediately goes outside to wait for her there. This latter scene is crucial as Jeff's first, tacit acknowledgement to himself that he, priding himself absolutely on his cold, ruthless efficiency, has made a mistake: he has allowed his fascination with the pianist (the exact inverse of Cocteau's Princess in *Orphée*, a beautiful black woman in dazzling white) to break his own rule of complete emotional anonymity. It is this mistake, partly, which leads Jeff to his final 'harakiri', prepared for in the opening shot when he is seen stretched out on his bed, silent in the darkness as though laid out in death, and consummated in the final scene when he allows himself to be killed by the police rather than betray his love (or destiny). But his decision to die is also partly influenced by his knowledge that Jane Lagrange, the unshakeably loyal and loving bastion of his abili, has been threatened by the police because she will not betray him. When, just before killing Olivier Rey, he pays his final visit to her (this scene, with her categorical denial that she is suffering on his account, is still in the film, so that the cuts make her seem to be telling the truth, rather than lying because she loves him), Jeff tells her he is going to "arrange everything" so that she will not be troubled any more. Essentially, therefore, the film unfolds on three levels: Jeff's superbly cool, methodical exercise of his trade as a first-class hired killer; his tentative, haunted love affair with the enigmatic pianist; and his gradual realisation that his involvement with her has shorn him, like Samson, of his strength (his icy solitude), so that he deliberately annihilates himself, accepting his destiny, after taking leave of the three beings he loves, variously and in his own fashion. First, the caged bird, the only living creature allowed to share his room, and which serves as his sentinel; then Jane, his trusted and trusting confederate; and finally Valérie, his nemesis. Only the first level still survives in the film, in the brilliant exposition of Jeff's complex alibi, his ruthless execution of the first contract and his easy mastery of the gunman sent to chastise him, and in the marvellous tailing sequence by the police in the Métro. Even in this butchered form *Le Samourai* is a remarkable film, but Melville's masterpiece is reduced to a pale, ragged shadow of its former self.

TOM MILNE