

UNDERGROUND MEN

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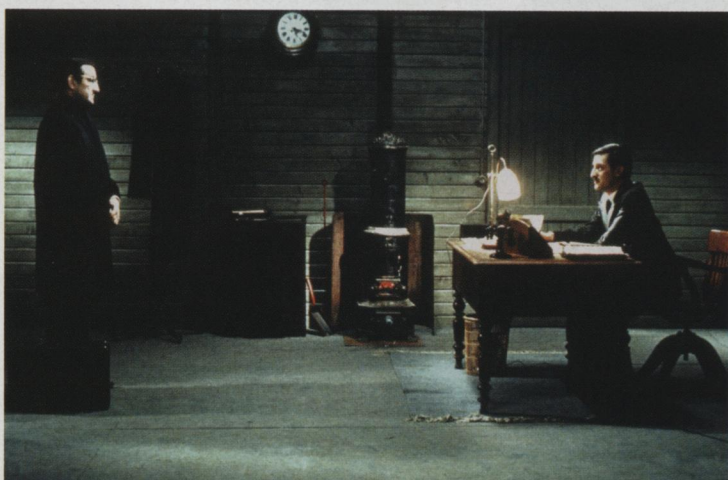
NOBODY GETS OUT ALIVE IN **ARMY OF**

ELEGANT, BRUTAL, ANXIETY-PROVOKING, AND OVERWHELMINGLY sad, Jean-Pierre Melville's 1969 film *Army of Shadows* is being released for the first time in the U.S. by Rialto in a splendidly restored 35mm print, whose nearly impenetrable blacks and drained color palette are a tribute to the title. This is the third and final film in which Melville deals directly with the German occupation of France—*Le Silence de la Mer* (47), his first feature, and *Léon Morin, Prêtre* (61) were also set during the Occupation—and his first and only film devoted to the Resistance. But *Army of Shadows* was made in the middle of Melville's stunning late run of gangster films, preceded by *Le Deuxième souffle* (66) and *Le Samourai* (67) and before *Le Cercle rouge* (70) and *Un Flic* (72), and it has more in common with them formally, narratively, and philosophically than with the earlier war films. Even if you do not conclude, as I do, that *Army of Shadows* is Melville's most significant film—his signature work—and certainly one of the greatest films of the Sixties, it will at least change the ways in which you make meaning of the films that surround it.

The film is adapted from Joseph Kessel's *Army of Shadows*, an account of the author's experience in the French Resistance, published in London in 1943. "Everything had to be accurate and at the same time nothing must be recognizable," Kessel wrote in his preface. In other words, fiction, as a protective strategy, was applied to a work of reportage. In Rui Nogueira's *Melville on Melville*, the director says that he read Kessel's book when he too was in London in 1943; he immediately wanted

SHADOWS, JEAN-PIERRE MELVILLE'S FRENCH RESISTANCE MASTERPIECE BY AMY TAUBIN

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to film it. He also seems to have taken Kessel's method as the guiding principle for his entire oeuvre, explaining to Nogueira in a different context: "what people often assume to be imagination in my films is really memory, things I have noticed walking down the street or being with people—transposed, of course, because I have a horror of showing things I have actually experienced." The filmmaker whose subject was underground man assumed as a creative artist the strategies of secrecy, subterfuge, and masquerade that were life-or-death matters for his characters whether gangsters or *résistants*. The meshing of Melville's method of constructing story and identity in film, and perhaps in life as well, with the behavior of characters as seemingly different from each other as Gerbier in *Army of Shadows* and Corey in *Le Cercle rouge* largely accounts for the surprising emotional resonance and profound sense of unease generated by films that are also as precise, distanced, and abstract as a game of chess.

It should go without saying that the experience of World War II was definitive for Melville's generation. Melville was drafted into the army in 1937 at age 20. Born to a Jewish family, he changed his name from Grumbach to that of his favorite American writer, and since it was as Melville that he received his military decoration, he kept the name after the war, or so he explained to Nogueira. According to Ginette Vincendeau, whose *Jean-Pierre Melville: An American in Paris* is, along with Nogueira's book-length interview, the only extended work on Melville available in English, Melville was involved in the Resistance, probably between 1941 and 1943. He was jailed in Spain; his brother was killed perhaps trying to reach him. He joined the Free French in North Africa in 1943 and took part in the Italian and French liberation campaigns in 1944. Although his service with the Free French has never been disputed, some, including Volker Schlöndorff, at one time Melville's assistant director, have been skeptical about his connection to the Resistance.

Notwithstanding what Vincendeau refers to as "contradictory testimony" about Melville's Resistance activities, *Army of Shadows* has the quality of lived experience like no other film in the director's oeuvre. By comparison, even the most dazzling and affecting of the gangster



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films—*Le Doulos*, *Le Cercle rouge*, *Le Samourai*—seem like game-playing. They transcend genre but not their own fetishistic defenses. (This criticism is of course relative. One has only to compare Melville's genre excursions to Tarantino's to understand the gravity of Melville's project.) And while Melville told Nogueira that the attack on *Army of Shadows* by some French critics for presenting the resistance fighters as if they were characters in a gangster film was "absurd," he himself made another kind of connection: "Tragedy is the immediacy of death that you get in the underworld or in a particular time such as war. The characters from *Army of Shadows* are tragic characters. You know that from the very beginning."

(Beware: major spoilers ahead. Although it would be simplistic to categorize *Army of Shadows* as a thriller, suspense and shock are crucial to the narrative structure; please desist from reading until after you've seen the film.)

In regard to incidents, characters, dialogue, and the distribution of interior monologues, Melville's *Army of Shadows* is a remarkably faithful, albeit condensed, adaptation of Kessel's book. But unlike Kessel, who was writing in London at a moment when the war suddenly seemed winnable and therefore gave his

story an open, and even guardedly optimistic ending, Melville, looking back more than 25 years later, refuses to allow anyone to get out alive. The opening and closing of the film are devastating. Indeed, for a French audience in 1969, the first shot must have had the shock effect Buñuel and Dalí aimed for when they sliced through the eye at the beginning of *Un Chien Andalou*: a regiment of German soldiers, headed by a drum and bugle corps, goose-steps across the Arc de Triomphe and makes a sharp turn onto the empty Champs-Élysée, marching straight toward the camera which holds its position, as if frozen by the sight. It is, however, the shot itself that freezes as the first row of soldiers comes abreast of the lens, and the nightmare image hangs over the film, just as the occupation must have hung like an all-enveloping poison cloud over France.

The narrative proper begins with Gerbier (Lino Ventura) a civil engineer and the chief of a small cell of resistance fighters, handcuffed inside a police van, being escorted to a prison camp by two Vichy cops who make a pit stop along the way to pick-up some black-market food from a local farmer. (It's the first of many quick interjections of local color that reveal how the French survived the occupation, in this case by doing favors for Vichy.) The sky is overcast, rain slants down on the yellowed fields; on the soundtrack, cawing crows mix with howling wind, the van's ancient chugging motor, and the film's main music theme, its descending minor melody suggesting the "fate" motif from Bizet's *Carmen*. One of the cops tries to make small talk with Gerbier, whose manner and brief responses suggest not only his intelligence but his ironic strategy of tempering rage and despair with courtesy, a strategy so engrained that it seems the defining element of his character. Gerbier is the governing consciousness of Kessel's book, where the longest chapter is titled "The Diary of Philippe Gerbier," although Kessel distributes the first-person voice among several other characters as well. Melville follows Kessel's lead in this, but the Gerbier of the film is a more complicated and heartbreaking character, thanks to Ventura's remarkably subtle, unsentimental, concentrated performance. Always a powerfully physical presence, with a solid yet agile body and a block-like head that is instantly recognizable, Ventura here filters

everything—physical action/ reaction and sensory perceptions—through a mind that never stops working. How he conveys Gerbier's intensity of mind and will is, like all great acting, mysterious. It's not just a matter of the alertness of his gaze or the shifting rhythms of his speech or the timbre of his voice (Melville remarked that no one taught Ventura how to say lines but he said them more convincingly than anyone else) but the way his intelligence seems to infuse every cell of his body. One of Melville's strengths is his casting and directing of actors, but no other performance in his films, including the wonderful ones here by Jean-Pierre Cassel, Simone Signoret, and Paul Crauchet, are as rich as or have the tragic stature of Ventura's. (Melville and Ventura were on such bad terms that, according to Signoret, they never spoke to each other during the shooting.)

A *Army of Shadows* follows Gerbier and the members of his small cell (it is 1942, before the rise of the Maquis, and the number of active resistance fighters was only in the hundreds) as they are arrested, tortured, imprisoned, find a way to escape or to engineer the escape of others, and eventually are murdered, in some cases by the Nazis, in others by their own comrades who have judged them a danger to security. Melville is unsparing in his depiction of killing and dying and the desperate effort to survive. Early in the film, Gerbier escapes from Nazi headquarters by stabbing one of the guards. Gerbier moves so efficiently (and the camera angle changes so quickly) we can't quite grasp what's happening until the guard falls backward across Gerbier's arm, and we see the knife lodged in his arched throat. Two sequences later, Gerbier and three members of his cell, Felix (Crauchet), Le Masque (Claude Mann), and Le Bison (Christian Barbier)—the names may sound like they belong to gangsters, but they are all taken from Kessel's book—execute a young man who worked with them and betrayed them to the Germans. Unlike the compression of time in the killing of the guard, this execution is agonizingly extended, with the group debating the method to be used in front of their whimpering victim. No one wants to kill him, and yet they must if they are to survive. After the deed is done and they pre-

pare to leave, we hear the same dark musical fragment that played over the scene in which Gerbier is introduced. With this killing, each of the Resistants knows he has sealed his fate. Even if they survive the occupation, they will have to live with their own guilt and their compromised humanity. If *Army of Shadows* is a tragedy rather than a melodrama—and I believe it is—this is its first act.

The narrative will come full circle and the theme music will be heard again, in the last sequence in which Gerbier, this time with his commander, Luc Jardier (Paul Meurisse), the character modeled on the legendary resistance hero Jean Moulin, decides it is once again necessary to kill one of their group. But now it is one of the most valued members, Mathilde (Signoret), whose courage and ingenuity has saved their lives more than once. Mathilde is gunned down on the street, and as the car bearing her executioners speeds away, Melville shows us, one by one, their agonized faces, and we see, through the front windshield, the Arc de Triomphe. A second later, a series of title cards briefly describes how each of the four men in the car was executed by the Germans. One expects that an image or two from a film as powerful as this one will stick in one's memory, but in the months since I've seen *Army of Shadows*, it's these words, which originate not with Kessel but with Melville, that will not leave my mind.

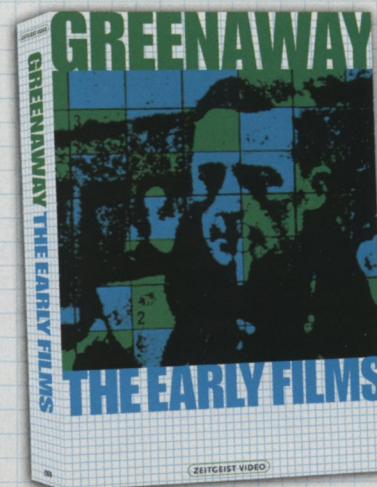
In Kessel's book, Gerbier, who believes he's going to be killed by a firing squad (he's rescued at the last minute), thinks to himself: "I am going to die . . . and I'm not afraid . . . It is because I'm too limited, too much of an animal to believe it. But if I don't believe it until the last possible moment, until the ultimate limit, I shall never die. What a discovery!" Melville uses the entire text as a voiceover, one of many spoken by Gerbier and other characters as well. As much as Kessel's concept of fiction-as-disguise, it affects the shape of *Army of Shadows* and the late gangster films that bracket it. The extreme elasticity of subjective time in the face of death—of a subjectivity defined by that elasticity rather than by conventional point-of-view shots—is what makes Melville's films, and *Army of Shadows* in particular, not merely exquisite abstractions or exercises in style but graphs of human consciousness grappling with mortality. □

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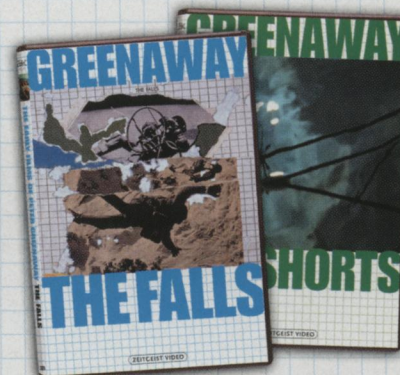
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