

JEAN SERVAIS
CARL MOHNER
MAGALI NOËL
JANINE DARCEY
ROBERT MANUEL

A dramatic movie poster for the film 'Ritzi'. The background is a dark, moody portrait of Jean Servais, looking slightly to the right with a serious expression. In the foreground, a hand is shown holding a large stack of banknotes, with a single note fanned out. The title 'Ritzi' is written in a large, bold, yellow, hand-painted style font across the center. The overall color palette is dominated by dark blues, blacks, and the bright yellow of the title and the money.

Ritzi



RIFIFI (ri-f' -fi) n. French argot.

1. Quarrel, rumble, free for all, open hostilities between individuals or gangs, rough-and-tumble confrontation between two more individuals.

2. A tense and chaotic situation involving violent confrontations between parties.

Etymology: probably derived from rif "combat," Italian argot ruffo "fire," Latin rufus "red." Since 1942: Paris underworld slang coined by Auguste Le Breton during a gangland clash in 1942 and popularised in his novel "Du Rififi chez les homes" (Paris: Gallimard, 1953) and the film directed by Jules Dassin (1955). The enormous popularity of that movie led to the use of "rififi" in the titles of several unrelated thrillers.



MIRACLE FILMS
STORAGE

RIFIFI

(spells trouble)

ENGLISH
SUB
TITLES

JEAN SERVAIS
ROBERT MANUEL
CLAUDE SYLVAIN

CARL MÖHNER
MAGALI NOEL
PERLO VITA

FROM THE NOVEL BY
AUGUSTE LE BRETON

DIRECTED BY
JULES DASSIN

X

HEAR MAGALI NOEL SING THE
NEW BLUES SENSATION "RIFIFI"



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PATHÉ-CONSORTIUM CINÉMA

presents an

INDUSFILMS

PRIMAFILM

S. N. PATHÉ CINÉMA

production

a film by

JULES DASSIN

DU RIFIPI CHEZ LES HOMMES

based on the book "DU RIFIPI CHEZ LES HOMMES"

by AUGUSTE LEBRETON published by

GALLIMARD

adaptation by JULES DASSIN in collaboration with RENÉ WHEELER

and AUGUSTE LEBRETON dialogue by AUGUSTE LEBRETON

starring

JEAN SERVAIS

CARL MÖHNER

ROBERT MANUEL

director of photography PHILLIPPE AGOSTINI

art direction ALEXANDRE TRAUNER

music GEORGES AURIC conducted by JACQUES MÉTEHEN

editing by ROGER DWYRE

sound JACQUES LEBRETON

song "Le Rififi" by Jacques Larne (lyrics) and M. Philippe-Gérard (music)

produced by

RENE G. VUATTOUX

Principal Photography: September 22 – December 21, 1954

Exteriors: St.-Rémy-les-Chevreaux and Paris

Paris release: April 13, 1955



I'M A CROOK AT HEART

by David Cairns

Pulling off a heist is like making a film. An idea is hatched, a plan drawn up, a team of specialists gathered. Locations are scouted, equipment procured, the task tackled on a tight schedule. The aftermath is fraught with peril, and all too often the perpetrators, rather than going home rich, fall into squabbling or are denounced and exposed.

So heist movies are naturally popular with filmmakers. Jules Dassin's *Du rififi chez les hommes* (1955) wasn't the first: John Huston's *The Asphalt Jungle* (1950) set the pattern. Dassin's film confirmed that it could be repeated, with variations, without immediate risk of boredom. Also, that outside Hollywood and the constraints of the Production Code, it was unnecessary to prettify ugly stories with socially redeeming messages and moralising.

THE IDEA

All heists and movies germinate from some tiny notion: like a seed, it contains all the information necessary to grow the finished product, but needs fertile ground to sprout from. Here, the producers Berard, Bezard & Cabaud had acquired crime novel by August le Breton, reeking with authentic atmosphere, and felt they needed an American to direct it.

Jules Dassin was looking for a job after being blacklisted in Hollywood, where he had made several thrillers including the classic *The Naked City* (1948).



When Dassin's pre-war communist affiliations came to the attention of the House Unamerican Activities Committee (he was named by fellow noir director Edward Dmytryk), Darryl Zanuck sent him to London to shoot *Night and the City* (1950), which successfully exported American noir style (arguably a European development in the first place). The film worked, but the idea of hiding Dassin from HUAC didn't, and he found himself unable to get a film off the ground.

Although Dassin wasn't too taken with Breton's book, so full of luridly unpleasant characters and incidents, it was the only offer on the table, so he set about rewriting it to suit his own tastes.

The above narrative, told so often by Dassin in interviews, echoes the story he tells on screen uncannily: Tony le Stéphanois, newly released from stir after being denounced to the authorities, is offered a tempting caper but feels he can't accept it. As in many versions of "mythic storytelling," the hero is at first reluctant. What makes Tony change his mind?

Tracking down Mado, the woman who ratted him out, Tony forces her to strip and thrashes her savagely with a belt.¹ Immediately thereafter he calls his friend and agrees to the job: "One has to live." Also, Tony greatly alters and enlarges the plan,

¹Directing thrillers would seem to be one of the few professions where a zest for sadism might be put to positive practical use. Dassin's homoerotic treatment of brutal warden Hume Cronyn in *Brute Force* (1947), coupled with the somewhat gratuitous whipping of Gina Lollobrigida in *The Law* (1959), suggests a keen interest in the sexual side of cruelty. Even the primarily light and cheerful *Topkapi* (1964) hints lightly at kinky goings-on between Melina Mercouri (Dassin's wife) and Maximilian Schell: but then, it might be disappointing to think of international mastercriminals enjoying only boring vanilla sex.

just as Dassin reworked Breton's book. So, either avenging himself frees his mind to concentrate on the next stage of his life, or it invigorates his spirits and makes him want to test himself, or it leaves him at an emotional dead end where the risk of death seems meaningless and any chance worth taking.

THE GANG

Dassin had never worked in France but swiftly found capable technicians: cinematographer Philippe Agostini had worked with Carné, Duvivier, Ophuls and Autant-Lara. Editor Roger Dwyre would work with Dassin on many of his later films: his work here is taut and efficient, genuinely groundbreaking at the film's conclusion. Production designer Alexander Trauner was a legendary wizard: he had by this time made *Les Enfants du Paradis* and *Othello*; he would go on to design *The Apartment* (1960). Composer Georges Auric was a longstanding collaborator with Cocteau, among many other credits. If *Rififi* had started out with the aspirations of an exploitation pulp thriller, the A-list technical talent suggested something else.

As Tony, Dassin cast Jean Servais, once a star but now fallen on hard times. The actor's painful history, whatever it may have been, is written on his features. Some faces look lived in: his appears died in. The aura of a man who has suffered gives the character a raw credibility that almost replaces psychology. But Servais is more than just an evocative presence: his eyes can dart with a flash of white-hot anger, like Jean Gabin's. Some kind of fierce life still burns within. He looks ill, but never weak. The overcoat that swamps his wiry frame suggests a man physically diminished by suffering: at the movie's end, a child wrapped in an adult's coat offers a rhyming image.



If Dassin's crew were the cream of the industry, his cast were mainly semi-washed-up types like Servais, or newcomers like minor thug Robert Hossein, who went on to a good B-list career as both handsome lead and director. Using a multi-national gang (Carl Möhner an Austrian playing Swiss, Robert Manuel, a Frenchman playing Italian) excused Dassin from deploying one of Breton's most celebrated tropes, the extensive use of French criminal *argot*.²

A movie can't easily feature a glossary, so Dassin contented himself with showing the details of behaviour and ethical codes which suggest a real underground subculture. And when a casting idea fell through, he stepped in to play safecracker Cesar himself, under the pseudonym Perlo Vita, a role which gave him the chance to rat on his friends and die for it. Must have been cathartic.

THE JOB

Servais rejects the simple smash-and-grab operation proposed, and concocts the kind of complex scheme essential to heist movies. Dassin's masterstroke was the alarm system which forces the thieves to work in silence: and yet, the alarm is deactivated as soon as access to the jeweller's is achieved, and in any case, it's been established that quiet sounds – such as whispers – will not trigger the bells. So the wordless half-hour sequence is an expression of sheer virtuosity, not truly motivated by any story necessity. Dassin even keeps the gang from speaking until they've escaped the scene of the crime, disposed of the getaway car, and reconvened to

²Regardless of his name, Dassin was New York Jewish, not French, and the rich slang of Breton's novel was incomprehensible to him.

examine their takings.

The director must have observed what every projectionist knows: audiences talk when the characters talk, and are silent when the characters are silent. Simply by eliminating dialogue – and by focussing on a suspenseful task – he could greatly increase the audience's attention. Of course, a wordless sequence at the heart of the film made his task, as a non-French filmmaker, a little easier; it's less often remarked that the film's climax also features a long dialogue-free stretch.

Despite his linguistic handicap, Dassin was a good choice to conjure a convincing underworld milieu. His American films included one prison drama (*Brute Force*), one tale of gangsterism and corruption (*Thieves' Highway*, 1949) and one police procedural (*Naked City*). Most significantly, *Night and the City* had tackled street-level crime in London. The London fence *Rififi's* pass their loot to, "Teddy the Greek", might almost be a minor character from that film, a cousin to Herbert Lom's ruthless Kristo.

The quirkily inventive, wholly credible robbery sequence makes use of socks, an umbrella, and a fire extinguisher; the inventiveness with which the crooks burrow through from above without disturbing the noise-sensitive alarms below, and the ruthlessness with which they tackle the couple living in the upstairs flat and, later, a policeman who gets in the way, puts the emphasis on coldblooded professionalism rather than any kind of heroism³. Our guys may not be as ruthless as the gangsters who turn on them, but the film doesn't encourage too many romantic illusions about their honour.

³But there's a touch of gallantry in the cushion provided for the bound and blindfolded lady.



Rififi presents the crime as a *coup de cinema* and a scheme of Rube Goldberg complexity. The jeweller's security system is a clever set of contraptions in itself, but its true purpose is to expose the greater cunning of our band of outlaws. John Huston's heist was disconcertingly simple by comparison, dependant on blunt instruments and guns. The comparative artistry of Dassin's model stresses ingenuity over both high-tech gadgets and brute force, and wins our respect without totally overcoming our scruples. The only violence comes when the plan momentarily goes wrong. Far from Hollywood, Dassin didn't have to insert any socially redeeming speeches to balance the celebration of criminal endeavour, as John Huston had been forced to do in *The Asphalt Jungle*. The closest thing to editorialising comes from Möhner's wife, who wonders what drove him to this career: not poverty, since many are poor but few turn to robbery as a profession. The suggestion that the childhood influence of other hoods, with their apparent glamour and easy access to money, formed the

basis of the seduction, is paid off at the end when we see Möhner's kid swathed in his father's coat, a pint-sized protégé. American gangster films since at least *The Public Enemy* (1931) have diagnosed gangsterism as a childhood ailment, a kind of arrested development. *Rififi* suggests the same thing more obliquely.

AFTERMATH

In the traditional heist movie, the job itself always occurs around the mid-point, for obvious structural reasons: it's hard to sustain interest in the planning for a whole movie. This always leads to the question of what to do in the remaining third act, and

over the years various solutions have been attempted. It's axiomatic that something must go wrong in order to build to an even greater climax, so heist movies become, by structural necessity, tales of hubris, modern Greek tragedies in which carefully wrought plans fall apart due to human error. It was probably inevitable that Stanley Kubrick would tackle this subject, since that theme informs so much of his work: his *The Killing* followed *Rififi* a year later.

The police investigation; personal rivalries or betrayals within the gang; a tiny, simple, stupid mistake; the interference of outsiders – all are useful plot devices to turn the triumph of a successful caper into ruin. *Rififi* uses variants on all of the above, although the police are virtually nonentities in this story: the detective glimpsed is an efficient state functionary. But it's the greed and jealousy of other criminals and the follies of the gang (as well as the absence of mobile phones, which would have derailed the plot at a crucial point) that really ensure the gang's eventual demise. In other words, civilisation itself defeats the aspirations of these asocial entrepreneurs.

The film's climax, a delirious drive through the streets of Paris by a dying man, anticipates the fragmentary style of Godard's *A Bout de Souffle* (1960), though the stylistic excess is here given the alibi of the POV of a character in extremis. The rapid flow of scenery viewed from a racing perspective, coupled with the jagged jump-cuts, manically compresses a long journey into a flurry of confused sensations. As death nears, montage disintegrates.

The huge success of *Rififi* led to a spate of phony sequels, all unrelated except by title and the heist structure (Dassin also failed to profit from the conversion of his film *The*



Naked City into a hit TV show).

Dassin himself went on to a wildly varied, and variable career, mainly eschewing thrillers for arthouse pieces of high seriousness. The colourful self-parody of *Topkapi* constituted his only return to the field he'd helped create, although *Up Tight!* (1968), a blaxploitation remake of John Ford's *The Informer* (1935) contains a modest caper⁴.

For the most part, Dassin pursued seriousness openly, rather than through the disguise of genre. The results were at times uneven, and have often been derided for ludicrous pretension: David Thomson writes, "In good company, and a little drunk, *He Who Must Die*, *Phaedra*, and *10:30 p.m. Summer* might cure would-be suicides." One could add *A Dream of Passion* (1978) to that role-call, in which an actress prepares for the role of Medea by interviewing a real murderess — actorly self-importance is indulged to the utmost, and Dassin's uncritical direction of his wife, Melina Mercouri,

results in some preposterous moments. But the film's climax, intercutting the onstage performance with the earlier crime, is a dazzling feat of pure cinema. And the other films Thomson condemns interweave moments of stunning imagination

among the thematic over-reaching and dramatic over-playing. *10.30 p.m. Summer*, a 1966 Marguerite Duras adaptation, seems particularly ripe for reappraisal, for its arthouse aesthetic (Fellini appears to have swiped the moody, modish night drive in 1968's *Spirits of the Dead* from a similar sequence here), *giallo*-like stylistic brio, and frank eroticism.

⁴Has any leading man sweated as much as Widmark in *Night and the City*? Not until Julian Mayfield in *Up Tight!*

Dassin's work, divided between highbrow aspirations and punchy potboilers, Hollywood and a whole package tour of European countries, critical success and derision, is a hard *oeuvre* to get a handle on. As early as his first short, an adaptation of Poe's *The Telltale Heart* (1941) that plays like an audio-visual poem, he'd embraced internal division and psychological schism. While many of his films are dismissed for embodying these inner conflicts in their stories and style, tearing themselves apart in a welter of breast-beating, a few of his films achieve a strange unity and balance: *Rififi*, like its characters, tiptoes lightly across alarmed surfaces, relying on professionalism and fearlessness to gain its prize.

David Cairns is an Edinburgh based writer and filmmaker. He tends a blog 'Shadowplay' at <http://dcairns.wordpress.com/> David dedicates this piece to his mum and dad.



AUGUSTE LE BRETON AND THE SÉRIE NOIRE

by Alastair Phillips

The intercultural formation of Jules Dassin's adaptation of Auguste Le Breton's novel was but one further instance of the complex relationship between European and American forms within the associated spheres of French crime literature and French crime cinema. In her study of the influence of the *roman noir* on French postwar culture, Claire Gorrara points out that the publication of the first true French detective novel, Emile Gaboriau's *L'Affaire Lerouge* in 1863, only preceded Charles Baudelaire's translation of the American writer Edgar Allan Poe's short mystery stories such as *Murders in the Rue Morgue* by two years.ⁱ Similarly, Vincendeau reminds us that the 'dovetailing of French and American traditions in the *policier* genre'ⁱⁱ within French cinema goes far back to the enormous success with the French public of Victorin-Hippolyte Jasset's *Zigomar* and *Nick Carter* films as well as Louis Feuillade's *Fantômas* serial (1913-14).

The success of the Le Masque collection of crime fiction founded in 1928 and the appearance of Georges Simenon's first Maigret novel, *Pietr le Letton*, in 1931 was paralleled during the 1930s by a proliferation of French translations of American hard-boiled crime novelists such as Dashiell Hammett. Claude-Endome Magny has argued that the 'phenomenological' style of this kind of American literature was antithetical to the 'refined' French literature of introspection by the likes of [André] Gide and [Marcel] Proust'.ⁱⁱⁱ This may have been a reason why Gide admired Hammett, but it also accounts for one aspect of the later successful reception of *Du rififi chez les*

hommes in France. The film preserved an attention to psychological detail in terms of the representation of local milieu, but in the form of its treatment of the heist, it also sensationally concentrated on the unfurling in real time of an elaborate externally observed physical activity. As Marcel Duhamel, the founder of the Série Noire, would later say, 'as in all good movies, feelings are expressed by gestures'.^{iv}

The immediate precursor of the Série Noire was the Collection Minuit, which began during the Occupation when the French public was officially denied access to American crime and fiction. As Gorrara suggests, one of the functions of this particular series ghost-written by French authors (often with American sounding pseudonyms) was clearly to depict 'an imaginary America in sharp contrast to ration obsessed wartime France'.^v This interrelationship between American and French traditions continued with the arrival of the Série Noire in 1948. Indeed, it is interesting to note that the very early books in the later highly successful series were actually translations of works by English writers Peter Cheyney and James Hadley Chase, who were writing pastiches of American crime fiction precisely because they too had never travelled to the USA!

Marcel Duhamel's simple aim in initiating the Série Noire format was to 'stop [his readers] from falling asleep'.^{vi} To this end, he came from an appropriate pedigree, thanks to a longstanding association with the Surrealist poet and scriptwriter Jacques Prévert, who suggested the title of the actual enterprise.^{vii} Duhamel had also worked in the French cinema during the 1930s. He appeared (as an often uncredited) actor in numerous films such as *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange* (Jean Renoir, 1936); *Drôle*



JOHN TREVELYAN REMEMBERS *RIFI*

In films for young people and adults we always tried to keep off the screen any details of criminal techniques, such as how to open a locked door with a piece of celluloid, or how to open a safe; if we were consulted before production I used to advise that the details should not be shown. When I gave talks in prisons about film censorship I invariably had full support for this, since fathers who were in prison for criminal offences did not want their children to embark on crime.

Every time I gave a talk in a prison someone used to mention the French film *Rifi* made by Jules Dassin in 1954. This remarkable film showed in great detail a robbery of a jeweller's shop, the robbery sequence lasting about half an hour and being backed only by natural sound - one of the most brilliant film sequences of all time. I remember our discussions at the time. We took into account the fact that the robbery was accomplished only with the use of elaborate and obviously expensive equipment, and that only the most experienced and skilled criminals could possibly imitate it; we believed therefore that it was relatively safe. When talking in prisons some years later I learned that there had been several robberies in which the techniques had been copied, so perhaps we were wrong. However, I once met at a dinner a judge of the Central Criminal Court who told me that *Rifi* was easily the best film he had ever seen. When I said that possibly it had added to his work, and that I would be interested to know whether he thought that we should not have passed it, he said, 'Certainly not. It was a marvellous film. Of course it should have been passed.'

This extract from What the Censor Saw by former Secretary of the British Board of Film Censors, John Trevelyan, is published by Michael Joseph Ltd., 1973.



FRANÇOIS TRUFFAUT ON *RIFI*

Rifi, the first French film by the American filmmaker Jules Dassin, who came to cinema from directing in the theatre, is structured like a classical tragedy. Act I: Preparation for a holdup; Act II: "Consummation" of the holdup; Act III: Punishment, vengeance, death.

It isn't necessary to point out the modest production budget of *Rifi* before I say that I liked the film and intend to praise it, but it may serve some purpose, if only to demonstrate that a film's success depends more on its director than on massive production resources or the participation of world-renowned actors.

Out of the worst crime novel I have ever read, Jules Dassin has made the best Film Noir I have ever seen. In fact, this is not a minor genre. Dassin shot the film on the street during high winds and rain, and he reveals Paris to us [Frenchmen] as he revealed London to the English (*Night in the City*) and New York to the Americans (*Naked City*). It would be unfair not to credit also the chief cameraman, Agostini, who truly worked miracles under very unusual conditions: the interior shots in actual dark bistros, night time exteriors without lights, the platform of the Port-Royal subway station, tiny details of décor, etc.

Everything in *Rifi* is intelligent: screenplay, dialogue, sets, music, choice of actors. Jean Servais, Robert Manuel, and Jules Dassin are perfect. The two failures are the female casting and the specially written song, which is execrable.

The direction is a marvel of skill and inventiveness. *Rifi* is composed of three bits of rigorously developed bravura. Every shot answers the viewer's question, "How?" Dassin remains faithful to his style of combining the documentary approach with lyricism. For the past week, the only thing being talked about in Paris was the silent holdup, splendidly sound tracked, in which objects, movements, and glances create an extraordinary ballet around an umbrella placed over a hole pierced through the ceiling of a jewellery store alive with security systems.

Beyond that, the real value of the film lies in its tone. The characters in *Rifi* are not despicable. The relative permissiveness of the French censors allowed Dassin to make a film without compromises, immoral perhaps, but profoundly noble, tragic, warm, human. Behind the smiles of the three actors - Jean Servais' bitter, Robert Manuel's sunny, and Jules Dassin's sad though with bursts of gaiety - we divine the filmmaker, a tender, indulgent man, gentle and trusting, capable of telling us one of these days a more ennobling story of characters who have been better served by their destiny. That is what we must not forget and why we must thank Jules Dassin. It is this consideration that amply justifies the presence at the Cannes Festival of *Le rifi chez les hommes*.

Originally reviewed in Le Cahiers du Cinema, 1955

A NOTE ON THE TRANSLATION

Jules Dassin's *Rififi* set the tone for a sub genre within the genre of the crime film, namely the heist movie, and with this came a very particular language representative of the working class gangster milieu in 1950s Paris. Thus the style of the language used in the film is typical both of the gangster world as well as that of lower social classes in Paris of that time. There is no doubt that there is a strong American flavour to the film, not least due to the fact that the director was himself American (despite his French sounding name). The film portrays a criminal underworld within a context of strongly masculinised values and this is reflected in the dialogue used by the main characters. The translation therefore echoes this whilst seeking not to render the translated version too American yet retaining its flavour within the context of the 1950s French gangster film. In translating the dialogue in this film, it was necessary to render this style in a register that reflects this period and the gangster slang used whilst equally making it accessible for a contemporary audience.

*-Sonali Joshi, day for night**



PROJECTIONIST'S NOTE

In the past certain directors issued notes on how their films should be projected to ensure the image on screen reflected the director's intentions. As the master of the remote in your home cinema you are the projectionist and here you will find a short note on how to view Rififi as intended by the director.

Rififi is presented in the **1.33:1 FULL FRAME ASPECT RATIO**.

To view the film correctly a widescreen television should be set to the **4X3 FRAME**, the image inside will be presented as per the below still with the inactive portions of the screen offset by black at the left and right.



If your television is not correctly set up (in options such as 16:9, 14:9, zoom, wide and so on) it will squash or crop the image meaning that vital detail is lost in the film. To lose this detail is to alter the intention and meaning of the image.

NAVIGATING THE MENU

Enjoying classic films with the cinematic experience has become closer to what we now experience at home though without losing the flavour of the cinema the menu on your screen will display four options:

When you are ready to watch the film click **AUDITORIUM** to step through and enjoy the film.

If you are searching for a specific point in the film click **REEL CHANGE** to find your desired point.

Should you be interested in finding out more about the film take a trip to the **KIOSK** for further discussion.

Click on **PROJECTION BOOTH** should you need to adjust the settings of the viewing of the film.

We hope you enjoy the film.

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DASSIN

R I F I F I