

## Hold Me, Thrill Me, Kiss Me, Kill Me

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“Fantômas” (Louis Feuillade, 1913-14)

**“Gaumont Thrillers: From ‘Fantômas’ to ‘A Gang Story’” runs from August 15 to September 4 at [MoMA](#).**

Founded on August 10, 1895 by the engineers Léon Gaumont and Gustave Eiffel, the astronomer Joseph Vallot, and the financier Alfred Besnier, the Gaumont Company began by selling camera equipment and film and manufacturing and marketing inventor/filmmaker/gymnast Georges Demeny’s camera/projector, which used 60mm perforated film. Within a year, Demeny’s model was revised to use 35mm perforated film. By 1897 the company added motion picture production to its business and bought films, among other products, from Albert Londe, an influential medical photographer and chronophotographer of the late 1800s.

By 1900, Gaumont was only second to the Pathé Frères Company in producing cinematographic equipment with “Chrono de poche” for amateurs, the Chronophone for sound projection by the end of 1902, and the Chronochrome for projecting color films in 1912. In 1906 Gaumont founded the “Établissements Gaumont” to handle film production and distribution and to build movie theaters, including the Gaumont Palace in Paris, which was the largest in the world at the time. Gaumont today has several subsidiaries, including Gaumont International Television, Gaumont British, Les Cinémas Gaumont Pathé, and Gaumont-Pathé Archives. The Gaumont Company logo, a version of a “marguerite” or “daisy,” was created in honor of Léon Gaumont’s mother, whose first name was Marguerite.

In a new retrospective entitled “Gaumont Thrillers: From ‘Fantômas’ to ‘A Gang Story,’” MoMA presents an expansive selection of films The Gaumont Company has produced under the rubric of the thriller genre.

An influential figure in Gaumont’s early success was Louis Feuillade, a journalist who joined the company as a screenwriter in 1905. Quick to create and adapt short scenarios, mainly comedic, to draw in the public’s attention, Feuillade became a director in 1907, and directed hundreds of films before his death in 1925. In an effort to compete with the Pathé Frères Company, Feuillade and Gaumont decided to make their own silent

crime film, “Fantômas” (1913), based on Marcel Allain and Pierre Souvestre’s 1911 novel of the same name. Although not the first crime serial to be adapted for film (Victorin-Hippolyte Jasset had started the “Nick Carter” and “Zigomar” detective series in 1908 with the production company Éclair), and certainly not the first of the thriller genre (Ferdinand Zecca had directed “L’Histoire d’un Crime” in 1901 and “Les Victimes de l’Alcoolisme” in 1902 for Pathé Frères), “Fantômas” proved to be not only enormously entertaining and profitable, but cinematically ingenious. Fritz Lang and Alfred Hitchcock, among others, later used several thriller techniques Feuillade had introduced in “Fantômas.” Feuillade himself continued to refine his own methods in his subsequent crime series “Les Vampires” (“The Vampires”) between 1915 and 1916. And as the company has transformed itself—from the silent era to the talkies, to being commandeered by the Nazis during the German occupation of World War II, to being overshadowed by American productions after the war, and then to rediscovering itself—so too have the styles of films it has produced and been influenced by inside and outside of France.

### **A Stroll Down Thriller Lane**

The arrival of sound around 1929 in Europe enhanced not only the visceral immediacy of spine-tingling suspense but also highlighted the nuances of gang jargon and the power of suggestive horrific off-screen sound(s). Robert Siodmak’s **“Pièges” (“Traps”)**, completed months before the outbreak of the war in 1939 (and Siodmak’s last European film before leaving for Hollywood), is a deftly packed example of noir that combines light-hearted romantic comedy with dark crime thriller as it follows a serial killer who murders the women who reply to his newspaper ads in search of a companion. The late 1940s and 1950s saw the emergence of semi-documentary crime, spy, and flawed-cop films where movies were more fact-based, no longer studio-bound, and police heroes, with their morally conflicting lives, were far from perfect human beings. The films presented from this decade are a mixed bag of thriller subgenres: the black comedy from Sacha Guitry titled **“La poison” (“Poison”)**, an ingenious satire on married life and the French legal system that introduced the original narrative technique of slowly presenting all the characters involved in excruciating detail; the classic whodunit style cleverly reinvented for theater in André Barsacq’s **“Le rideau rouge” (“Curtain Call”)**, in which several tragedies occur during the unfolding of a “Macbeth” production in a provincial theater; the spy-surveillance type of Henri-Georges Clouzot’s first feature film for the Nazi-owned company Continental Films, **“L’assassin habite au 21” (“The Murderer Lives at 21”)**. Mixing thriller and comedic elements, Clouzot and his co-writer, Belgian author Stanislas-André Steeman, follow a detective and his mistress in search of the serial killer who leaves his calling card on every victim. Using a clever disguise, the detective learns more and more about the killer; Jules Dassin’s **“Du rififi chez les hommes” (“Rififi”)**, remarkably removed from the novel it was based on, is a masterpiece of heist precision and gangster camaraderie and remains, along with Jean-Pierre Melville’s 1956 **“Bob le flambeur” (“Bob the Gambler”)**, the pinnacle of caper films.



"Bob le flambeur" (Jean-Pierre Melville, 1956)

The French New Wave's late-'50s/early '60s fragmentary look introduced an entire new world of dizzying narrative techniques, more improvisatory moments, long thematic digressions, explicit references to other movies, and director-specific auteur voices. Key examples are Claude Chabrol's razor-sharp social commentary in "**Les Cousins**" in which the life and moral character of a young provincial man are compared and contrasted to that of his richer laissez-faire-living cousin whom he comes to in Paris and Jean-Luc Godard's flimsy, almost random, heist in "**Bande à part**" ("**Band of Outsiders**"), endearing in all its digressions on love and male-female relationships and the now-classic "Madison dance" sequence with music composed by the great Michel Legrand, which naturally goes wrong and leaves you without a grain of sympathy and half-way out the theater before it ends.

The 1960s saw the reemergence of the spy film coming through in two different versions: Ian Fleming's glamorous fast-moving hero James Bond versus John le Carré's grittier, wittier, more down-to-earth government agent George Smiley. The following decade saw a significant peak in the police thriller, highlighting

the overall police force's descent into the criminal world for taking the law into their hands (ironically) too seriously. During these two decades, the horror genre also received a revival with the introduction of gorier violence and more disturbing subject matter, spearheading the introduction of neo-noirs and sexual thrillers during the 1980s and 1990s in which classic noir themes of adultery, betrayal, blackmail, victimization, and murder returned with greater violence, more explicit sex, suburban plots, and saturated color palettes. French examples presented in the MoMA series include Alain Corneau's "**Série noire**," based on the American novel "A Hell of a Woman" by Jim Thompson and co-written with Georges Perec (famed contemporary writer and participant in the Oulipo movement best known for his highly constrained experimental writing techniques). Named after the French series of black-covered crime novels (primarily composed of translations of American hard-boiled detective fiction), "Série noire" follows a dejected individual in all his gritty glory, from his hapless life as a door-to-door salesman, to his loveless marriage, to his nightmarish emotional roller coaster ride with a 17-year-old girl as they plot to murder her aunt.



"Police" (Maurice Pialat, 1985)

Maurice Pialat's "**Police**" brilliantly contributes to the police procedural subgenre by defying it. Taut, raw, stifling, and victimizing interrogations and holdups reveal the quotidian dealings of the police force as an inspector investigates a drug trafficking ring in a Parisian neighborhood. His subsequent encounter with the prime suspect's girlfriend uncovers a world that is both horrifically brutal and indifferent, yet painfully tender.

A thriller of lust, adultery, and revenge, Michel Daville's "**Péril en la demeure**" ("**Death in a French Garden**") uses voyeurism to dig its compromising claw into a guitar teacher who receives an invitation to give lessons to the daughter of a rich couple. An affair with the mother and multiple double-crosses later, the teacher finds himself in the middle of a web of intrigue.

In a stylish flurry of graphic violence, Luc Besson's "**La Femme Nikita**" and his English-language "**Léon: The Professional**" are both assassin-type films with young female drug addicts or delinquents at the narrative core who are forcibly pulled into the world of crime and receive tutelage from seasoned professionals.

## A Multi-Generational, Cross-Continental Affair

Larry Kardish, esteemed Senior Curator of the Department of Film at MoMA, recently said about the series, “What I want the audience to take away, or at least to appreciate, is that the thriller, not necessarily the murder mystery, but the thriller genre, has been with us basically through the whole history of film. And it’s not peculiar to American cinema. It also gives me the chance to show a number of films that have not been seen in a long while in the context of the culture of French cinema even though that culture becomes more Americanized as we move into the ’80s and ’90s. And it gives me the opportunity to bring in and subtitle a couple of films that people just don’t know and should because they are good and strong mystery films—films like Siodmak’s “Pièges” or Barsacq’s “Le Rideau Rouge,” where a murder happens there [in the theater] and is written by a great playwright and directed by someone whose background is in theatre and not in cinema but does a very fine job as director. So it was in a sense an excuse to bring in some films to New York that otherwise would not be seen.”



“La Femme Nikita” (Luc Besson, 1990)

As for the rest of the contemporary films presented, they remain as fleetingly unmemorable as they are visually repetitive. Contemporary thrillers such as Mathieu Kassovitz’s “**Les rivières pourpres**” (“**The Crimson Rivers**”), Olivier Marchal’s “**36 Quai des Orfèvres**” (“**Department 36**”), and Fred Cavaye’s “**À bout portant**” (“**Point Blank**”) can be summed up in four words: brutal, fast, violent, and visceral. And the bobbing camera, non-stop jump cuts, blow-ups, formulaic music, high-speed chases, and sheer point blank shootings don’t add any narrative improvements. They are a far cry from the masterpieces of the past.

But as Kardish aptly points out, “There are different ways of chilling the audience, whether it is through the visual velocity of the chase or an intellectual puzzle of a whodunit or exploration of a certain atmosphere of a film noir. It really is difficult to make generalizations. Basically these [movies] represent a hundred years of film produced by this French company that have to do with mayhem, a certain sort of mayhem, murder, and violence. ... Murder is common to all the films, violence is not.”