SECOND WIND

THE REINVENTION OF JOSÉ GIOVANNI

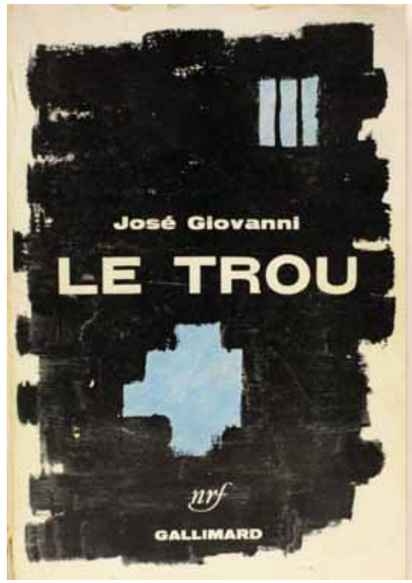
Imogen Sara Smith

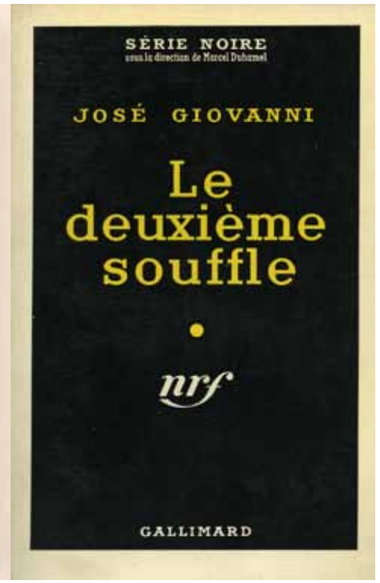
To be a fan of film noir is to be a connoisseur of moral ambiguity. The movies may be black and white, but the stories are a swirl of gray: among the shadows, we find ourselves empathizing with criminals, even murderers, and grappling with the irreducible complexity of human character and behavior. Or so we like to tell ourselves. In truth, this is easier when the crooks are fictional, and their crimes can be finessed in ways that soothe or distract our consciences. When the facts are real, it is trickier to navigate the boundaries of the forgivable, the murky no-man's-land between admiration and moral revulsion, judgment and agnostic tolerance.

What prompts this particular reflection is the life of the writer and director José Giovanni, one of the most fascinating figures in French cinema. A prolific novelist, screenwriter, and director, he earned his place in the noir pantheon chiefly as the source for three indisputable masterpieces, *Le Trou* (The Hole, 1960), *Classe tous risques* (The Big Risk, 1960), and *Le deuxième souffle* (Second Wind, 1966). His familiarity with the underworld and his status as an ex-con who had done time on death row were well known in his heyday, and lent credibility—not to say glamour—to his chronicles of gangsters and life "inside." For almost fifty years, Giovanni succeeded in keeping certain facts about his background hidden even as he mined his biography to great acclaim.

But, as noir teaches, the past never stays buried. In 1993 two Swiss newspapers, *La Tribune de Genève* and *24 Heures*, published their findings that the crimes for which Giovanni—born Joseph Damiani—had been convicted ranged from collaborationism during the Occupation of France to involvement in kidnapping, extortion, and murder. Initially Giovanni denied these charges, but he never followed through with threats to sue for libel, and in the end he declared simply, "I've paid. I am entitled to forgiveness and oblivion."

Was he?





José Giovanni, left, was a member of several hard-right and Nazi-allied organizations, including the Parti Populaire Français. The fascist, anti-Semitic, anti-Communist PPF was founded by Jacques Doriot, himself a former Communist. During the war, Doriot joined a French unit of the Wehrmacht and was killed by Allied forces in 1945

THE CASE

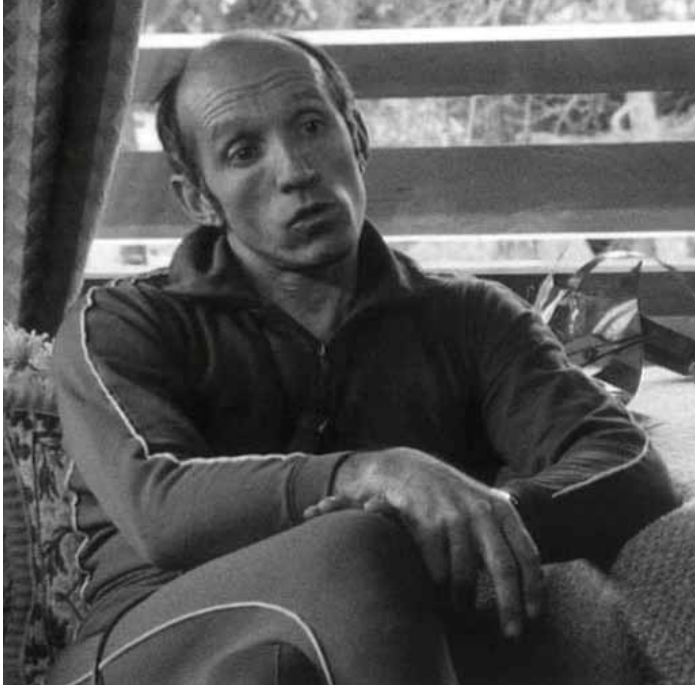
Facts never tell the whole story, but they are a good place to start. The most complete account of Giovanni's background was written by Franck Lhomeau in the journal *Temps noir, la revue des littératures policières* in 2013 as part of an extended article profiling French writers of the Série Noire, the iconic imprint of hardboiled crime fiction published by Éditions Gallimard beginning in 1945. Lhomeau scoured archives for documents of the various judicial investigations into Giovanni's activities, and laid out his findings in a meticulously detailed, studiously dry report that reads like the dossier of an obsessed detective in a *policier* who has chased down every last shred of evidence against his man.

Joseph Damiani was born in 1923 into a close-knit Corsican family living in France. His father, who ran a hotel in the Alps and worked in real estate, was convicted in the early 1930s of running an illegal casino. Joseph attended good schools, and Lhomeau describes him as "intelligent, curious, subtle, but incapable of submitting to scholastic discipline."[1] During his first twenty years he moved between Paris, Marseilles, Lyon, and Chamonix, where he was for a brief time (which would expand in his own telling) a member of Jeunesse et Montagne, a mountaineering youth group founded in the wake of the dissolution of the French military by the Germans after the fall of France in 1940.

The crimes for which Giovanni was convicted all took place during the Occupation, which lasted until 1944, or during the disorganized period after the Liberation, and they are embedded in that period of fear, chaos, and complicity. It was a time of enormous crimes, like the deportation of French Jews—who were rounded up by French police and agents, not by the Germans—and of innumerable petty compromises, as well as acts of courage. Damiani's activities were detailed in a series of investigations begun in 1945, part of a massive effort to track down and punish collaborators. They found that he had joined the far-right-wing Parti Populaire Français—the only charge that he later admitted to, claiming he had done so only to avoid the Service du Travail Obligatoire (STO), forced labor for the Nazis. His family had ties to collaborationist groups, and his older brother Paul was a member of the dreaded Milice Française, the French Gestapo. Damiani was identified by a number of witnesses as a member of the Schutzkorps, a German organization that hunted down French citizens who tried to dodge the STO. He was also tied to an affair in Lyon in which he and an accomplice named Nicolai Alexandre Raineroff, known as Orloff, disguised themselves as German police and extorted money and valuables from a pair of Jewish brothers-in-law, Joseph Gourentzeig and Georges Edberg. For these acts and *intelligence avec l'ennemi* (collusion) he was sentenced in 1946 to twenty years' hard labor and *dégradation nationale*, a punishment devised after the Liberation that stripped individuals of their civil rights.

But that was not all. In 1947, already serving time, he was tried for a triple murder. In May 1945, after the Liberation, Damiani had joined a gang composed of his brother Paul and two accomplices, Georges Accad and Jacques Ménassole. On May 17 they kidnapped Haïm Cohen, a wine merchant, extorted money from him by threats and torture, and after locking him in a basement eventually shot him and dumped his body in a river. Fifteen days later they did the same with brothers Roger and Jules Peugeot, both of whom they killed. With what can only be described as chutzpah, the gang—who had themselves been collaborationists—approached their marks posing as French military security investigating accusations of trafficking with the Germans. The suburban villa where they imprisoned and dispatched their victims was called the Bon Repos (Good Rest).

The gang's reign did not last long; they were all captured within a few weeks. Ménassole committed suicide when the police closed in; Paul Damiani escaped from custody but was shot dead by a barkeeper in Nice in 1946. Joseph Damiani was arrested at his parents' house, where he was nursing a bullet wound in the leg from the struggle with the Peugeot brothers. He and Georges Accad were both sentenced to death in 1948, but after less than a year on death



row their sentences were commuted to life imprisonment, and then in 1951 further shortened to twenty years. In 1956, after eleven years in jail, Joseph Damiani was pardoned and released by order of the president, René Coty. He owed this mercy largely to his father, who tirelessly pulled strings and petitioned the government to spare his son—a story that inspired Giovanni's book *Il avait dans le coeur des jardins introuvables* (literally, "he has in the heart undiscoverable gardens") and his final film, *Mon père, il m'a sauvait la vie* (My Father Saved My Life, 2000), made four years before he died.

THE STORIES

"The eternal conflict: the past that can't be forgotten because it always returns, at one moment or another."
—José Giovanni

"What is singular here is that Giovanni talks ceaselessly about a 'past that isn't past' without ever confronting it honestly."
—Franck Lhomeau

It was Damiani's lawyer, Stephen Hecquet, who encouraged him to write and helped him get published while he was still in prison "Diary of a Condemned Man," which was included in a 1952 collection *Les Temps des Assassins*, prefaced by an open letter calling for an end to the death penalty. After his release, Damiani took the pseudonym José Giovanni and began translating his experiences into novels, publishing four with Gallimard in the space of less than two years. Of composing the autobiographical *Le Trou*, he noted, "I write fast. The pages pile up. I see again my phantoms: the guards, the cohort of inmates. I feel the cold, hunger, fear, the smell of the drains." This first book was quickly followed by *Le deuxième souffle*, *Classe tous risques,* and *L'Excommunié*; all four soon became films. Over the next several decades Giovanni would publish more than twenty books and direct fifteen films in addition to working on dozens of screenplays.

In recounting his own story, Giovanni "proceeded by amalgamation," Lhomeau says. "One part truth to get away with a lie." In memoirs and interviews he repeatedly claimed that he had been active in the Resistance, even taken captive by the Germans at one point, and that he had been drawn into the Pigalle underworld through his family. He blamed the episode of "gangsterism" for which he was condemned to death on his "diabolical" uncle Santolini. Giovanni suggested that his death sentence was commuted because of his extreme youth at the time of the crime—though in fact he was twenty-two, not a minor, when he took part in the triple murder—and he consistently swore that he "never had blood on his hands." Whether or not he in fact shot any of the gang's victims (he first confessed to killing one of the Peugeot brothers but later retracted), it is hard to fathom a moral system in which taking part not once but twice in cold-blooded murders for profit could be construed as leaving one's hands clean.

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It is certainly possible that Giovanni—who was young at the time, if not as young as he made himself out to be—was not the driving force in these crimes, that he was led astray by family loyalty and "bad company," as the old story goes. It seems plausible that his collaborationism was motivated not by ideological sympathy with Nazism but by self-interest and opportunism. He was far from the only Frenchman to invent or inflate a past in the Resistance, and he may have benefited from a postwar era in which many of his countrymen were not eager to delve into the Occupation period too deeply.

Today it is hard to imagine that such an explosive past could be kept hidden for so long. What did those who worked with Giovanni know, or think, about his record? In the same issue of *Temps Noir* in which Franck Lhomeau published his research, he also interviewed the great French cineaste Bertrand Tavernier, a friend and colleague of Giovanni's. Their conversation becomes an engrossing, troubling debate about facts and context, lies and artistic license, guilt and rehabilitation, judgment and loyalty. According to Tavernier, those who befriended and worked with Giovanni—for instance the directors Jacques Becker and Claude Sautet and the actor Lino Ventura—were not interested in knowing the sordid details of his past. They considered his account settled and had no desire to dig up dirt or play prosecutor.

Tavernier makes many compelling points: that people change, and that stories are always more complex than the bare facts of an investigation and trial can reveal. That "there is a judicial truth that is not the whole truth," and there are "moments when the archives don't tell everything."[2] But Lhomeau has a powerful argument, too: that allowing Giovanni's account of his life to stand—an account in which he plays up his victimhood and suffering while obscuring the

According to Bertrand Tavernier, Claude Sautet did not learn until many years later that the character played by Lino Ventura (right) in *Classe tous risques* was based on Abel Danos. Giovanni was inspired by Danos' story of keeping his family with him while he was on the run

exact nature of his crimes—erases the memory of the lives he took part in destroying. "Only his point of view and his truth are taken into account," Lhomeau says. "The victims, who are never named, are ignored."

Giovanni blended fact and fiction both in his memoirs and in his novels. Most of his plots and characters were inspired by real people, and he often changed names only minimally. For instance, in *Classe tous risques*, the protagonist Abel Davos is inspired by a gangster named Abel Danos whom he had met on death row, but he omits the detail that the real Danos was executed for his involvement with the Carlingue. (Also known as the Bonny-Lafont gang after the corrupt ex-cop and the criminal who founded it, this group recruited men from the underworld to combat the French Resistance, part of a matrix of cooperation between gangsters and collaborationists.) The film features a police detective named Blot—who reappears as a major figure in *Le deuxième souffle* and in several other works—based on Commissaire Georges Clot, who led an "anti-Gestapo" unit after the Liberation. *Le deuxième souffle*'s main character, Gu Minda, is also based on a real criminal, Auguste "Gu" Méla, while Orloff, the honorable crook who helps him, shares the moniker of Giovanni's accomplice in the "fake police affair" in Lyon, who was later executed. Giovanni appears in his own works as Manu Borelli in *Le Trou*, and again as Manu in *Mon père*. (In the less autobiographical novel *Les Aventuriers* [The Adventurers, 1960], the main characters are best friends named Manu and Roland.) He risked the close-to-home topic of collaborationism in his book and film *Mon ami le traître* (My Friend the Traitor), in which a young man who joined the German police to get out of jail, out of loyalty to his older brother, redeems himself by agreeing to spy on his former comrades. As Lhomeau argues, even though he said that he had paid his debt and deserved to have his past forgotten, Giovanni did not really want to bury his history. He wanted to rewrite it.

> "Even though he said that he had paid his debt and deserved to have his past forgotten, Giovanni did not really want to bury his history. He wanted to rewrite it.

A very happy Alain Delon (center) with director José Giovanni (right) and co-star Michel Bouquet on the set of *Deux hommes dans la ville*

THE ARTIST

While Tavernier grants Giovanni's right to fictionalize his life as he wished, he admits that his weak point as both writer and director was a lack of clarity and force in certain scenes—the word he uses is *flou*, meaning vague, blurry, hazy. It is tempting to ascribe this vagueness to the challenges of telling partial truths, though it may also have come from his tendency to work fast, often submitting manuscripts without titles and in need of editing. (Readers for the Série Noire complained about his first draft of *Les Aventuriers*, citing its "languishing and wordy dialogue," "disjointed plot," and "total lack of rigor.") Entirely absent from the masterful adaptations by Jacques Becker and Claude Sautet, this muddled quality sabotages some films, like Jean Becker's *Un nommé la Rocca* (1961)—the first of two versions of *L'Excommunié* (1958), both starring Jean-Paul Belmondo, the latter being Giovanni's own *La Scoumoune* (1972). At heart, it is the story of two friends who wind up in jail together and agree to risk their lives as minesweepers in exchange for shortened sentences, but too many murky gangland subplots dilute and distract from their central bond.

There are also two film versions of *Les Aventuriers*, a book that introduces another strand of Giovanni's work: his love of John Huston–style adventure stories about tough guys in exotic places. The films were both released in 1967, but they are adapted from different parts of the novel, with almost no overlap. Robert Enrico's *Les Aventuriers* is mostly a lighthearted and loose-jointed buddy movie about a pair of best friends (played by Lino Ventura and Alain Delon) who, after messing about with airplanes and racecars, join up with a free-spirited female artist and set off to recover sunken treasure off the coast of Africa. It all ends badly, in a mournful climax against the striking setting of a ruined military fort that rises out of the ocean. The other adaptation was the first film Giovanni directed, *Le loi du survivant* (The Law of Survival). It too has a gorgeous backdrop, the rugged island of Corsica that was Giovanni's ancestral home, but it is an odd, frustrating film that never really comes into focus until a revelation delivered in the last five minutes. Scraps of backstory feel like loose ends, never telling us enough about the protagonist (played by Michel Constantin), who rescues a woman who has been mysteriously held captive and forced into prostitution by a Corsican family.

Giovanni is, to put it bluntly, not a great director. Visually, his films also tend to be a bit *flou*, a bit fuzzy, and their stylistic flourishes sometimes misfire or come off as clichés. Tavernier said that for Giovanni "the shooting was an obligation, and he didn't know the passion or the pleasure that I could take in it." Nonetheless, he directed a total of fifteen films, on the whole competently, including some based on the works of other writers, such as *Le Rapace* (The Bird of Prey, 1968), from the book by John Carrick, and *Dernier domicile connu* (Last Known Address, 1970), from a novel by Joseph Harrington. Both these films star Lino Ventura, in radically different roles: in the former as an arrogant, bullying hit man who arrives in Mexico to assassinate a politician, and in the latter as a veteran police detective unfairly demoted and assigned to a long-shot search for a missing witness, assisted by a young female trainee. A very solid procedural, if not particularly original, *Dernier domicile connu* is memorable for a surprisingly tragic twist ending that highlights the callousness of the justice system and the cops who enforce it.

Deux hommes dans la ville **marked the third and final pairing of Alain Delon and Jean Gabin, and one of Gabin's finest late performances**

> **Giovanni's best works are rooted in a bone-deep conviction of defeat and betrayal: he rarely bestowed on his characters the grace and forgiveness he himself received.**

One of his best films, *Deux hommes dans la ville* (Two Men in Town, 1973), which he wrote from an original scenario, goes much further in depicting a police detective who maliciously harasses a reformed criminal trying to go straight. Smugly certain that he will relapse, the cop eventually goads him into violence. What elevates the film is its passionate and sorrowful denunciation of the death penalty, and above all the presence of Jean Gabin, who brings all of his immense authority and effortless warmth to the role of Germain Cazeneuve, a compassionate social worker whose faith in justice is finally, late in life, crushed.

Fighting a perennially uphill battle to make prisons humane places of rehabilitation instead of chaotic pits of despair and violence, Cazeneuve takes up the cause of Gino Strabliggi (Alain Delon, who also coproduced), a former bank robber and gang boss who, he argues, has changed during his ten years in jail and deserves another chance. There is no subtlety or ambiguity about what happens: Gino is sympathetic, his enemies malicious, his fate grossly unfair. At his trial, the judge doodles and a juror snoozes. The case is twisted and biased—recalling Giovanni's own claims in the "Diary of a Condemned Man" that the prosecution had used "lies upon lies" to obtain his death sentence. "I cannot imagine grace," he wrote in the diary. "On the contrary I can perfectly imagine execution." More than twenty years later, he put on film the death by guillotine that he must have many times envisioned for himself.

One of the weakest parts of *Deux hommes dans la ville* is the brief idyll in which Gino enjoys his freedom: slow-motion sequences of him cycling, boating, playing soccer with friends look like nothing so much as a Coca-Cola commercial. The strongest scene, by contrast, is of Cazeneuve plodding along the endless blank wall of a prison, musing despondently on the futility of his efforts. Happiness and freedom were not Giovanni's muses. He was in many ways a lucky man, with a gift for inspiring, and returning, friendship and loyalty. He had the good fortune to encounter the likes of Becker, Sautet, Ventura, Tavernier, and to find in art rehabilitation, perhaps redemption. But his best works are rooted in a bone-deep conviction of defeat and betrayal: he rarely bestowed on his characters the grace and forgiveness he himself received.

Crime inspires a fierce hunger for clarity: we want to know exactly what happened and who was responsible, and to see justice done. The kind of ambiguity and ambivalence that surround Giovanni's story are uncomfortable to live with, but the ability to accept uncertainty and mixed feelings are things we can't live without. In every heart there are undiscoverable gardens. ■

NOTES

1. Franck Lhomeau, "Les premiers Français de la 'Série Noire,' 3ème partie (1955-1960): Joseph Damiani, alias José Giovanni," *Temps noir, la Revue des Littératures Policières*, no. 16 (September 2013): pp. 181-222. These and subsequent quotations from this article are the author's translations.
2. Franck Lhomeau, "Le passé tous risques de José Giovanni: Conversation avec Bertrand Tavernier," *Temps noir, la Revue des Littératures Policières*, no. 16 (September 2013): pp. 249-267. Quotations from this article are the author's translations.