



BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

Un flic

+ pre-recorded introduction by film critic Christina Newland

Un flic opens with a quote from François-Eugène Vidocq (1775-1857), an escaped convict who became Chief of Police and published his memoirs in 1828. An inspiration for Balzac's *Vautrin* and a great influence on the French *policier*, Vidocq remains emblematic of the porous border between crime and the law. The quote, 'The only feelings man could ever inspire in the policeman are ambiguity and derision', thus strikes a keynote: *Un flic* will be a meditation on ambiguity (legal, moral or sexual) and derision. This is the meaning of the parallel editing in the opening sequence: four gangsters dressed like bank managers rob a bank, while Alain Delon, the gangster of *Le Samourai* and *Le Cercle rouge* now plays Edouard Coleman, a police inspector who maintains highly ambivalent ties with the chief villain, Simon.

Although *Un flic* did not achieve the stratospheric results of *Le Cercle rouge*, its box office takings (2.8 million tickets) were excellent, higher than those of *Le Samourai* for instance (even more impressive given that in the intervening five years, overall French box-office had dropped by about 30 million cinema-goers a year). Yet the reputation of Melville's last film is that of a failure, on account of the severe thrashing it received from the French press. Review after review talked of boredom, emptiness, excessive mannerism and incoherence – Louis Chauvet in *Le Figaro* even reproduced the press book's summary as evidence that the film was incomprehensible.

There were too many improbabilities: among others, the fact that Coleman warns Simon without arresting him straight away, that he shuts the door on Paul's suicide rather than preventing it, and that, as a Parisian *flic*, he drives a huge American car and works in hyper-modernist offices. The use of models for the train and helicopter was singled out as particularly unacceptable. Melville's impeccable technique was recognised in two sequences, namely the opening bank robbery and the train heist, but the overwhelming feeling was that this was simply not enough. Robert Chazal in *France-Soir* spoke of 'gratuitous virtuosity' and *Le Canard enchaîné* compared Melville to 'those who speak brilliantly to say nothing'. Most damagingly, Melville's staunch fans, Baroncelli, Chapier and Beylie now turned against him – as summed up by Baroncelli: 'One would like to write that *Un flic* is the quintessence of Melvillian cinema. Unfortunately it is only its caricature,' while Chapier thought the whole thing was 'infinitely embarrassing for those who always loved him.'

There were some small pockets of praise, for the heist sequences, and for the performances, although many thought Delon was miscast. But even the most positive responses, such as by Albert Cervoni in *France nouvelle* were lukewarm. Cervoni talked of Melville having 'once more, made a very good film, but the same very good film'. And Jean Rochereau in *La Croix* issued 'a gentle warning.' Only Claude Mauriac in *L'Express* wrote a truly enthusiastic (and perceptive) review. But these were tiny islands in a tide of hostility and by all accounts Melville was extremely hurt by this devastating and sometimes abusive response (*Positif* for instance demanded, 'it is about time "Inspector" Melville was made redundant').

Were the critics right? Melville's last film is strange and, if not incoherent, certainly uneven, investing more in set-pieces than tight plotting. There is a problem with Delon, although not so much miscasting as the fact that his role is eclipsed by Simon, especially in the middle section of the film when he disappears for half an hour (Melville offered Delon either part but the star chose to play the *flic* partly to break with his gangster image – a shrewd move in the long run, but clearly not at the time). Still, given, at the very least, two breathtaking sequences, why so much hatred?

In the ferocious and highly volatile French critical milieu of the time, Melville suffered a backlash after the triumph of *Le Cercle rouge*. But evidently the surfacing of the normally hidden sexual ambivalence of the 'virile' gangster was 'too much'. *Un flic* is both opaque and obvious in its portrayal of 'homophilia' and the critics' responses at the time are an interesting mixture of denial (mostly) and abuse (sometimes). This coalesced round the figure of the transvestite, either ignored or referred to as 'detestable', a 'dramatically useless and purely sensational detail'. Only Edmond Gilles in *L'Humanité* noted, 'not without ambiguity, [Coleman] plays with the passion that a transvestite has for him'. Similarly, the relationship between Coleman and Simon appeared as a caricature of Melville's 'virile friendships', while Deneuve was a parody of the marginal Melvillian women.

There is undeniably truth in these views, even though they do not exhaust the meaning of the film. Claude Mauriac was one of the few who noted at the time: 'A woman between two men? Rather two men opaquely facing each other and trying to reach each other through a transparent woman.' In total contrast, Serge Daney, who in the late 1960s had vilified Melville, wrote in 1988 of how 'beautiful' *Un flic* was, concluding: 'Like all great filmmakers, [Melville] is content with filming what, that is to say, whom, he loves.'

In July 2002 Louis Skorecki wrote two brief but extravagant pieces in *Libération* on the occasion of a television broadcast of the film. On 8 July he called *Un flic* 'a subdued pastel-coloured masterpiece with gay overtones (not outrageously queenly, a real gay film: glorious, massive, amorous). We love you Melville.' Three days later, on 11 July, he extolled Melville's representation of 'sublimely queer gangsters' and harangued critics who 'in a rush to praise his worst films (*Le Samouraï*), ignored his masterpieces and buried his most beautiful, his last, *Un flic*. While Skorecki somewhat overstates textual evidence, the discrepancy of these readings, beyond wildly different critical climates, is ample testimony to the textual ambivalence built into *Un flic*.

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

UN FLIC

Director: Jean-Pierre Melville
Production Companies: Films Corona (Nanterre), Oceania Produzioni Internazionali Cinematografiche, Euro International Films
Presented by: Robert Dorfmann
Production Manager: Pierre Saint Blancat
Unit Production Manager: Jean Drouin
Assistant Trainee [Unit Manager]s: Bernard Girardot, Philippe Martin
General Location Manager: Phillip Kenny
Associate Director: Marc Grunebaum
1st Assistant Director: Jean-François Delon
2nd Assistant Director: Pierre Tati
Script Girl: Florence Moncorgé
Screenplay: Jean-Pierre Melville
Director of Photography: Walter Wottitz
Camera Operator: André Domage
1st Assistant Cameraman: Valery Ivanow
Editor: Patricia Nény
Assistant Editors: Marie-Jose Audiard, Sophie Tati
Art Director: Théo Meurisse
Assistant Art Director: Enrique Sonois
Set Decorator: Pierre Charron
Properties: René Albouze
'La Rose noire' of Ms D Designed by: Yves Saint-Laurent
Furs by: Jeanne Nafar
Costumes: Colette Baudot
Make-up: Michel Deruelle
Titles: Eurocitel, Georges Pansu
Music: Michel Colombier
Song by (Music): Michel Colombier
Song by (Lyrics): Charles Aznavour
Song by (Vocals): Isabelle Aubret
Sound: Jean Nény
Sound Recording: André Hervée
Sound Editor: Maurice Laumain

Cast

Alain Delon (*Edouard Coleman*)
Richard Crenna (*Simon*)
Catherine Deneuve (*Cathy*)
Riccardo Cucciolla (*Paul Weber*)
Michael Conrad (*Louis Costa*)
Paul Crauchet (*Morand*)
Simone Valère (*Paul's wife*)
André Pousse (*Marc Albouis*)
Jean Desailly (*distinguished gentleman*)
Valérie Wilson (*Gaby*)
Henri Marteau (*firing range inspector*)
Catherine Rethi (*clinic receptionist*)
Louis Grandidier
Philippe Gasté
Dominique Zentar
Jako Mica
Jo Tafanelli
Stan Dylík (*man on a quiet road*)
Georges Florian
Leon Minisini (*Mathieu*)
Roger Fradet
Jacques Galland
Jean-Pierre Posier
Jacques Leroy
Michel Frétault
Gene Moyle
Nicole Temime
Pierre Vaudier

France/Italy 1972
98 mins

BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

Chinatown

Mon 18 Oct 14:15; Sun 24 Oct 11:50;
Wed 27 Oct 14:15; Sat 20 Nov 20:30

Inside Man

Mon 18 Oct 17:50; Mon 8 Nov 20:30;
Thu 25 Nov 14:30; Tue 30 Nov 20:20

House of Bamboo

Mon 18 Oct 18:00; Thu 4 Nov 20:50;
Thu 11 Nov 14:30; Mon 15 Nov 18:10

Heat

Tue 19 Oct 14:00; Sun 24 Oct 14:30;
Sat 13 Nov 16:30; Mon 15 Nov 13:40

Kiss Me Deadly

Tue 19 Oct 18:00; Fri 5 Nov 20:40;
Sat 20 Nov 18:00; Sat 28 Nov 12:15

Devil in a Blue Dress

Wed 20 Oct 17:55; Thu 28 Oct 20:50; Wed 17 Nov 18:00 (+ intro by
Empire Magazine Contributing Editor Amon Warmann)

Un Flic

Wed 20 Oct 18:10 (+ pre-recorded introduction by film critic
Christina Newland); Fri 22 Oct 14:20; Tue 23 Nov 20:45;
Mon 29 Nov 20:55

The Long Goodbye

Wed 20 Oct 20:50; Wed 10 Nov 17:50 (+ intro by Geoff Andrew,
Programmer-at-Large); Sat 27 Nov 20:40

The Manchurian Candidate

Thu 21 Oct 14:15; Sun 21 Nov 14:50

Illustrious Corpses (Cadaveri eccellenti)

Thu 21 Oct 20:30; Mon 25 Oct 14:15; Fri 19 Nov 20:40; Sat 27 Nov 18:10

Murder on the Orient Express

Sat 23 Oct 17:30; Sun 7 Nov 18:10; Tue 16 Nov 14:15

Blue Velvet

Tue 26 Oct 14:30; Tue 2 Nov 18:00; Sat 13 Nov 20:45; Sun 21 Nov 17:40

Dirty Harry

Wed 27 Oct 18:00 (+ pre-recorded intro by film scholar Hannah Hamad,
Cardiff University); Sun 14 Nov 18:20; Fri 26 Nov 20:45

The Silence of the Lambs

Fri 29 Oct 20:40; Wed 3 Nov 19:00 (+ pre-recorded intro by Professor
Yvonne Tasker, author of BFI Film Classics *The Silence of the Lambs*);
Thu 18 Nov 14:40

No Country for Old Men

Sat 30 Oct 11:00; Mon 1 Nov 20:30; Wed 24 Nov 18:00 (+ intro by
Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large)

In the Cut

Sun 31 Oct 18:30; Tue 30 Nov 18:10

Zero Dark Thirty

Sat 6 Nov 17:30; Tue 9 Nov 14:15; Sun 28 Nov 15:20

Shaft

Fri 12 Nov 20:50; Tue 23 Nov 18:20

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