



BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

Le Doulos

+ pre-recorded intro by Professor Ginette Vincendeau, King's College London
(Wed 30 June only)

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away some of the plot.

With 1,475,391 tickets sold in France, *Le Doulos* was Jean-Pierre Melville's second major box office success after *Léon Morin, prêtre*. The clever plot was a major attraction (publicity urged people not to miss the beginning), as were the performances of Belmondo, the top young male star of the time, and Reggiani, who was (rightly) hailed as an actor who had been scandalously ignored by filmmakers since *Casque d'or* (1952). *Le Doulos* was widely reviewed by the daily and weekly press, where it received flattering comparisons with the three 'gold standards' of *Touchez pas au grisbi*, *Le Trou* and *Du rififi chez les hommes*. In the cinephile press, Claude Beylie, a Melville fan, wrote an eulogistic review in *Cahiers du cinéma*, stressing the film's 'moral reflexion' on truth and lies and 'extraordinary craftsman's precision, a high love of style'. References to masterly technique, sobriety, elliptical style and narrative efficiency graced almost every review, summed up by *L'Express* as 'quasi perfection of *Le Doulos*'. An isolated critical note by *Les Nouvelles littéraires* – 'All we see here is a lot of professionalism and a clever use of two remarkable actors, Belmondo and Reggiani' – is worth quoting because the 'all technique and no content' slur will become a leitmotiv of hostile Melville criticism right up till the 1990s. Since 1963, *Le Doulos* has steadily risen to the status of an uncontested 'classic'. It was one of the '100 films' included in a special issue of *Cahiers du cinéma*.

Many reviewers in 1963 praised Melville for reaching out to both popular and cinephile audiences. A few lamented the 'vulgar' genre, although on the whole conceding that Melville had 'transcended' the thriller. Inevitably, references to the 'American-ness' of the film abounded, evidenced by its classicism, and in particular its 'efficiency' and 'sobriety', as well as its noir thematics and visuals. At the same time most reviewers noted that the essential ambiguity and 'tragic' mood of *Le Doulos* endowed it with a strong French and Melvillian streak.

The aspect of *Le Doulos* which has attracted most critical attention is its spectacular narrative twist. Until nearly 90 minutes into the movie, we believe Silien is a nark. His phone call to Salignari (Daniel Crohem), his assault on Thérèse, his appropriation of the jewels, his elaborate *mise en scène* of Nuttheccio and Armand's deaths, all conspire to make the spectator, like Faugel, believe Silien has set him up. When he reveals that Thérèse, not he, was the informer, we are stunned into rereading everything that has gone before. Despite Melville's assertion that he 'gave a double twist to the situations in the novel', *Le Doulos*' structure of deception comes from the book. Although occasionally Lesou gives us access to Faugel's inferiority (in Gilbert's scene, in the botched heist in Neuilly, when Faugel wakes up to ponder at length what has happened to him), in all other respects Lesou's reader, like Melville's viewer, is led up the garden path for most of the story. Lesou's Silien is 'a guy who does not exteriorise himself', so that his motivations are always opaque. Clearly the cleverness of Lesou's plotting must have attracted Melville.

As announced by the post-credit quote ('One must choose. To die... or to lie?'), each character in *Le Doulos* in turn lies (or may be lying) to someone at some point – Gilbert about Arlette, Faugel about Gilbert, Silien about Faugel, Thérèse about Silien, Clain about the drug squad's threat to Silien, etc. In the trailer, *Le Doulos* is described as both 'A tragedy of lies' and 'Pure mystery'. Even Silien's series of revelations is open to question. As many, including Melville have pointed out, there is no guarantee that he is telling the truth. He is backed up by Jean, but they could be lying together. Melville edits Silien's revelations over dreamy piano music, giving them a distinctly oneiric quality. We also see how skillfully Silien manipulates Fabienne to believe that she 'heard' a gunshot while waiting in the car outside Gilbert's house.

This web of deception means that *Le Doulos* is constantly negotiating issues of truth and lies, appearances and reality – both moral and cinematic. For Zimmer and de Bechade, *Le Doulos* shows that 'the world is but one immense duperie, where everyone cheats and steals', while for Bantcheva it 'demonstrates the impossibility of trusting representations of time, space and causality'. For her *Le Doulos* questions the very essence of classical film narration, and 'the greatest liar is without doubt the filmmaker who leads us from one falsehood to another.' From a different perspective, Murray Smith argues that 'the duration and intensity of our aversion towards Silien precludes a simple cognitive revision of our understanding of events and of our moral allegiances. The 'drags of emotions may make us resist the revision, prompting us to question the reliability of the narration.'

While the opening credits and first sequence of *Le Doulos* distil urban alienation and construct the abstract noir space in which the story unfolds, the ending sums up the absurdity of a tragedy which engulfs characters who lie and die, contradicting the opening quote with its existential choice. The Chinese screen collapses as in the catastrophic ending of *Les Enfants terribles*. The mirror reflects the ultimate narcissistic vanity of the fatally wounded hoodlum.

In a more conventional film one could see in this ending a classic 'crime does not pay' message. Silien's palatial new home, paid for with ill-gotten gains, will not be lived in. But this would be to ascribe to the film a moral framework which is alien to it. The incursion into nouveau riche suburbia, which rhymes with and yet points to the difference from Gilbert's seedy abode at the beginning, hints at a critique of 1960s embourgeoisement or at least a deliberate departure from it. The reference to *The Asphalt Jungle* points in this direction. Where Sterling Hayden's horse symbolised the dream of a return to rural nostalgia, Belmondo's is a status symbol.

Out of an excellent thriller, Melville fashioned a tragic noir tale, stripped of its sociological depth and conventional moral viewpoint, yet resonant with cinematic art in its purest form. As Bernard Dort put it in *France-Observateur*: 'It is less the crime plot which kept me on the edge of my seat than the pleasure Melville takes in making cinema.'

Ginette Vincendeau, *Jean-Pierre Melville 'An American in Paris'* (BFI Publishing, 2003)

LE DOULOS

Director: Jean-Pierre Melville
Production Companies: Rome-Paris Films, Paris, Compagnia Cinematografica Champion
Presented by: Carlo Ponti, Georges de Beauregard
Production Manager: Georges de Beauregard
Unit Managers: Jean Pieuchot, Roger Scipion
Production Secretary: Liliane Delerme *
Associate Director: Charles L. Bitsch
1st Assistant Director: Volker Schlöndorff
Script Girl: Elisabeth Rappeneau
Adaptation: Jean-Pierre Melville
From the novel by: Pierre Lesou
Director of Photography: Nicolas Hayer
Camera Operator: Henri Tiquet
Assistant Camera: André Dubreuil, Etienne Rosenfeld
Key Grip: Jean Boudaloux
Chief Electrician: Etienne Duteil
Stills Photography: Raymond Voinquel
Editor: Monique Bonnot
Assistant Editor: Michèle Boëhm
Art Director: Daniel Guéret
Assistant Art Director: Donald Cardwell
Set Decorator: Pierre Charron
Props: André Davalan *
Costumer: Paulette Breil
Music: Paul Misraki
Piano-bar: Jacques Loussier
Orchestra Conductor: Jacques Météhen
Sound: Julien Coutelier
Sound Assistants: Victor Revelli, Jean Gaudalet
Publicity: Bertrand Tavernier

Cast

Jean-Paul Belmondo (*Silien*)
Serge Reggiani (*Maurice Fauget*)
Jean Desailly (*Inspector Clairin*)
René Lefèvre (*Gilbert Varnove*)
Marcel Cuvelier (*detective 1*)
Aimé de March (*Jean*)
Fabienne Dali (*Fabienne*)
Monique Hennessy (*Thérèse Dalmain*)
Carl Studer (*Kern*)
Christian Lude (*the doctor*)
Jacques de Léon (*Armand*)
Jack Léonard (*detective 2*)
Paulette Breil (*Anita*)
Philippe Nahon (*Rémy*)
Charles Bayard (*old man*)
Daniel Crohem (*Inspector Salignari*)
Charles Bouillaud (*bartender*)
Michel Piccoli (*Nuttheccio*)
Georges Sellier (*bartender*) *
Andrès (*maître d'hotel*) *
Volker Schlöndorff (*man entering bar*) *

* Uncredited

France 1963

109 mins

BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

Le Doulos + pre-recorded intro by Professor Ginette Vincendeau, King's College London

Mon 7 Jun 14:15; Thu 17 Jun 20:45; Wed 30 Jun 17:45

The Killers

Tue 8 Jun 14:30; Wed 23 Jun 17:50 (+ pre-recorded intro by Imogen Sara Smith, author of 'In Lonely Places: Film Noir beyond the City')

The Night of the Hunter

Tue 8 Jun 20:50; Wed 16 Jun 18:15 (+ pre-recorded intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large)

The Tango Lesson

Wed 9 Jun 17:50 (+ pre-recorded intro by So Mayer, author of 'The Cinema of Sally Potter')

Cleo from 5 to 7 (Cléo de 5 à 7) Thu 10 Jun 21:00; Mon 21 Jun 14:30

Man Hunt Sat 12 Jun 16:00; Tue 29 Jun 14:15

Sweet Smell of Success Sun 13 Jun 15:45; Sat 26 Jun 11:40

Eraserhead Mon 14 Jun 21:00; Thu 24 Jun 21:10

L'eclisse (The Eclipse) Tue 15 Jun 17:50

La Haine Wed 16 Jun 21:00; Fri 18 Jun 20:40

Bitter Victory Sun 20 Jun 13:00; Mon 28 Jun 17:55

Touch of Evil Sun 20 Jun 18:15

Citizen Kane Mon 21 Jun 20:45

Steamboat Bill, Jr. Tue 22 Jun 18:30

The Big City (Mahanagar) Wed 23 Jun 17:40

The Gospel According to Matthew (Il vangelo secondo Matteo)

Thu 24 Jun 17:40

Alice in the Cities (Alice in den Städten) Fri 25 Jun 20:45

The White Ribbon (Das weiße Band) Sat 26 Jun 16:30

The Man Who Wasn't There Sun 27 Jun 18:20

Persona Mon 28 Jun 21:00

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Mirror (Zerkalo) + pre-recorded intro by Malgorzata Szumowska
Wed 9 Jun 14:30

David Byrne's American Utopia

Mon 14 Jun 18:00

The Elephant Man + pre-recorded intro by Prano Bailey-Bond

Tue 15 Jun 17:45; Sat 19 Jun 12:00

Syndromes and a Century (Sang sattawat)

+ pre-recorded intro by Chaitanya Tamhane

Sat 19 Jun 17:50

Broadcast News

Sat 19 Jun 20:20

Beginning + pre-recorded intro by Luca Guadagnino

Tue 22 Jun 20:30

The Warriors

Mon 21 Jun 18:00 (+ intro by Asif Kapadia); Mon 28 Jun 14:30

The Cook, the Thief, His Wife & Her Lover

Thu 24 Jun 20:30

The Gleaners & I (Les glaneurs et la glaneuse)

+ pre-recorded intro by Zhu Shengze

Fri 26 Jun 14:30

The Seventh Seal (Det sjunde inseglet)

Wed 30 Jun 14:30

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