



The French New Wave and the New Hollywood: Le Samourai and its American legacy

Jacqui Miller

Liverpool Hope University (United Kingdom)

E-mail: millerj@hope.ac.uk

Abstract. The French New Wave was an essentially pan-continental cinema. It was influenced both by American gangster films and French noirs, and in turn was one of the principal influences on the New Hollywood, or Hollywood renaissance, the uniquely creative period of American filmmaking running approximately from 1967–1980. This article will examine this cultural exchange and enduring cinematic legacy taking as its central intertext Jean-Pierre Melville's *Le Samourai* (1967). Some consideration will be made of its precursors such as *This Gun for Hire* (Frank Tuttle, 1942) and *Pickpocket* (Robert Bresson, 1959) but the main emphasis will be the references made to *Le Samourai* throughout the New Hollywood in films such as *The French Connection* (William Friedkin, 1971), *The Conversation* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1974) and *American Gigolo* (Paul Schrader, 1980). The article will suggest that these films should not be analyzed as isolated texts but rather as composite elements within a super-text and that cross-referential study reveals the incremental layers of resonance each film's reciprocity brings. This thesis will be explored through recurring themes such as surveillance and alienation expressed in parallel scenes, for example the subway chases in *Le Samourai* and *The French Connection*, and the protagonist's apartment in *Le Samourai*, *The Conversation* and *American Gigolo*.

A recent review of a Michael Moorcock novel described his work as “so rich, each work he produces forms part of a complex echo chamber, singing beautifully into both the past and future of his own mythologies” (Warner 2009). This description of a science fiction writer's work perfectly encapsulates the French New Wave and its legacy. Numerous scholars have noted the intertextuality of the New Wave. Adam Thirwell's article, its title, ‘Forever Young’, implicitly recognizing the freshness and enduring influence of the movement, recalls not only Jean-Luc Godard's belief that collaboration was a defining feature, but perhaps more importantly, comments on ‘the delighted quotation of each other's films’ (Thirwell, 2009), for example the moment in Godard's *A Woman is a Woman* (*Une Femme est*

une Femme, 1961) when Angela (Anna Karina) asks Suzanne (Nicole Paquin) what she has been doing lately. Her response, to mime a shoot out and then piano playing invokes the part that actress had played in Francois Truffaut's *Shoot the Pianist* (*Tirez sur le Pianiste*, 1960). Truffaut's film is also incidentally invoked in *Le Samourai* by Jef Costello's (Alain Delon) relationship with Valerie (Caty Rosier) a beautiful pianist who, although she is his last contract, he chooses not to kill.

This intertextuality is not confined to what might in that case have been a somewhat smug and incestuous self reference, but spans across a mosaic of world cinema, particularly, but not only, with reference to Hollywood filmmaking. Stella Bruzzi has written of "the reflective relationship between the American and French traditions, the mutual scavenging, cross-referencing and straight copying that has been perpetrated since the French cinema of the 1950s began to express its fondness for Americana." (Bruzzi 1997, 67.) Some examples are film legend: Michel (Jean-Paul Belmondo) in *Breathless* (*A bout de souffle*, 1960) looking up to Humphrey Bogart's poster for *The Harder They Fall* (Mark Robson, 1956) and reverently whispering 'Bogie' is an example of Hollywood's influence on French cinema, while Robert Benton and David Newman being inspired by New Wave directors to write *Bonnie and Clyde* (Arthur Penn, 1967) and continuing to insert their influence despite failing to secure Truffaut or Godard as director, reciprocates the admiration.

This article explores intertextuality and the New Wave's legacy by taking as its central intertext Jean-Pierre Melville's 1967 film, *Le Samourai*. In doing so it pushes the narrowly defined boundaries of the New Wave beyond the tight constraints of time – 1959 to 1962, and personnel – Truffaut, Godard, Claude Chabrol, Jacques Rivette and Eric Rohmer, just as it is useful to acknowledge that the British New Wave had a life outside those parallel years and its equally small clique of inner circle directors. Like Robert Bresson, Louis Malle and Alain Resnais, Melville was a director whose work predated, and subsequently stood in parallel to, whilst being highly influential on the work of Godard et al. Beginning his directorial career in 1947, working out of his own production company and later his own studio, Melville was an independent, whose gangster film, *Bob le flambeur* (1956), featured, as David A. Cook describes, "production methods – location shooting, small crew, use of unknown actors ... [which] became the model for New Wave filmmakers." (Cook 1990 [1981], 549.)¹

From the outset, Melville's cinema seemed to be in an intense interplay with American film, acknowledged in the title of Ginette Vincendeau's seminal

¹ The New Wave's debt to Melville is shown, for example, in Godard's casting of Melville as a writer in *Breathless*, and an oblique reference by the police to Michel's friend Bob [*Bob le flambeur*] (Verevis 2006).

monograph, *Jean-Pierre Melville: An American in Paris* (2003), as well as the fact that Jean-Pierre Grumbach reinvented himself as Melville in homage to his favourite American author, Herman Melville, creator of *Moby Dick*. What Jennifer Fay and Justus Nieland call Melville's 'Americanophilia' was also demonstrated in his dress sense, Ray-Ban sunglasses and a hat, either a Stetson or the trilby that was an integral part of *Le Samourai*'s Jef's style. (Fay and Nieland 2010, 204) Indeed, *Le Samourai*'s two principle sources, *This Gun for Hire* (Frank Tuttle, 1942) and *Pickpocket* (Robert Bresson, 1959), which themselves respectively draw on English and Russian novels, further illustrates its transculturality.²

All the features Cook cites about *Bob le flambeur* could be equally well applied to Hollywood independent, Stanley Kubrick's film of the same year, *The Killing*. It is also true that Melville's work is part of the intertwining relationship between French, American and Japanese cinema, as Akira Kurosawa drew on Hollywood Westerns, refracted them through a Japanese lens in, for example *The Seven Samurai* (1954), only for them to be reclaimed by Hollywood in *The Magnificent Seven* (John Sturges, 1960), and renegotiated by France in Melville's own *Le Samourai*, which self consciously quotes from a fictional *Book of the Bushido* describing the code of the samurai or ronin. More directly, another strand of Kurosawa's work engages specifically with film noir. *Drunken Angel* (1948) examines the samurai code through the modern yakuza prism, while the generically playful *Yojimbo* (1961) manages to draw on classical Hollywood John Ford Westerns, foreshadow Sergio Leone's 'spaghetti' Westerns, whilst also invoking one of the paradigmatic American noirs, *The Glass Key* (Stuart Heisler, 1942).³ It will be Melville's relationship with Hollywood on which I will focus, specifically America's own new wave, that uniquely rich period of filmmaking from – loosely *Bonnie and Clyde* to *Raging Bull* (Martin Scorsese, 1980) known as the New Hollywood or the Hollywood renaissance.

There are almost any number of American films of drastically varying degrees of artistic integrity, which bear the mark of *Le Samourai* including *The Driver* (Walter Hill, 1978), *Miller's Crossing* (the Coen brothers, 1990), *Leon* (Luc Besson, 1994), *Reservoir Dogs*, *Pulp Fiction* (Quentin Tarantino, 1992 & 1994) and *Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai* (Jim Jarmusch, 1999). My discussion will be two directional. Contextual analysis of *This Gun for Hire* and *Pickpocket* will facilitate

² Graham Greene's novel, *A Gun For Sale* (1936) was the source for *This Gun For Hire*. Although Keith Reader says *Pickpocket* was the first of Bresson's films "not to be based on a text written by somebody else" it clearly draws on the outlines of Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* (1866). (Reader 2000, 52.)

³ *The Glass Key* was the second American noir to bring together *This Gun for Hire*'s star team of Alan Ladd, Veronica Lake and Brian Donleavy.

focus on three primary films of the New Hollywood, *The French Connection* (William Friedkin, 1971), *The Conversation* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1974), and *American Gigolo* (Paul Schrader, 1980). Although usually unacknowledged as *Le Samourai*'s intertexts, perhaps because they are not archetypal gangster-noirs, each of these New Hollywood films have startlingly reverential scenes and stylistic homages, but also address the thematic essences of *Le Samourai* thus drawing attention to a cross-continental seeming universality of the modern masculine if not human condition in the twentieth century. These recurring themes include surveillance, professionalism with regard to work and a personal code of ethics, masculinity and the construction of identity through commodities, and alienation – from one's surroundings as well as from human relationships.

In each film, a particular character has clear parallels with Jef Costello, the hired assassin played by Alain Delon in *Le Samourai*, but in each case the similarities are fraught by complexities, as if the characters are looking into obverse, distorting mirrors. *American Gigolo*'s Julian Kay, played by Richard Gere is every bit as beautiful and well dressed as Jef, and his work as a male prostitute makes him a criminal, but he is not a killer, and is wrongly imprisoned for murder. *The French Connection*'s Popeye Doyle and *The Conversation*'s Harry Caul, both played by Gene Hackman, are dishevelled, unkempt, and hardly handsome; moreover, as a cop and a surveillance expert respectively, they are ostensibly on the right side of the law, if, in fact, their world is as murky as Julian's.

The French Connection contains one of the most striking examples of homage through replication. Drawing on the railway setting that runs through *Pickpocket*, *Le Samourai* has two Metro chases, one brief, the other more detailed, as Jef, electronically tagged, and shadowed closely both on foot, and at police headquarters by cops following his movements on a wall map, evades pursuit. In *The French Connection*, a title which I could have used for this article, its cross cutting between New York and Marseille foregrounding French and American cinematic symbiosis, the scene is inverted on the subway as we root for the cop. Popeye's quarry, 'Frog One'/Alain Chanier (Fernando Rey), a French heroin importer, teasingly and expertly leaves Popeye on the platform, while he escapes on a subway train. Like in *Le Samourai*, the next chase sequence is the most exciting. Bruzzi regards such moments as merely a "predilection for citing details from past films" (Bruzzi 1997, 68) but I would argue in each instance they are synthesized, acknowledging their origin, but fusing with their own context to gain additional meaning. Thus, this second chase whilst unequivocally having its source in *Le Samourai* is truly a New Hollywood landmark, pushing the chase

bar beyond that set by *Bullit* (Peter Yates, 1968), in its race between a cop car and an unmanned train. Walter Hill's *The Driver*, often considered a remake of *Le Samourai*, self consciously over-determines this theme as the entire film more or less consists of car chases.⁴ It can also be suggested that the references gain generational intertextuality. In *This Gun for Hire*, Raven (Alan Ladd) is pursued along a bridge spanning railroad tracks; in *Le Samourai*, Jef is shot in a double cross on a railway bridge; Popeye shoots 'Frog Two'/Pierre Nicoli (Marcel Bozzuffi), as he climbs the steps to another rail overpass. Popeye's car/train chase is usually regarded as particularly exciting because it was unscripted, authentic location shooting and at one point his car almost collides with a woman pushing a pram. The scene is not as ground breaking as it appears; Raven too pushes aside a mother and baby as he flees across the bridge on foot.

Jef may be a criminal, but he has the audience's sympathies, not least because he is true to his own personal code of ethics presumably encoded within the fictional Bushido Melville has created; within a single character he comprises morality and amorality. This follows the philosophical precedent of *Pickpocket's* Michel (Martin LaSalle) who muses: "Those gifted with talents and indispensable to society should be free to disobey laws in certain circumstances". Popeye Doyle has a similar function, hence the film's tagline taken from dialogue: "Doyle is bad news ... but a good cop!" Like Jef, Doyle is driven by his work, refusing to sleep when on a case, and dancing an impromptu jig when he gains evidence. Physically, he is a parody of Jef's looks and style. They both have trademark hats, but instead of epitomizing film noir cool, ironically, the detective's pork pie hat makes him appear a comedic fool. His apartment is no more of a home than Jef's, but whereas Jef's contains no superfluous articles, Popeye's is stuffed with every kind of litter, summed up by his partner's (Roy Scheider) query, "anybody hurt in this wreck" as he surveys the chaos.

But in the four years between *Le Samourai* and *The French Connection*, in the American context of Vietnam and Richard Nixon's administration, even moral ambiguities have greater opacity. In his comprehensive study of crime films, Thomas Leitch writes: "The irreducible complexity of the people pressed into service as suspects and criminals and detectives and the inevitable contamination of the natural resources by cultural imperatives, guarantee the failure of any possible quest for justice and truth." (Leitch 2002, 230.) Jef may be sympathetic, but he is a victim of the conventional morality that a killer is brought to justice and his avenging Superintendent (Francois Perier) gets his man. Unlike Perier,

⁴ *The Driver* also foregrounds its textuality by having a pivotal sequence set on a train.

who plays by the rules, Popeye according to Leitch is as “brutal, vicious, indifferent to the constraints of the law and his superiors, as violent as the drug lords he pursued” (Leitch 2002, 43) and the retributive expectations are reversed; ‘Frog One’ escapes and Popeye is transferred out of narcotics.

Each protagonist-antagonist has a complex cop/criminal relationship. Reflecting the interplay between Raskolnikov and Porphyre in Feodor Dostoyevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*, the police inspector in *Pickpocket* (Jean Pelegri) philosophizes with Michel, claiming to be interested in his theories, toying with him psychologically. In both *Le Samourai* and *American Gigolo* the cop appears fascinated by his handsome quarry, and Julian even gives Detective Sunday (Hector Elizondo) style tips. Both Jef and Julian are fetishistically displayed for the cops’ and spectator’s gaze in their line-ups. ‘Frog One’ gets under Popeye’s skin, and their first subway encounter mimics a ritualized mating dance, as ‘Frog One’ steps on and off the train, eventually leaving Popeye stranded. An implicit homoeroticism is revealed by Popeye’s exhaled: ‘Bitch!’ and ‘Frog One’s’ teasing wave, not unlike an eighteenth century coquette’s fan-play, reciprocated by Popeye later when ‘Frog One’s’ capture seems imminent. The gesture is mimicked by Sunday when he dismisses Julian, after the line-up.

Surveillance is a theme of each film. Jef’s apartment, which features an identical hiding place to Michel’s, is bugged by the cops, and he is alerted to this by his pet bird. Popeye uses two wiretaps to gain evidence. Julian’s home isn’t bugged, but jewellery that might be planted there serves the same function; it causes him to mistrust his former sanctuary. In post-Watergate America – we see a TV programme discussing Nixon – surveillance is the *raison d’être* of *The Conversation* and the surveillance convention Harry attends is both surreal and a function of the country’s contemporary atmosphere. Harry’s job as a surveillance expert is his life, and, invoking a reference both to Jef Costello’s cage-bird and to Raven, the original source of Jef’s hit-man, he once famously put a bug in a parakeet. But Harry is not immune to being tapped himself; a fellow expert slips a free pen into his pocket, and humiliatingly broadcasts Harry’s stumbling attempts to ask Meredith (Elizabeth MacCrae), a demonstrator at the convention, for advice about his estranged lover. It is not only this humiliation that ironically vindicates Harry’s reluctance to bare his feelings; functioning in parallel to Valerie’s double-dealing with Jef, Meredith is a honey trap who steals his surveillance tapes while he is sleeping. From the outset, interior scenes at Harry’s home are photographed as if he is the subject of surveillance, and later his home too, is bugged. His name, Harry *Caul* is surely a pun on the telephone *calls* he

taps before being a victim himself, while similarly anticipating 'Call Me', the Giorgio Moroder/Blondie song that runs through *American Gigolo*, reminding us that a male prostitute is the economic subject of those he believes he profits from.

In terms of visual style, *American Gigolo* is the closest of the New Hollywood films to *Le Samourai*. Discussing *American Gigolo*, Schrader has acknowledged some of his debt to the French, and wider European, New Wave. (Schrader 2004 [1990]) The world of uncertainties heightened by refracted light in Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Conformist* (*Il conformista*, 1970) was recreated for Schrader by Bertolucci's production designer, Nando Scarfiotti, alongside cinematographer John Bailey who emulated *The Conformist's* lighting effects. The sex scene between Julian and Lauren Hutton's Michelle, her name a feminized homage to *Pickpocket's* Michel, is taken from Godard's *Two or Three Things I Know about her* (*2 ou 3 choses que je sais d'elle*, 1967) and the ending is famously a replication of *Pickpocket* – reprised by Schrader in *Light Sleeper* (1991).

Although *Pickpocket* is also an acknowledged source for *Le Samourai*, Schrader has not acknowledged a direct connection between *American Gigolo* and *Le Samourai* but I would argue one is clear. Jef and Julian – whose names are not dissimilar – may seem to have different professions, but in explaining the difference to my students – one is a hired gun, while the other is a male prostitute, I only ended up underscoring their identity, especially given the gun's cinematic stereotype as a phallus. The title of the Graham Greene novel *A Gun for Sale* and film *This Gun for Hire*, underscores what each man is respectively selling.

Almost every key element of *Le Samourai's* *mise en scène* is reconfigured by *American Gigolo* as the films mediate commodity culture. In this sense, *American Gigolo* synthesizes Euro-American film style; *The Conformist* was not only a European source for Schrader, but as he describes, encompassed "the concept of high style" (Schrader 2004 [1990], 160) harking back to classical Hollywood's lavish sets which we see throughout *Le Samourai* in Jef's 'stage set' apartment, deco night-club and exotic gangland apartment and in the MTV-video texture of *American Gigolo's* LA. Revealing little of their emotional interiority, Jef and Julian represent what Schrader described as "a character of surfaces." (Schrader 2004 [1990], 158.) Jef steals cars to get to his Paris hits; Julian's BMW convertible is an icon as he drives to his tricks in the plush suburbs of Los Angeles. Jef's possessions may be sparse, but his home foregrounds chic French labels – Evian water, Gitane cigarettes; Julian takes a Tab from the refrigerator and orders a Perrier. They both meticulously construct their identities through costume; Jef's is the fixed noir uniform of trench coat and trilby, the fetishization of costume

causing critics to look askance at Melville for seeming to advertise “a style in raincoats.” (Browne (ed.) 1990, 117.) The over-determination of iconic costuming, signifying far more than the sum of its human clothes horse is demonstrated at Jef’s line-up when Perier tells the suspects to swap items of clothing; the clothes may be memorable, the person is not. Julian chooses from a vast wardrobe. In the film’s seminal scene, in what Schrader calls “the artist at his palette” (Schrader 1994 [1980], 161) and in what for me has always invoked Daisy Buchanan’s almost orgasmic cry at Jay Gatsby’s limitless apparel in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (1925), Julian muses at length what combination of clothes will constitute his latest ‘*beau de jour*.’ Julian is also dedicated to being the best at his job, simultaneously exercising to maintain his physique whilst learning Swedish to escort a new trick and articulates a philosophy to defend what Sunday deems his ‘illegal’ activities that parallels Michel’s: “Giving pleasure to women, I’m supposed to feel guilty about that? Legal is not always right. Men make laws. Sometimes they’re wrong, or stupid, or jealous. Some people are above the law.” Reflecting the duplicity of the imminent Reagan presidency, Julian’s obverse moral high ground is undermined by his own selective attitude. As H. N. Lukes points out, Julian cheats and double deals his male and female pimps (H. N. Lukes 2007 *American Gigolo*. In Merck (ed.), 178).

Alluding to *Pickpocket* as a source, Schrader has described *American Gigolo* as “a man and his room story” (Schrader 1994 [1980], 163), which particularly links Jef, Harry and Julian whose very different apartments serve as their sanctuary, but which signal their demise when that sanctuary is invaded. None of the men appear, at least at first, to ever invite another human being to their homes. Harry’s place is neat and pleasantly furnished, but it is sterile and impersonal, and some furnishings, such as a lampshade and sofa arms retain a plastic cover, to guard from dirt, but also to stress the lack of contact even between Harry and objects. The place is protected by three locks; he is furious when the building’s superintendent leaves a birthday gift inside his door.⁵ Demanding he should be the sole key-holder, Harry tells the superintendent, “I don’t have anything personal but my keys.” Julian’s apartment is beautifully furnished, but as with his use of costume, car, even drinks, the spectator has the sense that every object has been chosen to construct his image rather than reflect his self. Of course this film was made on the cusp of the status and consumer driven 1980s, and Julian’s home serves as a prototype for the designer store display effect that

⁵ This gift both heightens and justifies Harry’s paranoia; the superintendent has learned it is his birthday by opening Harry’s mail.

reaches its ironic apotheosis in *American Psycho* (Mary Harron, 2000). Julian too resists human contact at his home. When Michelle tracks him down there he is incredulous that the receptionist says a friend is here to see him. He tells Michelle, "This is my apartment. Women don't come here." For both Jef and Julian experiences at their apartments are a barometer of their increased vulnerability, which involves the removal of their other protective coating, their costumes. After he has been shot, Jef, like the 'wounded wolf' Perier describes, goes back to his lair to lick, or at least clean and dress his wound. Wearing now a white t-shirt, evoking Marlon Brando's overt sexual appeal in *A Streetcar Named Desire* (Elia Kazan, 1951), as Bruzzi points out, Jef is doubly exposed as he is undoubtedly subject to the erotic gaze of the audience. (Bruzzi 80-82) Julian has a parallel experience. Michelle pays her first visit immediately after the 'getting dressed' scene described above, in which, despite the upper body nudity, Julian remains in control, seemingly aware of the teasing effect on a rapt audience. After breaking his rule about women in his apartment, and making love to Michelle he is literally and figuratively exposed as he stands full frontally naked facing the camera. It is in this susceptible state, within their invaded sanctuary that both men reveal something of their inner selves. Jeff, who does at least share his apartment with another living creature, tenderly feeds his pet bird, while Julian tries to explain the honourable code of his work when he recently spent three hours bringing to orgasm a lonely elderly woman. Ultimately, both Julian and Harry destroy their homes after their invasion. Julian smashes his formerly prized commodities, particularly the "stupid little \$1200 stereo" women had unwittingly competed to buy for him, as he searches for the planted jewellery, before locating it under his car,⁶ which is as much a part of his commodified identity as his apartment, while Harry's painstaking destruction of every fibre of his place while looking for a bug is perhaps the most poignant representation of a tormented soul in any of the films.

Another theme highlighted by Schrader, which is common to all the protagonists is "the inability to express love." (Schrader 2004 [1990], 158) Like Raven's affection for his kitten, Jef appears to have no feelings save for his bird; in the exquisitely staged opening scene when we first see Jef's sparse apartment, the bird in its cage is in the centre of the frame, exactly paralleling the position of a body's heart. Of course Jef has an alleged fiancée,⁷ certainly a beautiful woman who loves him, but she appears no more than a convenience to him, a provider of alibis. Indeed, she is a parallel character to *The Conversation's* Amy (Teri Garr). Amy appears to be

⁶ Julian's painstaking deconstruction of his car replicates the search for smuggled heroin, eventually located in the rocker panels of the car in *The French Connection*.

⁷ Jane LaGrange, played by Delon's then wife, Natalie Delon.

Harry's mistress in the Victorian sense of the word. She is his kept woman, waiting, apparently perpetually in bed, for his unannounced visits. Amy did not know it was Harry's birthday; she does not know his age, or anything about him, but on learning he is visiting on his birthday, she wants 'something special' that would involve him telling her about himself, perhaps 'a secret,' certainly something 'personal.' Recalling to the audience Harry's denial to his apartment superintendent that he has anything personal, he gets up from her bed. Just as Jef caresses his bird with banknotes rather than his own touch, Harry is unable to connect with Amy physically or emotionally, but tells her that her rent is due, and leaves payment behind. Harry truly cannot express love. In the bugged convention party tape, Harry tries to ask Meredith about a hypothetical relationship, obviously his own and Amy's. When Meredith, putting herself in the woman's position, wonders "How would I know he loved me?" Harry replies "You'd have no way of knowing." *The Conversation* is an ironic title; Harry may bug the words of others, but he is incapable of face to face communication, the times he does try to talk about himself remain distanced from contact; the first is to an invisible curtained-off father confessor, the other a nightmare dream sequence.

Both Jef and Harry arrive when their mistresses are in bed. The woman is wearing scanty nightwear, but both men remain fully dressed, including their raincoats and shoes; there is no direct evidence that either Jef or Harry consummate a sexual relationship with these women justifying Andrew Spicer's claim that "an insidious form of misogyny operates in New Wave Noir, while Melville eliminates women almost entirely from his bleak male world." (Spicer 2007, 45.) Julian begins *American Gigolo* lacking any personal involvement with women; they are for work only and when asked by his female pimp Nina Van Pallandt if he wants to hang out with her girls, he answers with derision "No thanks. No Way". During the film he softens towards Michelle's pursuit, but she retains the sense that when they have sex, it is as if he is going to work; as Schrader says, "Even the sex scenes are very cold." (Schrader 2004 [1990], 160.) Like his feminized nickname 'Julie,' the ease with which he adopts a camp persona, and his desperate agreement to do 'fag' tricks – can a man, whose sexual potency has to be visible, fake desire?, – Julian's sexuality is always ambiguous.⁸ The audience retains a suspicion that his increased affection for her is predicated upon his growing need for an alibi. The final scene is a precise replication of *Pickpocket*. Michelle comes to visit Julian in jail telling him she will provide him with an alibi, and like Michel and Jeanne (Marika Green) they reach out to each

⁸ Greeted at the door by name, Julian is obviously a frequent visitor at the gay disco.

other. In 1959 the lovers can actually caress through the metal grille but by 1980 a sheet of Plexiglas – not unlike Harry Caul’s chair covers – keeps them apart, representing not only the encroaching synthetic commodity culture, but Julian’s continued inability to make human contact.

His cry, “Michelle it’s taken me so long to come to you” sounds risible rather than tender. As for Jef, Vincendeau argues that rather than simply falling in love with the pianist he is hired to, but ultimately refuses to kill, his sadness is for himself for being unable to experience love rather than their lost love. (Vincendeau 2003) Although critics like to assume this, there is no evidence within the film that Jef feels either desire or affection for Valerie. If she fascinates him it is because she duped him; he only realizes this when he returns to her apartment and finds instead the gang boss who hired him. Jef has not maintained his ‘no mistakes’ code and cannot carry out his last hit – on Valerie – not because he loves her, but because suicide is the only honourable end for the defeated samurai. Each man shares this defeat as they too have failed to maintain their personal code: Julian has succumbed to a relationship to save his skin, Harry has become the victim not the master of surveillance, and Popeye has failed to achieve justice.

References

- Bruzzi, Stella. 1991. *Undressing Cinema: Clothing and Identity in the Movies*. London: Routledge.
- Browne, Nick, ed. 1990. *Cahier du Cinema 1969-1972, The Politics of Representation*. London: Routledge/British Film Institute.
- Cook, David A. 1990 [1991]. *A History of Narrative Film*. New York: Norton.
- Leitch, Thomas. 2002. *Crime Films*. Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press.
- Lukes, H.N. 2007. *American Gigolo*. In *America First*, ed. Mandy Merck, 177–198. London: Routledge.
- Fay, Jennifer and Justus Nieland. 2010. *Film Noir*. London: Routledge.
- Reader, Keith. 2000. *Robert Bresson*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Schrader, Paul. 2004 [1990]. *Schrader on Schrader*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Spicer, Andrew, ed. 2007. *European Film Noir*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Thirwell, Adam. 2009. Forever Young. *Guardian* 18.04.09: 16–17.
- Verevis, Constantine. 2006. *Film Remakes*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Vincendeau, Ginette. 2003. *Jean-Pierre Melville: An American in Paris*. London: British Film Institute.
- Warner, Alan. On the Home Front. *Guardian*. 13. 06. 2009: 2.