

# ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF JEAN-PIERRE MELVILLE

## NO GREATER SOLITUDE

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**A**ccording to French director Jean-Pierre Melville, “A filmmaker is like the master of a shadow-show. He works in the dark.” Melville’s centennial, on October 20, 2017, is celebrated by a traveling retrospective of his films, crowds attest to the enduring popularity of his shadow theater: a self-contained world of rain and neon, in which hats and guns and American cars assume hieratic significance. Here the heists are as mute and stylized as Noh plays; the nightclub floorshows as solemn as temple dances; and, in their ritual combat, cops and criminals mirror each other’s weariness, sharing the knowledge that, in the director’s own words, the only way “to avoid being betrayed is to live alone.”



Cinema's great loner, Melville even recalled falling in love with movies not in the communal darkness of a theater but on his own, compulsively watching films he rented and played at home on a Pathé Baby projector. The original cinephile director, he believed it was necessary not only to "be madly in love with cinema" in order to make films, but also to possess a "huge cinematic baggage." This baggage shows up on-screen when he dresses Alain Delon in *Le Samourai* (1967) like Alan Ladd's hit man in *This Gun for Hire* (1942), or recreates a set from Rouben Mamoulian's



Melville, in his trademark Stetson and aviator shades, was a notorious tyrant on the set

gangster drama *City Streets* (1931) or a police detective's office in *Le Doulos* (1963). But Melville transmuted all of his influences into his own unmistakable cinematic language, which has become the baggage of later filmmakers enamored of his flawlessly cool style.

One of his actors, François Périer, said Melville "was so crazy about cinema that basically he could only live in the atmosphere of a movie, like a darkened movie theater." He came as close as possible, living in an apartment above his own movie studio on the rue Jenner in a semi-industrial neighborhood of Paris. (The bleak alley

behind the studio shows up as a location in several of his films.) In the most collaborative of art forms, he was notoriously intransigent, insisting he could only work by himself. He survived for decades largely outside the film industry, even as he came to direct France's biggest stars in huge box-office hits. Fiercely independent, he also believed it was the duty of movies to be commercial; a classicist whose touchstone was 1930s Hollywood, he was also claimed as a godfather of the New Wave for his location shooting and do-it-yourself freedom. He wrote or co-wrote almost

all of his 13 feature films, and designed some of the sets with fanatical attention to detail.

Though Melville maintained that every one of his original scripts "without exception" was a transposed Western, wide open spaces are rare in his films. It is a cinema of interiors. Melville's solitary, taciturn men kill a lot of time in hideouts, such as the spare, sepia-brown room where *Le Samourai* opens. Light entering the darkened chamber through two symmetrical windows fans across the ceiling like beams from projectors. The eye is drawn first to a domed, silver-



Melville planned the opening of *Le Samourai* as a clinical depiction of a hired killer's schizophrenia, anatomizing "the solitude, the silences, the introversion"





wire birdcage, a delicate miniature prison. It takes longer to notice the man in a dark suit stretched out on a daybed; the smoke curling up from his cigarette is the only sign of life in this exquisite tableau. Alain Delon, the man on the bed, first appears in *Le cercle rouge* (1970) once again in repose, lying in a clean prison cell with walls painted half white and half battleship-gray. Lino Ventura's escaped convict in *Le deuxième souffle* (1966) spends New Year's Eve alone in the whitewashed kitchen of a rustic safe house, eating a mutely stoic meal accompanied only by the ticking of a clock on the mantel. These criminals have the patience and self-control of monks—but while rooms may be whitewashed, men are not. The austerity and precision of Melville's films is a

counterpoint to the inevitability of violence, betrayal, and moral corruption.

Much of Melville's first film, *Le silence de la mer* (1949), based on a celebrated underground novel about resistance to the German occupation of France, is confined to the small, fire-lit living room of a farmhouse. What might be a cozy space is instead charged with tension as an old man and his niece tacitly resist by refusing to speak to the civilized, conflicted Nazi officer billeted with them. The director's next film, an adaptation of Jean Cocteau's *Les enfants terribles* (1950), is even more claustrophobic, burrowing into the bizarre, ingrown, incestuous dramas enacted by a brother and sister in a series of cluttered, windowless rooms they rarely leave. (Truffaut said the film had "the odor of children's sickrooms.") The hideaways of Melville's characters are replete with private rituals: the hit man in *Le Samourai* feeds his caged songbird, the police inspector in *Le cercle rouge* pampers his three cats (played by the director's own beloved

pets), the eponymous *Bob le flambeur* (1956) routinely tries his luck at a slot machine hidden in a closet in his

Roger Duchesne (far right) is Bob le flambeur in the 1956 film of the same name that, along with *Rififi* (1955), kicked off a brilliant cycle of French crime movies





Lino Ventura in *Le deuxième souffle*, adapted from a novel by Corsican-born José Giovanni, who drew on the time he had spent on death row

apartment. The peculiarly hermetic, sealed-off and self-reflexive world of Melville's films is expressed by interiors that grow increasingly surreal: the odd, cramped lair where an alcoholic former police detective played by Yves Montand suffers the DTs in *Le cercle rouge*, with its dizzying striped walls and framed pictures of guns; or the glittering, mirror-lined apartment where Delon's cop in *Un Flic* (1972) kisses a double-crossing woman.

In these films, people's lives are as circumscribed as their rooms, whether by the strict codes of cops and robbers, the deadly rules of the Occupation and the Resistance, or the narrowness of private fixations. Unlike the men and women in American film noir, Melville's characters scarcely seem to struggle against these restrictions. Maybe they are trapped by the sheer beauty of their prisons: the enameled patterns of rain on car windshields, the glittering caves of nightclubs and casinos. For all the stylistic flourishes that the Stetson-sporting Melville imported from Hollywood movies—he famously filled the streets of Paris with *American* cars, and he made two films set in the U.S., *Two Men in Manhattan* (1959) and *L'Aîné des Ferchaux* (1963)—his deeply fatalistic, unchanging, death-haunted worldview feels closer to that of Japanese cinema, with its tragic feudalism and obsession with honor. (He made up his own Japanese influences, penning the alleged quote from the "Book of Bushido" in *Le Samouraï* and the Buddhist parable in *Le cercle*

*rouge*.) In American noir, the belief in individual freedom is ruthlessly crushed; in Melville's grim yet formally elegant visions, men know from the start that there is no such thing.

### Breaking Out and Breaking In

Capers and jailbreaks, which mirror each other in their procedural rigor and long-shot defiance, are two of Melville's favorite subjects. He revered Jacques Becker's *Le trou* (*The Hole*, 1960), a stripped-down, minutely observed, and subtly devastating prison-break movie filmed at his own Studios Jenner. But when he adapted another book by *Le trou's* author, ex-con José Giovanni, Melville eschewed the realistic, durational detail of Becker's film in favor of a compressed, ravishingly abstract distillation of an escape. The opening of *Le deuxième souffle* (*The Second Wind*) is a minimalist rhapsody: the stark planes and angles of prison walls are framed with the compositional authority of Mondrian. Yet, as three escapees run for a freight train in the leafless woods, small details also ratchet up suspense and reveal the vulnerability of the aging, worn-out gangster Gustave Minda (Lino Ventura).

Very different is the escape of Vogel (Gian-Maria Volontè) in *Le cercle rouge*, while he is being transported to jail in handcuffs, sharing a train compartment with a police inspector (André Bourvil). In this small, dim space, we watch patiently in extreme close-up as the

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Melville hoped to cast Belmondo and Delon as the crime partners in *Le cercle rouge*, but had to settle for Gian-Maria Volontè when Belmondo was unavailable

prisoner manages to pick the lock of his handcuffs with a safety pin and gracefully slip out his hands before suddenly crashing through the train window and fleeing, again, into the wintry woods. (In Melville's films, it always seems to be winter.) Both of these long sequences unfold without any dialogue, a common feature of the director's later films. There is even a joke about this laconic quality later in *Le cercle rouge*, when a detective watching a surveillance video of masked robbers in a jewelry store comments, "They're not much for talk."

This 30-minute silent heist is a vision of perfection, from Delon and Volontè's long, stealthy journey over rooftops and through a maze of stairs and passageways, to their balletic leaps over electronic eye alarms, to Montand's supreme triumph in nailing the wall key with a single rifle-shot causing all the glass cases to smoothly open and disgorge their treasure. If this is the most suave, *Le deuxième souffle*'s heist is the most thrilling, as Ventura and three other men rob an armored truck in the dry hills overlooking the ocean high above Marseille. The sequence is a masterpiece of pacing, with an agonizing wait giving way to a sudden, jolting

rush of action: crisply efficient, ruthless, and reaching a spectacular climax when they push the truck off a cliff for a long swan-dive into the sea.

By his last film, *Un Flic*, the heists are downright languid. The first, in a desolate, sleekly modern sea-side town in the pouring rain, has the beauty of abstract art, but the second, an endlessly protracted, McGuyver-ish job on a train, lacks enough tension to hold our interest. Since even successful heists nearly always lead to ultimate loss and defeat, they have to seduce us into hoping this time will be different. In Melville's first caper film, *Bob le flambeur*, which he called "a comedy of manners," he pulled off a priceless twist by having the casino heist not merely foiled but rendered moot, as the gang's leader indulges his gambling addiction and wins more money than he had hoped to steal. "I like futility of effort," Melville said, "the uphill road to failure is a very human thing."



### Hot Shadows, Cool Colors

This principle applies to more than heists. Even the heroics of the Resistance come off largely as doomed ges-





In 1969, *Army of Shadows* was attacked by French critics as politically reactionary, but when it was finally released in America in 2006 it was hailed as a masterpiece

tures in *Army of Shadows* (1969)—as only a Frenchman who had actually been a *résistant* and served in the Free French forces could present them, no doubt. And what could be more futile than the forbidden yearning of the widowed Barny (Emmanuelle Riva) for the celibate Léon Morin (Jean-Paul Belmondo), as she climbs the stairs to his monastic chambers again and again to grapple with his slippery, teasing ambivalence in *Léon Morin, Priest* (1961)? A self-proclaimed atheist and “right-wing anarchist,” Melville professed a dim view of human nature, but the drama of his films comes from the bright shafts of passion, fierce loyalty or conviction that slice through the shadows.

It is well known that the director, born Jean-Pierre Grumbach in Paris to a family of Alsatian Jews, adopted Melville as his *nom de guerre* to honor a favorite American author, Herman Melville. The novel he cited as marking him forever was not *Moby-Dick* but the controversial, obscure *Pierre; or, The Ambiguities*. His embrace of this strange melodrama, with its themes of incest, desperation, and suicide, its hero living in a fraught ménage of women, seems surprising in light of the cool, hard-boiled crime movies for which he is best known. But both it and *Les enfants terribles* foreground motifs that run throughout his work. Cocteau’s story, filled with queasy eroticism and emotional violence, was a departure from Melville’s

*Léon Morin, Priest* proves that Melville was quite capable of making a film with a complex, fully realized female protagonist.

debut, *Le silence de la mer*, with its snowy landscapes and intense quietude, but the films (both starring Nicole Stéphane, an actress of striking intensity and androgynous beauty) share that insular, shut-in quality that pervades his whole body of work. The fever of melodrama continued to rage in Melville’s third feature, *When You Read This Letter* (1953). He later dismissed this—the only film he directed which he had no hand in writing—as an impersonal commercial project, which he undertook largely to earn money to set up his studio, but his description of it as “a very conventional, sensible film” is truly baffling.

Set in a decadent Cannes splashed with hot sun and inky shadows, it follows the exploits of a sleazy anti-hero and *homme fatal* (Philippe Lemaire) who starts as a mechanic and nightclub boxer before graduating to chauffeur/gigolo, dabbling in robbery, rape, and murder before meeting his match in a smolderingly severe ex-postulant played by chanteuse Juliette Gréco. The film grows weirder and more superheated on its way to a highly ambiguous ending, feeding off the torrid chemistry between real-life lovers

Lemaire and Gréco. In a black raincoat and beret, she is every inch the existentialist icon, and, as is often the case in Melville’s films, consummation comes in the form of death rather than romantic union. The couple’s tortured relationship escalates into deep noir territory of lust, guilt, temptation, and masochism, garnished with Catholic imagery—at one point there is a shot of Gréco disrobing next to a huge crucifix. Apparently, the film never opened in America, and no wonder: it would have made censor Joe Breen’s head explode.

This taboo blend of religion and sexuality recurs, of course, in *Léon Morin, Priest*, though Melville was drawn to Béatrix Beck’s source novel chiefly by its portrait of the Occupation. (In 2017, a new cut of the film was



Emmanuelle Riva and Jean-Paul Belmondo, co-starring in *Léon Morin, Priest*, were major figures in the French New Wave



released, restoring eleven minutes of scenes dealing with the moral dilemmas and compromises of life under the Nazis.) *Léon Morin, Priest* proves that Melville was quite capable of making a film with a complex, fully realized female protagonist. Indeed, Emmanuelle Riva's Barney is perhaps the most richly human character in any of his films: intelligent, flawed, self-contradictory, confronting us with both her physicality and her inner life. Yet, after this, women begin to disappear from his films, and sexuality is reduced to floorshow leg art. (From the topless bubble dancers of *When You Read This Letter* to the plumed, Vegas-style showgirls of *Un Flic*, nightclub acts are a Melville staple.) At the furthest extreme, *Le cercle rouge* has exactly one brief line spoken by a woman, and she is gratuitously naked. Melville knew he would be accused of misogyny and denied the charge, though his claim that he was instead reacting against the excessive explicit sex in films of the time is hard to credit when women are still present as barely clad decor, but not as characters. He was, to be sure, a chauvinist who once confidently asserted that "there are no lady film artists," and whose self-presentation as a loner overlooked the fact that he lived for thirty years with a woman who also helped run his studio.

To be fair, even men become more mannequin-like in Melville's later, hyper-stylized films, as the messiness he embraced in earlier works gives way to a nearly paralyzing perfectionism that increasingly inhibited his output. The director had famously difficult relations with his crews and actors—he admitted to being "impossible" at times, and he worked on a number of aborted or unrealized projects, including a spy thriller that he abandoned on impulse because of "a silly argument about the brim of a hat." Nonetheless, he did have fruitful partnerships, above all with the great cinematographer Henri Decaë, and his films were strongly imprinted with the personalities of certain actors, even as mutual loathing usually defined these working relationships. He explained, "Though it often happens that my stars and I aren't on very good terms during shooting, the sacrament of our relationship still persists, because one can marry and hate and still retain the complicity of mutual understanding."

Thus, the three late films with Alain Delon are just like Delon: hypnotically beautiful but chilly, more notable for surface than depth. The color in these films is much cooler than the black-and-white of earlier works: dusky blue-gray, the beige of wintry beaches, smoky brown and milky pallor. In *Le cercle rouge* the muted mise-





Jean-Paul Belmondo and Serge Reggiani in *Le doulos*, Melville's least romantic underworld portrait where he saw gangsters as "pathetic losers," but good dramatic subjects

en-scene is dotted with ominous "red circles": a traffic light, a single billiard ball, the garters on nightclub dancers. Melville declared that he was "careful never to be realistic," but in the Delon films he went furthest into realms of fantasy. The earlier *Bob le flambeur*, which he called a love letter to pre-war Paris, was suffused with the nostalgia of an aging hero, but by the late '60s Melville made nostalgia redundant by constructing a world that never changed, where men still wore trench coats and fedoras, where jazz still played in every nightspot and rock-and-roll was unheard.

While the Delon films reflect their star's cat-like impassivity, three with Belmondo play on the capacity for deceit and manipulation in his smiling seductiveness. (Melville claimed that the star himself didn't figure out until he saw the finished film whether or not his character was really the titular stoolie in the impenetrably dark and convoluted *Le doulos*.) The director's two films with Lino Ventura are weighted by the actor's monumental gravity and rugged, obdurate,

bluntly honest presence. *Le deuxième souffle*, a gangster film, and *Army of Shadows*, Melville's final, somber portrait of the Occupation, are among the most moving explorations of his central themes, honor and betrayal. In the former, Ventura's on-the-lam big shot Gu Minda spends most of his time waiting around in small, dingy apartments, traveling by bus or local train. Unlike the ever-stylish Delon and Belmondo, who stop to painstakingly adjust their hat brims before killing or dying, Minda dons the appearance of a nondescript, lumpish middle-aged man like a cloak of invisibility.

And while Delon is always as cool as his slate-blue eyes, Minda erupts in uncontrollable rage when the police trick him into revealing the names of associates; proving he's no squealer matters more to him than life. There are traces of warmth and tenderness in this stark, hard-edged film, residing with the few characters who remain faithful to the doomed protagonist, including his competent, self-possessed girlfriend Manouche (Christine Fabréga). She is

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Lino Ventura, Claude Mann, and Christian Barbier as Resistance fighters in Melville's *Army of Shadows*, adapted from an autobiographical novel by Joseph Kessel

something of a forerunner to Simone Signoret's stalwart Resistance leader Mathilde in *Army of Shadows*, a film that has almost nothing to say about the cause for which people risked their lives, and everything to say about the interplay of loyalty and distrust, courage and ruthlessness in this underground community.

Melville was obsessed by the elusive ideals of friendship and honor, which he claimed not to believe in, saying that betrayal was a more basic motivation for human behavior than love. ("Because if there are two of you, one betrays," he put it simply. "Why do you think I have chosen solitude?") It's tempting to see this fixation as rooted in the national trauma of the Occupation, when both gangsters (including, allegedly, José Giovanni) and the police were tainted by their involvement with the French gestapo. The relationship between cops and crooks, a marriage of hatred filled with complicity and mutual understanding, is perhaps the quintessential Melvillian bond. It is a chief of police in *Le cercle rouge* who intones the all-encompassing, pessimistic motto: "No one is innocent. All men are guilty."

Even the solitude Melville cultivated couldn't save him from the betrayals of fate. In 1967, a fire destroyed his beloved studio, exiling him from the domain he had worked so hard to build. He died in 1973, aged only fifty-five; when the heart

attack struck, he was in a restaurant, talking with a friend about the script for his next movie. With his fondness for futility of effort, he announced in 1971, "I don't know what will be left of me fifty years from now. I suspect that all films will have aged terribly and that the cinema probably won't even exist anymore." Almost 50 years later, we know how wrong Melville was—which is cause for more hope than his ageless films ever displayed. ■



Melville had a strong rapport with Alain Delon, who in 1967 praised him as the greatest director he'd worked with