

Call Me Melville

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Eric Breitbart

Call Me Melville

In my opinion cinema isn't an art form because you can't reread things, scratch them out and do them over again in the hope of approaching perfection. What makes a film different from a painting, a symphony, or a book is the fact that a release print is only a sketch.

—J. P. Melville

Jean-Pierre Melville made just thirteen feature films in an all-too-short career. Though he enjoyed both popular and critical success in France, this stubborn, fiercely independent director was virtually unknown in the United States when he died in 1973. *Le doulos* (The Fingerman), *Le deuxième souffle* (Second Wind), and *Le samouraï* (The Samurai), his three “*série noire*” films from the 1960s, did not fit the then-popular New Wave cinema mold, and weren’t released in the U.S. until twenty years later, when Melville’s laconic style and dark, existential worldview found a receptive audience. Along with *Bob le flambeur* (Bob the Gambler, 1955), and *Le cercle rouge* (The Red Circle, 1970), these films brought him critical acclaim, the admiration of directors such as John Woo and Quentin Tarantino, and cult status as a master of that rarefied genre, the French gangster film. Now, with the American theatrical release of *L’armée des ombres* (Army of Shadows, 1969) in a beautifully restored print, and the availability of many of his earlier films on DVD, audiences can appreciate the full range of Melville’s artistry.

Adapted from Joseph Kessel’s novel of the same name, *Army of Shadows* recounts the tragic story of five members of a Resistance network in occupied France. In the war’s early years, the French underground was a small force—Melville estimated their number at no more than six hundred—and their activities as depicted in the film consist primarily of eluding the Gestapo while saving British and Canadian pilots who have been shot down over France, and building the Resistance network by bringing in supplies from England. Though the film’s characters are fully realized individuals living in a particular historical period, *Army of Shadows* gradually evolves into a universal epic drama of loyalty, courage, and fate. The conventions of World War II prisoner films like *The Great Escape* or *Bridge on the River Kwai*, and the accepted mythology of the Resistance portrayed in *La bataille du rail* (Battle of the Rails) and *Le père tranquille* (The Quiet Father) are both ignored. Trains are not blown up and there are no dramatic confrontations or cliff-hanging sequences. German soldiers and the Gestapo are omnipresent in *Army of Shadows* but never as individual incarnations

of Evil; there are no jack-booted SS officers for us to hate. And while we do see the bloody, mangled faces of men who have been tortured, the torture itself is never shown; and what is more unusual and disturbing, the acts of violence are those of the Resistance killing their own.

Though shot in color by the renowned cinematographer Pierre Lhomme, the film's restrained palette and somber mood make it feel much more like black-and-white. The film's first shot, a tour-de-force recreation of the famous World War II newsreel of German troops marching along the Champs-Élysées, comes as a shock. It looks like the newsreel until the soldiers come marching toward the camera and you realize that the scene is in color, not black and white, and that it's shot from a position you've never seen before. When bright colors are used, as in a London nightclub sequence during the Blitz, the effect is almost expressionistic.

Melville's fastidiousness and attention to detail were legendary. He was fond of recounting how veterans of the Resistance would ask him how he knew exactly what each of their particular hotel rooms in London looked like, not knowing that Melville himself, having made several clandestine trips to London, had stayed in the one room the British Intelligence reserved for all French Resistance visitors. When Gerbier (Lino Ventura) meets Luc, not knowing that he is, in fact, the head of the Resistance, the two men retire to a wooden shed constructed in the living room of Luc's elegant home. Only someone who lived through this period would know that this is what people did when no coal was available for heating. Yet though Melville used his personal experience in the Resistance to develop the main characters and achieve a high degree of realism in this film, he always insisted that *Army of Shadows* was anything but autobiographical.

Known for being exceptionally careful in selecting actors for their physical presence, in this film Melville chose principals—Lino Ventura, Paul Meurisse, Jean-Pierre Cassel, Simone Signoret, and Paul Crauchet—who completely inhabit their roles, as do the supporting players. Toward the beginning of the film, Gerbier escapes from Gestapo headquarters in Paris by killing a guard and soon after stumbles into a barbershop, obviously on the run. The barber—in a wonderful cameo performance by Serge Reggiani—sits Gerbier down in his chair and begins to shave him. There is no dialogue, only the sounds of the soldiers outside and the razor scraping Gerbier's face, leaving us to wonder if the barber is a collaborator or not. Will he alert the Germans? Will he cut Gerbier's throat? The expression on Reggiani's face gives nothing away. In the end, he finishes the shave, refuses to be paid, and gives Gerbier an overcoat which will make him less conspicuous on the street.

In another scene, Mathilde (Simone Signoret), disguised as a German nurse, arrives in a stolen ambulance at the prison where Felix (Paul Crauchet), is being tortured, presumably in an attempt to transfer him to Paris. As the German guards inspect the false papers and look over Mathilde's two comrades, stone-faced in their stolen German uniforms, steel doors lock the ambulance in. Mathilde can speak German but the others can't; if they are discovered there will be no escape. The sequence is constructed with medium shots and medium closeups; its tension comes from actions playing out minute by minute in real time, not from dramatic editing. In the end

the ruse is successful, but in one of the film's many bitter ironies, the rescue is not; a doctor informs Mathilde that Felix is dying and cannot be moved.

As it is depicted in *Army*, the code of the Resistance is antiheroic and morally ambiguous. There are no speeches about the cause of liberty and freedom; men and women are fighting for their own lives. After he succeeds in escaping from the Gestapo and rejoining his comrades, Gerbier's first act is to order the killing of the man who turned him in. There is no trial and no consideration of extenuating circumstances. In a scene that is horrible but not without black humor, Gerbier and his comrades have to resort to strangling the man with a kitchen towel in order to avoid arousing the neighbors' suspicions with gunfire. The message is clear: loyalty to the group's mission may well mean, at some point, killing people who are, or were, your friends, by any means necessary. Any vestige of empathy or sentiment is a sign of weakness, something that is usually attributed to female characters in Melville's films. Though Mathilde's courage is never questioned, she keeps a photograph of her daughter in her purse in spite of Gerbier's warning that she should destroy it—a flaw that is exploited by the Gestapo to force her to denounce her comrades. When they find out that she has been temporarily released, presumably to gather more information, Gerbier makes the decision to kill her, arguing to the others that this is what she would have wanted and, by implication, what any of them would want.

As in all of Melville's films, there is a kind of cold-bloodedness in *Army*. Violence is not gratuitous, however, nor is it something to agonize over; it is nothing more than a fact of life. Parallels between the shadowy, clandestine world of the Resistance and the criminal underworld in Melville's other films are easy to find. In both these worlds, as in the one we inhabit, death is the fate that awaits everyone, sooner or later. A coda at the end of *Army of Shadows* recounts the fate of the film's real-life counterparts, each one of whom was eventually captured, tortured, and killed.

Jean-Pierre Melville occupied a unique place in French postwar cinema. Born in 1917, he was only a decade or two older than most of the New Wave filmmakers, but he had little in common with them, or with French directors of the 1930s. In the end, he belonged to no school or movement other than his own. When he began shooting his first feature, *Le silence de la mer* (The Silence of the Sea) in 1947, he had no director's card and had never served an industry apprenticeship. Nor had he obtained the rights to the novel on which the film was based—an early assertion of a ruthless independence that he maintained throughout his career. Adapted from a well-known 1942 novel by Vercors (the nom de guerre of Jean Bruller), *Silence* takes place in a small village where a German officer (Howard Vernon) is lodged with an old man (Jean-Marie Robain) and his niece (Nicole Stéphane), whose act of resistance to his presence in their home is silence. Much of the film's dialogue is composed of the officer's voiceover monologues in which he expresses his love for France and French culture—a veiled expression of his evident attraction to the niece. Melville has said that he read the book in English in London in 1943, and when he heard that the actor Louis Jouvet wanted to film it, he enlisted one of his Resistance friends to stop the project. As an assertion of his self-confidence, Melville got Vercors to cooperate—most

of the film was shot in the writer's home—by promising that he would destroy the film negative if Vercors and other veterans of the Resistance didn't like it.

After the successful release of *Silence* in 1949, Melville was approached by Jean Cocteau, who asked him to do a screen adaptation of his novel *Les enfants terribles*, published in 1926. Another young director might have been intimidated by the idea of collaborating with one of the most well-known *enfants terribles* of twentieth-century French literature for his second film, but Melville was never one to doubt his own abilities. While he was contractually bound to accept Cocteau's protégé Edouard Dermithe for one of the main roles, Melville maintained creative control of the film. Cocteau was on the set almost every day and considered himself enough of a director that he early on shouted "Cut!" in the middle of a take. The crew expected a tantrum but a stern look from Melville was enough to elicit Cocteau's apology. In the completed film, Melville's outsize ego is evident from the opening credits when his name is spelled out in large block letters against a shot of the Parthenon.

The film begins with a snowball fight, filmed near the Gare St. Lazare, at the Lycée Condorcet, which Melville attended. One of the boys, Dargelos (Renée Cosima), wrapped in a black cape, stands outside the fray until he spots Paul (Edouard Dermithe) and hurls a snowball, knocking Paul to the ground, unconscious. Called into the headmaster's office, Dargelos reacts scornfully and trashes the man's desk as he is expelled. In the meantime, Paul is taken back to the apartment where he lives with his sister and sick mother.

Up to this point, *Les enfants terribles* appears to be a schoolboy revolt film (albeit with strong homoerotic overtones—Paul has a crush on Dargelos) in the style of Jean Vigo's *Zéro de conduite* (Zero for Conduct). When Paul takes to his bed in the room he shares with his sister Elisabeth (Nicole Stéphane), however, the film makes an abrupt shift into a surreal drama of obsession and incestuous desire. The two "children" have transformed their cluttered bedroom into a cloistered, artificial world in which Paul is by turns nurtured and tormented by his sister. A schoolmate and a Dior model (also played by Renée Cosima) join the playground to make it a foursome. Dermithe is obviously too old, too rugged, and almost too handsome for the role, but Stéphane's powerful performance often makes him shrink before our eyes. Melville's choice of Bach and Vivaldi for the soundtrack, Cocteau's voice in the unseen narration, and Stéphane's classic profile all work to give the film the aura of Greek tragedy. Although Melville never returned directly to this kind of subject matter, the principal elements—a melancholy, insular world, ritualistic behavior, dramatic black-and-white cinematography—remained constants throughout his career.

After these two films, which established his credentials as a successful independent, his next project, *Quand tu liras cette lettre* (When You Read This Letter, 1953), a complexly plotted melodrama set on the Côte d'Azur and starring Juliette Gréco, Irène Galter, and Philippe Lemaire, was a conscious attempt to enter the commercial mainstream and earn enough money to finish construction of Melville's personal film studio on the rue Jenner. Although he often dismissed the film later in his career, he succeeded in realizing both of these goals.

From then on, his films came in relatively quick succession: *Bob le flambeur* (1956),

the story of an over-the-hill gangster and compulsive gambler; *Deux hommes dans Manhattan* (Two Men in Manhattan, 1959), a murder mystery concerning the death of a French diplomat, filmed partly on location in New York City; *Léon Morin, prêtre* (Léon Morin, Priest, 1961), another Resistance drama that takes place in a town in the French Alps, with Jean-Paul Belmondo playing the role of a country priest who resists the sexual overtures of one of his parishioners; *Le doulos* (1963), with Belmondo playing the role of a police informer; *L'ainé des Ferchaux* (Magnet of Doom, 1963), again starring Belmondo, this time as an ex-boxer who becomes the secretary to an unscrupulous businessman; and *Le deuxième souffle* (1966), an underworld drama of revenge featuring Lino Ventura as the gangster Gu Minda.

Melville's next project, *Le samouraï* (1967), the story, with Japanese overtones, of a lone wolf contract killer named Jeff Costello, played by Alain Delon, is perhaps his best-known film, and is now considered by many critics to be his masterpiece. Melville has said that he wrote the script in 1963 with Alain Delon in mind, but at the time Delon had his sights set on an international career, so the script was put away. Three years later, after the success of *Le deuxième souffle*, Delon got in touch with Melville and asked if there might not be a film that they could do together. When Melville told him about the script he'd written, Delon insisted on an immediate reading at his apartment. According to the director, Delon listened intently for a while, his head in his hands, then looked at his watch and said: "You've been reading the script for seven and a half minutes now and there hasn't been a word of dialogue. That's good enough for me. I'll do the film. What's the title?" When Melville told him it was called *Le samouraï*, Delon motioned for the filmmaker to follow him into the bedroom. The room contained only a leather couch and a samurai's lance, sword, and dagger.

Released in the fall of 1967, *Le samouraï* attracted an audience of almost two million, but its critical reception was decidedly mixed. Praised by the mainstream press, the film was vilified by most of the specialized journals as an exhibition of technical mastery without content, though almost all the critics agreed that Delon's performance was the best of his career. Melville used Delon's physical beauty and almost feline grace to create an image of masculinity that one critic has referred to as that of the *homme fatale*—the man who can kill by his looks alone. A number of the film's scenes with Delon adjusting his hat or raincoat have an almost ritualistic quality but it was just this ostensibly realistic yet highly stylized filmmaking that infuriated many younger critics, whose preoccupation with specific social circumstances served as a premonition of the coming storm of May 1968.

In the early 1960s, Melville was often identified as the "father of the New Wave" (though he himself often referred to Godard, Truffaut, & Co. as his stepchildren rather than his children); this identification had more to do with his independence from the establishment than with any stylistic affinities, but his relationship with the younger filmmakers began to sour when he argued against government subsidies and a special category for art films, insisting that it was the director's duty to find a way of bringing large audiences into the theaters without compromising his principles. In a way, it was a position that Melville could afford to take because he was his own producer and had

his own studio. If necessary, he could go downstairs in the evening and build his own sets. Early in his career, when he was accused of being an “amateur” because he didn’t have a union card, Melville responded that he was, in fact, an “ultra-professional,” capable of doing everything from scriptwriting to art direction. He always took himself absolutely seriously and was known as a hard taskmaster who often fought with his actors to get what he wanted; he was also extremely loyal to the few longtime crew members he respected. His personal life was uneventful; he had a long-term, childless marriage, and lived quietly with his wife and three cats. When asked about his work habits, he once told an interviewer: “I believe that to be a film director is extremely tiring if you take it seriously. You can work in a relaxed manner and I know a number of my young colleagues who do. As for me, twenty-four hours before the first shot I call for the doctor because I am not well at all. I have heart palpitations and feel sick during the whole first day of production. I try not to show it, but I have such anxiety that as soon as the day is over I go straight to bed.”

This anxiety may not have been simply a manifestation of stage fright. Melville’s father and grandfather had both died of heart attacks at the age of fifty-five; as he approached that age his anxiety increased, and by either a cruel twist of fate or sheer coincidence, he himself died of a heart attack, as he was having lunch with a journalist. He was fifty-five years old.

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A personal digression: I had the opportunity to meet Jean-Pierre Melville in the spring of 1964 when I was a student at the Institut des hautes études cinématographiques (IDHEC), the now-legendary film school in Paris. Melville had come to talk to the students in the directing class about the importance of set design and art direction. When he walked in I recognized his trademark white Stetson and tinted glasses from his cameo appearance as the novelist Parvulesco in Godard’s *À bout de souffle* (*Breathless*), but I knew little about him or his work. I’d seen *Les enfants terribles* in the U.S., but like many people, assumed that the film had been directed by Cocteau. My ignorance on this point was not surprising to most of my fellow students, since in their view I was very much a cinema *naïf*, infatuated with the superficial charm of Truffaut’s *Jules et Jim* and oblivious to the brilliance of Howard Hawks’s mise-en-scène in *Hatari*. The French IDHEC students were somewhat disdainful of the New Wave but had grudging respect for Melville, whose reputation as a maverick independent carried some weight with them.

To illustrate his talk, Melville showed scenes from his most recent film, *L’ainé des Ferchaux*; these scenes were supposed to take place in the United States. Some had in fact been shot in America, but others had been cleverly staged in France. After the screening, one of the students pointed out, somewhat smugly, Melville’s error in having Fruehauf (i.e., German) trucks on what was supposed to be an American highway. Without waiting for Melville’s explanation, I stood up and said that yes, Fruehauf was of course a German name but in fact the company was one of the largest truck manufacturers in the United States. While this comment didn’t particularly

endear me to my French comrades, Melville came up to me after the class and invited me to lunch.

When I arrived at his home, it didn't take long for me to realize that Melville was someone who lived for the cinema. His apartment was attached to his film studio and one of the first things I noticed was that the windows were American sash-type, not French. I asked if they were imported. Melville told me that he'd had them made by his studio carpenter. In fact, the whole feel of the place was almost like an American film set, right down to the bottle of Jack Daniels on the table. Moreover, it was clear that Melville was extremely knowledgeable about American prewar cinema and that he'd have no trouble reeling off the names in his personal pantheon of sixty-three Hollywood directors to anyone who asked. As we spoke, he took great pleasure in finding gaps in my knowledge of New York trivia, and in telling me how easy it had been for him to find Frank Sinatra's house in Hoboken, New Jersey. And I would guess that he was very likely the only Frenchman to have walked down the main street of a town called Melville in Louisiana.

Of course, I asked him about his name. Born Jean-Pierre Grumbach, he told me that he had adopted the name Melville in the mid-1930s out of admiration for the American novelist. "What I feel about Herman Melville is almost a filial admiration," he said. "Herman Melville is my father, my grandfather, and my older brother—which means that aside from the unbounded admiration I have for him there is also respect. If someone asked me what I would have liked to have been in life, I would answer without hesitation: 'Herman Melville'; and to have lived a hundred years ago and write like he did." At one point I took photographs of Melville standing alongside the sign of the rue Edgar Poe, another of his favorite writers. In fact, as I think about it now, Melville's identification with the American writer was more complex. Melville was no doubt aware of the parallels between their careers. Both were outsiders, both achieved popular success with their first works, and both left the public and the critics confused with their last—*Un flic* (A Cop, 1972) and Melville's *The Confidence-Man*. For Melville (the filmmaker) incorporating an American artistic identity was also a central element in his creation of a new persona. In the '60s, this meant wearing sunglasses and a white Stetson, and driving around Paris in a Ford convertible, savoring the pleasure of cursing out anyone who made snide comments to him, mistakenly assuming that he didn't know how to speak French.

I asked him why friendship was such an important element in his films, and he told me that it was because his way of working didn't give him the opportunity to have real friends anymore, and that as he got older he'd become more demanding and difficult to be with. He said that the only friend he had left was the Dutch writer Jan de Hartog, who was living in Texas at the time, so they could only get together every three or four years. I considered it quite possible that Melville identified himself with Captain Ahab as well as with his creator, and asked him if he too was searching for a white whale. He thought for a moment then answered that indeed he was, and for him it was the United States. "When I am in a rented car, driving along a highway in the West or the South, I'm a happy man. At that moment I don't need anything else. My emotions are contained. I've found my white whale." I didn't recognize it

then, but I do now—the terrible sadness of a man who feels himself most complete when he is absolutely alone.

I saw Melville several times after that first visit and we seemed to get along well enough for me to fantasize about his giving me a job when I got out of film school. Unfortunately, I hadn't been clever enough to get a student deferment before I went to France so I was drafted into the U.S. Army in the summer of 1964. I never finished at the IDHEC and by the time I got out of the Army two years later I'd lost touch with Melville and a lot of other things. Still, before I left Paris for Fort Jackson, South Carolina, I typed up an interview I'd done with him and sent it to *Film Culture*, the only magazine I knew of in the U.S. that might be interested. It was published in the winter of 1964, at about the same time I completed basic training.

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Army of Shadows is 140 minutes long, and while there is some dramatic action—a submarine rendezvous, a parachute return to France, the Blitz in London—it is essentially a character-driven film without heroes. The pace is slow and deliberate, and yet when I saw it at the Film Forum in New York this spring, in a full theater, for the last half hour you could have heard a pin drop when there was no dialogue. Everyone's attention was riveted on the world inside the screen. I thought to myself that it was quite an achievement to have made a film that people in an altogether different culture would respond to this way almost forty years after it was first released. Would American audiences have responded this way in 1969? I doubt it. That year was a year of the unrestrained western hero: Sergio Leone's *The Good, The Bad, and the Ugly*, Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch*, George Roy Hill's *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, and yes, in its own way, Costa-Gavras's *Z*. If audiences in that era were going to see a French film about the Second World War, it would likely have been more along the lines of Marcel Ophüls's 1969 documentary *The Sorrow and the Pity* (though this film wasn't released in the U.S. until after it was screened at the New York film festival in 1971).

Melville's current popularity may seem surprising (though "popularity" should perhaps be put in quotation marks because we are talking about a cultural moment in which a Hollywood film is rolled out in 2,500 theaters simultaneously in an effort to rake in \$50 million the first weekend). In many ways, he represents a throwback to the kind of filmmaking we associate with another era. And yet, in spite of his well-known admiration for American cinema, he never really imitated the style of '30s and '40s Hollywood. When Jean-Paul Belmondo draws his finger across his lip in *Breathless*, Godard wants us to think of Humphrey Bogart, as if the gesture itself required a footnote. The relationship of Melville's characters to American cinema is never that self-conscious. It is as if Melville swallowed these films whole, digested them, and then proceeded to create something that was neither French nor American, but uniquely Melvillian.

In numerous respects, Melville was never a man of his own time. In the years after World War II, France was a country in the throes of modernization and decolonization,

and most filmmakers responded directly to the pressing social conditions around them. Melville's appreciation of cinema developed early—he had been given a baby Pathé projector and a collection of films when he was a small child—but his worldview was ultimately formed by his military service and the early years of the German Occupation, when an Allied victory was uncertain and you could rely on nothing but your own resources. Melville's characters are not larger-than-life heroes, and are not driven by ideology or allegiance to a just cause; they live by an archaic, ahistorical, but fundamental code. Their virtues and flaws might nowadays be seen as quaint and old-fashioned, in the same way that Melville's precise, no-nonsense style of directing is old-fashioned. And yet, for today's audiences, bombarded by superheroes and digital effects, the dark, almost nihilistic quality of Melville's films may be oddly reassuring, something both foreign and familiar, an island of dead calm in a world of frenzy and false hopes of safety.

In an unpublished journal, Melville wrote: "In 1931 I was the only adolescent of my generation who said he wanted to be a film director. In 1963, I don't know a single adolescent who wants to be anything else." What would he say about 2006, when almost every adolescent *is* a film director?

FURTHER READING:

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