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Cinematic Cool: Jean-Pierre Melville's *Le Samourai*

by [Temenuga Trifonova](https://www.sensesofcinema.com/author/temenuga-trifonova/) (https://www.sensesofcinema.com/author/temenuga-trifonova/) Ⓒ March 2015

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Le Samourai/*Frank Costello, faccia d'angelo*/*The Godson* (1967 France/Italy 105 min)

Source: Level Five **Prod Co:** CICC/Fida Cinematografica/Filmel/TC Productions **Prod:** Raymond Borderie, Eug  ne L  picier
Dir: Jean-Pierre Melville **Scr:** Jean-Pierre Melville, Georges Pellegrin, from the novel *The Ronin* by Joan McLeod (uncredited)
Phot: Henri Deca   **Ed:** Monique Bonnot, Yolande Maurette **Art Dir:** Fran  ois de Lamothe **Mus:** Fran  ois de Roubaix

Cast: Alain Delon, Fran  ois P  rier, Nathalie Delon, Cathy Rosier, Jacques Leroy, Michel Boisrond, Robert Favart, Jean-Pierre Posier

Bar Owner: *Who are you?*

Jef Costello: *Doesn't matter.*

Bar Owner: *What do you want?*

Jef Costello: *To kill you.*

The product of a series of international cinematic exchanges, Jean-Pierre Melville's *Le Samourai* is a perfect example of the geographically and temporally confused nature of cinephilia: 1) In the pre- and post-World War II years European émigré filmmakers brought German Expressionism to the US, laying down the foundations of American film noir, which in turn informed the development of the French New Wave, specifically the genre of the "film policier" (commonly contracted as "polar"); both French New Wavers and Japanese directors, particularly Kurosawa and Suzuki, paid tributes to American gangster/noir films (Godard's *Breathless*, 1959, Kurosawa's *High and Low*, 1963, Suzuki's *Branded to Kill*, 1967) while French filmmakers incorporated motifs from Japanese cinema (for example, Kobayashi's *Seppuku*, 1962, along with numerous others, and Melville's *Le Samourai* figure ritualistic suicide); 2) The American western, particularly those of John Ford, was appropriated and reworked into Japanese samurai films (e.g. Kurosawa's *The Seven Samurai*, 1954); 3) The French New Wave, and European art cinema more generally, influenced both the Hollywood Renaissance of the mid-1960s to late 1970s (e.g. *Le Samourai* anticipates Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*, 1976) and Hong Kong action cinema (John Woo's *The Killer*, 1989, is a loose remake of *Le Samourai*).

Although the development of the French polar depended on the adoption and reworking of American film noir – distinguished by its preoccupation with the criminal underworld, eroticised violence, existential angst, paranoia, death, exotic non-white characters, moral ambiguity, and urban nocturnal settings – the gangster/noir genre was not completely new to French cinema: its forerunners include Louis Feuillade's crime series *Les Vampires* (1915) and 1930s French poetic realist films featuring doomed working class male protagonists, who eventually became assimilated into the gangster class of the 1950s (1) in films like Becker's *Touchez pas au grisbi* (1954), Dassin's *Du Rififi chez les hommes* (1955), *Breathless*, and Melville's own *Bob le flambeur* (1955), *Le Doulos* (1962), and *Le Deuxième souffle* (1966). These films anticipated the development of a two-way system of exchange between French and American cinema, with French filmmakers giving the noir genre a specifically French twist (e.g. the portrayal of the femme fatale – Valérie – in *Le Samourai* as kind, alluring and mysterious, rather than psychotic, conniving, and double-crossing, or the infantilisation of the femme fatale and the probing of female identity, sexuality and memory in Luc Besson's polar *Nikita*, 1990) and, in turn, influencing the development of American neo-noir: *Le Samourai* partly inspired Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) and *Pulp Fiction* (1994) (2).

Although most critics, including Rui Nogueira and Ginette Vincendeau whose commentary is included in the Criterion Collection DVD of *Le Samourai*, read Melville's eclectic borrowings from Japanese and American cinema as little more than the typically disembedding, pastiche-producing gestures of a postmodern cinephile unconcerned with, for instance, the significance of the samurai and gangster figure in Japanese and American culture, Melville's samurai/gangster/assassin Jef Costello actually reflects a particular phase both in the history of the American gangster film as well as in the history of the Japanese yakuza (gangster) film, which gained unprecedented popularity in the 1960s, at the same time that the polar, along with comedy, established itself as the dominant genre in France.

Far from being a cardboard figure artificially transplanted into 1967 Paris, Jef can be situated within the tradition of social rebellion constitutive of the Japanese yakuza film: "The traditional yakuza hero... was a critic of a kind, a critic of modern society, a rebel who preferred the ancient warrior code as adopted by gangsters to the cynicism of modern Progress. But he had to pay for his rebellion by dying." (3). Jef's personal code refers to the yakuza code of honourable conduct, known as *jingi*, which is made up of the first two of the five Confucian virtues, *jìn* (humanity) and *gì* (honour). Calling him "le samourai" is, however, somewhat misleading because of the different ideologies informing samurai and yakuza movies. While samurai movies usually focused on the duties of vassal to lord, early yakuza films dramatised defiant anti-authoritarian conflicts, thus providing "a powerful vision in a society that was still governed by feudal ideals and Emperor worship" (4). Jef Costello is not bound to a "lord" by an irrevocable sense of duty; on the contrary, he has no other master than himself and it is only to his own death (represented by Valérie) that he must remain loyal.

The yakuza films made popular by the Nikkatsu studio in the 1950s and 1960s had their predecessors in the period dramas (*jidaigeki*) of the wandering yakuza/ronin films of the 1920s and 1930s. However, while the nihilism of the earlier yakuza films was "grounded in the hero's alienation from the community through the failure of moral concepts of justice", the nihilism of the 1950s films was "founded on a transgressive refusal to adhere to the norms of a corrupt society" (5). Thus, the

hero's anti-social behavior and nihilism had the positive connotations of a heroic rejection of the material world of corruption in favour of some abstract spiritual system or the old code of honour. The 1950s jidaigeki eventually gave way to the cruel-jidaigeki films of the 1960s (e.g. Kurosawa's *Yojimbo*, 1961, and *Sanjuro*, 1962) which shifted the focus to aestheticised violence, cruelty and death, and were generally seen as more "Western" than "Japanese". The pacing and themes of the films changed: classic jidaigeki and yakuza films are about mortification and stoicism, themes which slow down the film's pace and distinguish it from Western action films and cruel-jidaigeki films, in which cruelty and violence are usually foregrounded. Although *Le Samourai* includes cruelty and violence, these scenes are so stylised/ritualised that the film remains more indebted to the classical yakuza film, with its themes of endurance and mortification, than to the action-packed later versions of the genre.

On the other hand, the film does share the preoccupation of Nikkatsu action gangster films with the loneliness of the "drifter" as depicted, for instance, in Suzuki's *Tokyo Drifter* (1966), the story of a gangster who, betrayed by his godfather and his gang, continues to live according to the "old code". *Le Samourai*, however, departs both from the classic American gangster film and from the yakuza film and their emphasis on male bonding. Jef's alienation is not the result of the breakdown of loyalty and obligation within the gang; rather, Jef is absolutely disconnected from any sort of community from the very beginning ("a lone wolf"). This is partly due to the fact that the gang itself no longer exists as an isolated entity, as it does in classic American and Japanese gangster films, because by the late 1960s its presence has become more pervasive and fluid, with the whole of society now operating according to its laws. Jef's loneliness is thus either a reflection of the anachronism of the individual in modern mass culture or, more abstractly, a metaphor for a specifically European (narcissistically self-absorbed) sense of existential drift.

Melville's anachronistic lone warrior/assassin/samurai type wandering through 1967 Paris with its modern metro, fast cars and chic night clubs calls to mind the figure of the drifting samurai/gangster/assassin in cult auteur Seijun Suzuki's 1960s samurai and yakuza films, especially *Kanto Wanderer* (1963) and *Tokyo Drifter*. *Kanto Wanderer*, for example, departs from the conventional setting of the *nonkyo eiga* (chivalry films) by setting the action not in pre-war Japan but in the present day and contrasting kimonoed yakuza with high school girls in sailor uniforms, implicitly commenting on the outmoded nature of the genre. Nevertheless, Melville and Suzuki offer two very different treatments of the samurai/gangster who lives by the old code of honour foreign to modern consumer society: while Suzuki's yakuza films are absurd, loopy and playful in their narrative incoherence, often employing a theatrical *mise en scène* borrowed from the stylised naturalism of Kabuki theatre, Melville's somber, meditative and often hypnotic film owes a lot more to the minimalist, reserved Noh theatre of the medieval warrior class, a theatre that demands to be watched in respectful silence.

Jef's anachronism is conveyed visually in the minimalist art design of his personal space: his apartment – dark, colourless, squalid, with old wallpaper peeling off the walls, and a beat up wardrobe the contents of which we never see – is barely distinguishable from a hotel room. The general sense of decay pervading this transitory space and visually suggesting the samurai's anachronistic code of honour, dignity and self-sacrifice is in stark contrast with every other setting in the film: the cold glass and plastic surfaces of the classy night club, the colourful busy streets of Paris, the angular design of the underground police headquarters. However, *Le Samourai*'s emphasis on the (socially, culturally, geographically and temporally) anachronistic figure of the samurai in the modern day metropolis is not motivated by a desire to mock an outdated genre; just the opposite: it is an homage to the elegance and tragic beauty of the lonesome warrior type in all its incarnations (gangster, samurai, noir hero).

Like the classic American gangster film from which Melville borrows freely (the story of Frank Tuttle's *This Gun for Hire*, 1942, being closest to that of Melville's film), *Le Samourai* is easily read as a tragic story:

The gangster transcends existing economic conditions in achieving the American Dream in a perverted form [through illegal means i.e. violence, double-crossing, corruption] but is brought down because his inversion of the American Dream is a challenge to official ideology. Like tragic heroes of old, the gangster tries to achieve individuality (which American ideology promises its citizens) but is destroyed by a larger system (ideology itself). ()(6)

However, *Le Samourai* also deviates from the classic gangster film (e.g. *Little Caesar* [Mervyn LeRoy, 1930], *Public Enemy* [William Wellman, 1931], and *Scarface* [Howard Hawks, 1932]) which generally focuses on the gangster's rise and fall: Jef's job as an assassin defines who he *is* rather than signifying a higher social and economic status he aspires to (i.e. his motivation cannot be situated within the American Dream's ideology of social mobility).

Le Samourai differs not only from the classic (pre-Code) gangster film but also from the G-Man (government man) post-Code gangster film cycle, which tried to “socialise” the anti-social classical gangster and somehow justify his problematic romanticisation and heroicisation by audiences:

The privileged position that the G-Man film gives to the individual is a product of the concern that in the classic cycle individuality has become the domain of the gangster and become coded as an aberrant ideology rather than the basis of legitimate society.... The G-Man movie is an attempt to re-code individuality as acceptable behavior and to ideologically recuperate it. (1)
(2)

In this cycle of films, the gangster is used as a paradigm of the individual-society relationship, with particular attention given to the question of whether his criminal actions are the product of choice or of socially determined necessity. Gangsters who enter crime because of (usually economic) necessity are more sympathetically represented while those who choose freely a life of crime are treated more ambiguously. Insofar as the studios had to show the gangster turning to crime under the influence of external factors without, however, making those factors too specific and thereby admitting that society might be responsible for the gangster's criminal deeds, the post-Code gangster was usually represented entering crime by accident. Since *Le Samourai* does not explore the motivation behind Jef's criminal lifestyle, we are invited to read Jef's criminality more abstractly or philosophically as a form of rebellion, thereby re-establishing the link between individuality and criminality that defined the classic gangster film.

There are similarities between Jef and the American gangster of the 1940s, particularly Humphrey Bogart's character in Raoul Walsh's *High Sierra* (1941), which reworks the genre by presenting the gangster as an ennobled and alienated figure embodying a sense of honour and integrity absent from society. The film reflects an important shift from the outer-directed (anti-social or social) gangster of earlier films to the narcissistic, introverted loner figure of later films (1)(8), thereby anticipating the doomed gangster noir hero. An inversion of values takes place: the honourable gangster becomes the last repository of honour, dignity, authenticity and individual autonomy, while society comes to embody the forces of chaos, immorality and disruption previously associated with the gangster. *High Sierra* also marks a new phase in the representation of the gang which no longer provides the sense of community and solidarity of a surrogate family. The gang, increasingly indistinguishable from the unjust society which it previously threatened, becomes gradually equated with businesses, corporations and, eventually, the legal system; it is no longer “outside” society because capitalist society functions through the same criminal methods it hypocritically condemns as illegal and undemocratic: coercion, exploitation, surveillance of citizens' personal life, and the suppression of individualism. As the modern state appropriates the criminal tactics of those it persecutes (e.g. when the two policemen sneak into Jef's apartment they use a set of keys very similar to the ones that Jef uses to steal cars), the criminal becomes the underdog whose criminal actions now signify the legitimate struggle of the individual against the repressive forces of the state (threatened with the “decency” police, Jane opposes the state's totalitarian strategies of regulating citizens' personal lives and refuses to turn Jef in).

The film's implicit critique of modern society becomes more explicit in the scenes of Jef's arrest and his interrogation at the underground police headquarters. Arrested during a poker game, Jef is informed that if he proves he has a legitimate occupation he will be released. Later, failing to incriminate Jef during the line up, the Superintendent makes him exchange his raincoat and his hat with two other suspects to see if Jane's lover will recognise him. In a scene that calls to mind Magritte's 1953 painting *Golconde* (in which it's “raining” men in bowler hats), Jef “disappears” in a crowd of men wearing the same type of raincoat and hat. Jane's lover admits he only has a composite image of Jef: “this raincoat, with that hat, with this face”. Depicting a sample of the mass society of indistinguishable suspects/citizens (the blurring of the distinction between citizens and suspects is later underscored again, through an ironic inversion, as every citizen in the city metro becomes a potential informer helping the police hunt down Jef) against the backdrop of police headquarters, a depressing, dark underground labyrinth equipped with modernist functional furniture and drowned in the constant noise of typewriters, the film figures criminality as perhaps the only means of preserving one's individuality.

Jef's challenge to this bureaucratised world is conveyed both through the alternative underground space he navigates/controls and through his alternative occupation. While the Superintendent moves freely and confidently through the maze of the underground, dimly lit police offices (visually analogous to the confusing passages and tunnels in another paranoid film, Orson Welles' *The Trial*, 1962) Jef exercises intimate control over another underground space, the Paris metro. However, even this alternative underground space is in the end presented as a source of entrapment rather than freedom for the mo-

bilised gaze of this underground flâneur: like the paranoid Michel (in *Breathless*) who sees everywhere around him signs that the police are tying the knot around his neck, Jef finds all metro exits guarded by the omnipresent police and the noose around his neck getting tighter and tighter.

Like the romantic outlaws Bonnie and Clyde, who stand metonymically for all marginalised, dispossessed Americans and who remain outside both the American Dream and its inverted form in the classical gangster film, Jef is not interested in money, power or success. His illegitimate occupation (an assassin) is inscribed in the “alternative economy” the gangster creates with his refusal of official work sanctioned by ideology: “The gangster circumvents the rationalizing systems that the official economy of American capitalism demands in labour and production and as such threatens the puritan work ethic of self-discipline and hard work.” (9) In this respect, *Le Samourai* is very much in line with New Hollywood’s reworking of the gangster film in the context of the social and political unrest of 1960s America: as the problem of crime was presented as more profound, diffuse and insurmountable, “criminal motives, limited in the 1930s gangster movies to money or power, became increasingly cryptic and pathological, reflecting a cynical, almost hopeless disillusionment with society” (10).

In an interview included in the Criterion Collection DVD, Melville admits he thinks of gangsters as pathetic losers; however, he continues, it was the gangster film, along with American hard-boiled detective fiction, that made possible the most beautiful contemporary embodiment of tragedy: film noir. On one hand, Jef is a tragic figure in the Western tradition, which construes tragedy as the result of a character’s internal flaw that eventually causes his unraveling and death. Jef’s “flaw” is that he falls in love with the only witness to his crime (the one who gives him a temporary reprieve from death) and fails to carry out his final contract which involves killing that woman (he cannot kill his own death). At the same time, however, Jef’s tragic figure also evokes Kurosawa’s unique blending of the Japanese sensibility of *mono no aware* (an intuitive understanding of the passing of time and its inevitability, a reflective acceptance of the transitoriness of everything that is, however, different from sadness or nostalgia) with the existential fatalism of film noir. The sense of inevitability and doom in Melville’s film is not the result of particular social and historical forces or of internal psychological flaws; rather, Jef’s fate appears to be sealed from the very beginning by abstract, transcendental forces (as well as by equally relentless genre codes) over which he has no control. The shot of the caged bird with which the film opens and to which it returns again and again, as well the repeated framing of Jef’s figure between vertical lines that seem to collapse on him (the dark corridor on the way to the first murder, the white corridor in Valérie’s ultra-modern suite above the night club, the subway, the train station where Jef gets shot) visually underscore the sense of entrapment and predetermination that renders his death little more than a self-fulfilling prophecy. Finally, even the title of the film, which identifies Jef with the *role* he is playing, “sentences” him to the narrative conventions that dictate his ritualistic death at the end.

That Jef, like Godard’s Michel before him, *plays* the tragic noir hero (Michel imitates Bogart, Jef puts on his hat and raincoat as if he were putting on a costume) suggests the conventionality of these characters (they are not three dimensional characters but allusions to pre-existing generic codes) and, at the same time, their anachronism, which nostalgically positions them as somehow more “authentic”, “individual”, “charismatic” – in a word, “cool” – than the more “realistic” modern society against whose backdrop they appear to be so out of time and place. For some, Jef’s beautiful tragic death undermines whatever social critique there was in the film until the final hara-kiri scene:

There is a gloomy existential allure about the idea of going down fighting, which is the final refutation of utilitarianism. Utilitarianism calculates the consequences, whereas this kind of snarling, last-ditch self-affirmation damns them, preferring the aesthetic beauty of an act performed entirely for its own sake, a mutinous expression of value which will get you precisely nowhere. (11)

Nevertheless, it was precisely this “cool” existential gloom that made *Le Samourai* into a cult film.

Endnotes

- (1) Susan Hayward, *French National Cinema*, Routledge, London and New York, 1993, p. 170.
- (2) Fran Mason, *American Gangster Cinema: From Little Caesar to Pulp Fiction*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2002, p. 162.
- (3) Simon Field and Tony Rayns (eds.) *Branded to Thrill: The Delirious Cinema of Suzuki Seijun*, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, 1994, p. 21.
- (4) Patrick Macias, *Tokyoscope: The Japanese Cult Film Companion*, Cadence Books, San Francisco, 2001, p. 96.

5. ()Isolde Standish, *A New History of Japanese Cinema: A Century of Narrative Film*, Continuum, New York and London, 2005, p. 277.
6. ()Mason, p. 7.
7. ()Mason, p. 34.
8. ()Mason, p. 55.
9. ()Mason, p. 16.
10. ()Nicole Rafter, *Shots in the Mirror: Crime Films and Society*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2000, 24.
11. ()Terry Eagleton quoted in Standish, p. 323.

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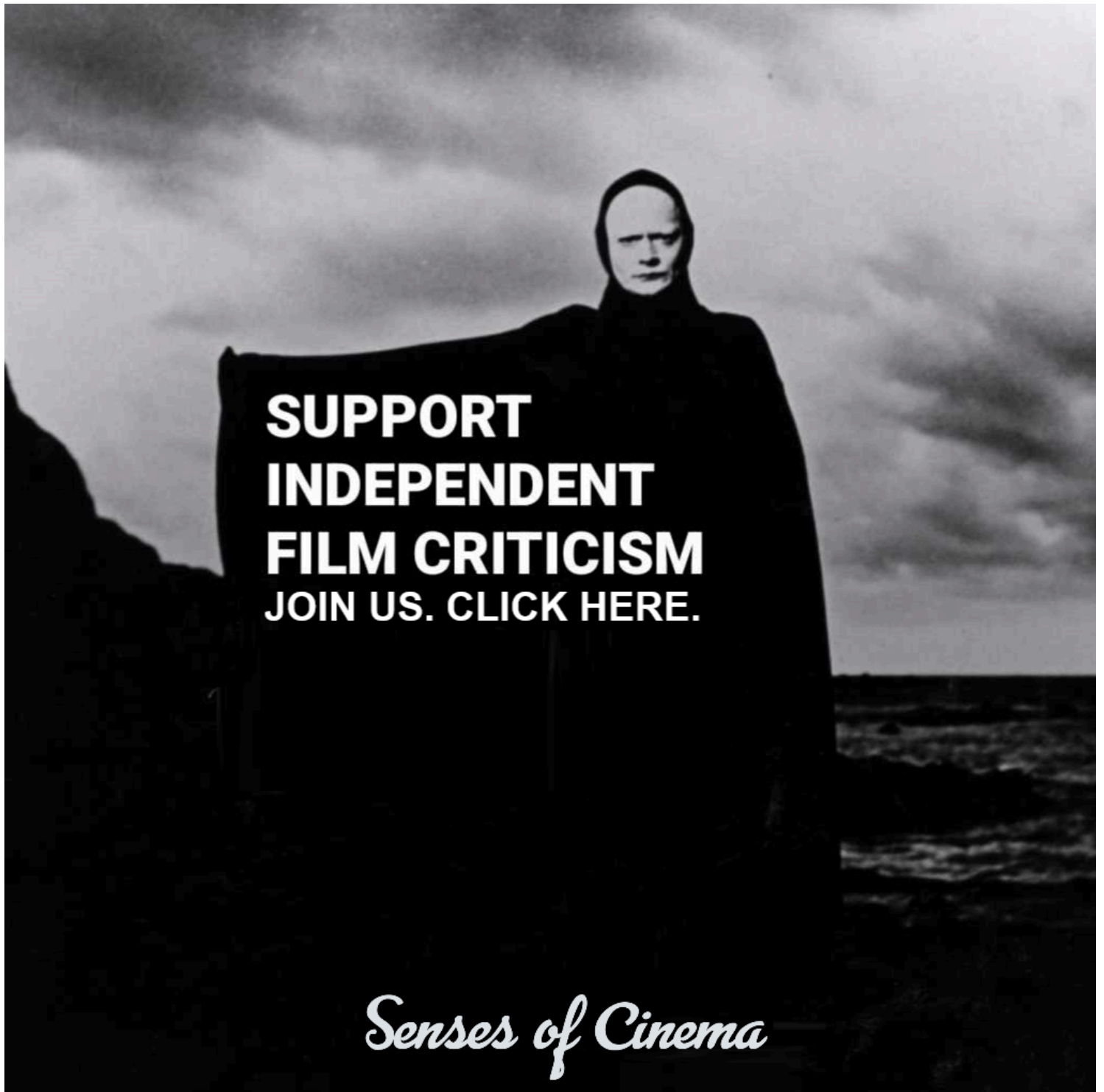
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