

JEAN-PIERRE MELVILLE FILM NOIR 2.0

Marc Svetov



"I was reduced to despair by the realization that producers didn't have faith in me because, they said, I was much too intelligent to be a filmmaker. One day Ray Ventura, who was a very important film producer at the time, told me quite frankly: 'But, Mr. Melville, you obviously aren't a film director, because film directors shouldn't be intelligent!' I was so thrown by this that I decided people shouldn't be allowed to think of me as intelligent or intellectual—which is far from proven anyway. They must be made to see once and for all that I was a showman, full stop."

—Jean-Pierre Melville

Jean-Pierre Melville did not approach filmmaking in the largely unarticulated manner of the Hollywood directors who inspired him. From the outset, he reflected upon the aesthetics and style of American film noir and transposed its ingredients, self-consciously, with a new level of awareness, to his own "art." Melville represents the second phase of film noir's evolution, both imitating what had been previously created and shifting the content and message—while still adhering to its stylistic paradigms.

All Melville's film noirs—from *Bob le flambeur* (Bob the Gambler, 1956) to *Le Samourai* (The Samurai, 1967) and *Le cercle rouge* (The Red Circle, 1970)—are abstract and mannerist, existential dramas in a completely artificial world. "I never work in realism," the director claimed, "and I don't want to. ... I am not a documentarist. And since I am careful never to be realistic, there is no more inaccurate portraitist than I am. What I do is always false."

Draining American noir and gangster epics of content and context, he created refinements and extensions of them, translated into French. His films are never slavish copies, merely quoting from American noir models; rather he distills the noir essence and drizzles it on unreal French settings, creating a world in which the gangsters wear American clothes and drive big American cars.

The Theater of the Absurd (represented particularly by Samuel Beckett's plays and novels, the heyday of which overlapped with Melville's greatest creative period) slips in through the back door in the director's stylish noirs. His silent, death-driven (and in the case of *Le Samourai*, suicidal) heroes are in tune with the Absurdist's existentialist philosophy. All of Melville's hoodlums are dandies, and very French, despite the Cadillacs, Buicks, and other American-made sedans they pilot. Sartorial elegance and the display of taste, especially in their

Japanese poster art from *Le Doulos*



Melville on location

apartments (*Le Doulos*, *Le cercle rouge*), are their hallmarks, as though to say: *It is all about style, this crime career.* American movie gangsters of the 1930s, '40s, and '50s of course wore fancy clothes and finery, maintaining their wardrobe as strictly as if they were soldiers in uniform. Melville's French counterparts follow this pattern, but Alain Delon is significantly more narcissistic than Paul Muni or George Raft (*Scarface*, 1932) could ever be.

A good example of the unique American-French palimpsest Melville enjoyed fabricating can be found in *L'Ainé des Ferchaux* (1963); he took pride in having shot portions of the film in France, while tricking viewers into believing the entire movie had been made in America. In 1971, he was asked about shooting certain scenes:

- Q. Where did you shoot that scene in the bank?
 A: In a bank.
 Q. Yes but what I meant was, in France or in America?
 A: In America. Why? You look as though you didn't believe me.
 Q. Not at all.
 A: Well, you shouldn't. As a matter of fact, I shot that scene at the Société de Générale in the Boulevard Hausmann because all banks look alike. ... I was therefore obliged to shoot certain exteriors in France: the sequence with the hitchhiker, the scene at the river and so on. ...
 Q. What is there of America in the film then?
 A: Only things that are typically American.... Obviously, I didn't film "the streets of New York" in the rue Jenner, but all the scenes on the highway were shot in France. If you look carefully, however, you will see that none of the cars are French, because I'd lined the Esterel autoroute with American cars.

"Strangely, Melville's films about the underworld created their own mythical milieu. But the myth wasn't French, it was inspired by the mythology of American film noir. He was steeped in America, it influenced him profoundly."

—Bernard Stora, assistant director on *Le cercle rouge*

"Melville was a great American filmmaker, lost in France."

—Rui Nogueira

Melville's noir cycle

Jean-Pierre Melville's film noir career begins in the mid-1950s with *Bob le flambeur*. "A real hood's face," says Bob, looking at himself in a mirror on the street. Bob is played





Roger Duchesne (center) as gambler “Bob” Montagné

by Roger Duchesne, a minor French film star from the 1930s. Melville chose him specifically because the actor was “over the hill.” Set in Paris (Montmartre, Pigalle) and a gambling casino in Deauville, the film shows us Bob’s last coup, a heist professionally planned and carried out—but, unfortunately for Bob and his criminal companions, it is foiled at the final moment by Inspector Ledru (Guy

Decomble), who, wanting to protect Bob, has warned him repeatedly not to do anything that would put him in jail. At Bob’s age, he won’t survive another stretch of hard time.

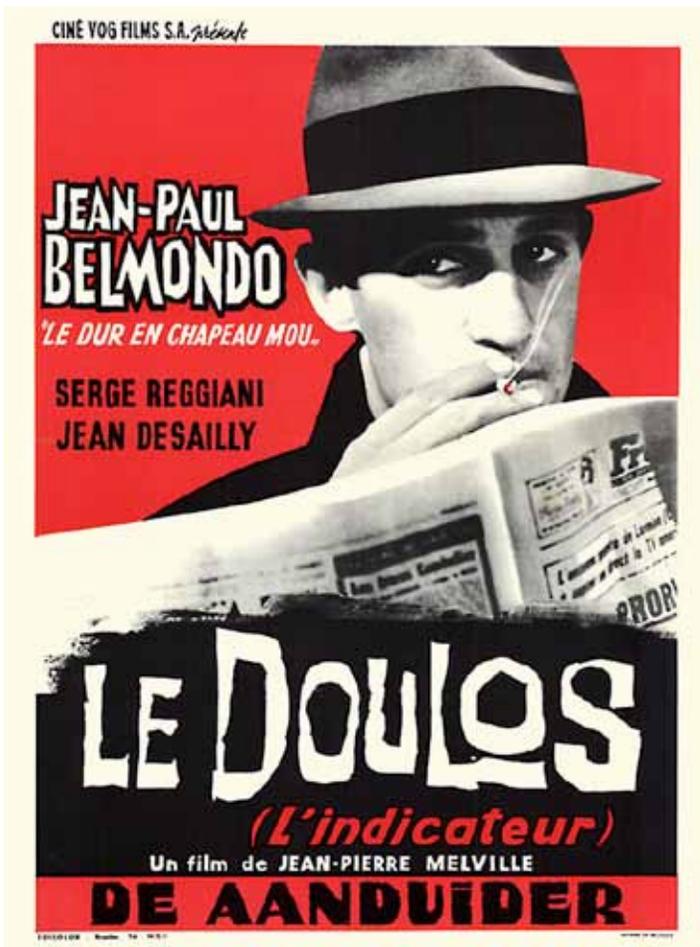
The film offers an ironic twist, as Bob makes a huge score at the casino’s roulette table before the robbery even takes place: he doesn’t even need to commit the robbery, but still sets it in motion. Inspector Ledru, however, catches everybody in the act. Bob’s young protégé Paulo (Daniel Cauchy) is shot and killed as Bob emerges from the casino, his winnings in hand. Ledru arrests him and the others, allowing Bob to stash his spoils in the trunk of the police car. As they ride together to the police station, Bob jokes with Inspector Ledru that, thanks to his luck at the tables, he can afford a good lawyer. He suggests that he’ll get off with a light sentence—and maybe even sue for damages.

Deux hommes dans Manhattan (Two Men in Manhattan, 1959) features the director himself in the role of French journalist Moreau, working for the French press agency in New York, who investigates the mysterious disappearance of a UN delegate, Fèvre-Berthier. Moreau enlists the help of disreputable tabloid photographer Delmas (Pierre Grasset), a cynic as well as a drunk. They find the diplomat dead from a heart attack in his American mistress’ apartment. Delmas rearranges the death scene for maximum sensationalism and takes several lurid shots to sell to the newspapers.

Moreau’s boss, explaining to them the man’s previous career as a Resistance fighter, convinces Delmas to surrender the roll of scandal-



Pierre Grasset and Jean-Pierre Melville on location in New York for *Deux hommes dans Manhattan*



Jean-Paul Belmondo and Charles Vanel in *L'Ainé des Ferchaux*

ous pictures. Instead, Delmas turns over a roll that has nothing to do with the incident. Realizing what his duplicitous colleague has done, Moreau chases down Delmas and confronts him. Eventually, Delmas tosses the film in the gutter, throwing away the big break that would have made his career. He exits laughing.

Le Doulos (*Doulos: The Finger Man*, 1962), with Serge Reggiani and Jean-Paul Belmondo in the main roles, is a complexly plotted noir involving the apparent betrayal by the police informer Silien (Belmondo) of his friend, the burglar Faugel (Reggiani). *Doulos* is French slang for a hat, as well as an informer. For most of the film, one believes that Silien is betraying Faugel, selling him out to the police; he even kills Faugel's girlfriend, Therèse (Monique Hennessy).

From his jail cell, Faugel vows revenge on Silien, contracting with his cellmate, Kern (Charles Studer), to kill his traitorous friend. In the end, it is revealed that Silien has been protecting Faugel all along, trying to clear him of a murder charge. In a spectacular climactic shoot-out at Silien's home, both protagonists die in a hail of bullets. Silien's *doulos* rolls off his head on to the floor, and the film ends.

Melville released *L'Ainé des Ferchaux* (*The Oldest Son of Ferchaux*) in 1963, casting in the main roles Belmondo and the aging Charles Vanel (of *Wages of Fear* fame). Filming in color, Melville shot extensive exteriors in America. *L'Ainé des Ferchaux* is a perverse tale of a banker, Ferchaux (Vanel), who must flee France due to a financial scandal and some vague crimes in his past—the murder of “three Negroes” in Africa. As he is preparing to escape to America, Ferchaux hires ex-boxer Maudet (Belmondo) as his traveling secretary. Driving from New York to Caracas, Maudet picks up an American hitchhiker and has sex with her. Ferchaux is jealous,

and the psychological warfare between the two men escalates from there. In Louisiana, they are trailed by FBI agents, who tell Maudet that although neither Frenchman will be allowed to leave the U.S., Ferchaux will not be extradited. Maudet keeps this crucial bit of information to himself.

Maudet plays sadistic psychological power games with the older man; Ferchaux submits to Maudet, pouts like a jilted lover (the homosexuality is implied but not explicit), and the rapidly aging Ferchaux soon grows ill. Maudet abandons him, taking a valise full of money, but returns after Ferchaux is robbed and beaten by two Americans. Ferchaux dies in Maudet's arms, but before he expires he gives Maudet the key to his Caracas safe. There the film ends, ambiguously. Maudet obviously came back to save the old man, despite being the consummate sadist.

Le deuxième souffle (*Second Wind*, 1966), featuring Lino Ventura as Gu Minda and Paul Meurisse as Police Inspector Blot, offers a complicated heist plot involving themes of male friendship, betrayal, and professionalism. Ventura, who always claimed he was never acting but merely “playing himself,” perfectly embodied the “honorable” gangster willing to die to save his reputation, to prove he is not an informer.

Gu Minda is doomed from the start, a loner who is nonetheless capable of eliciting fierce loyalty from his friends and comrades: people will go to any length to help him, like Alban the barman (Michel Constantin), the bodyguard of Gu's lover Manouche (Christine Fabrega); Orloff (Pierre Zimmer), the epitome of a smartly dressed professional killer; Paul Ricci (Raymond Pellegrin); Manouche herself, who seems to be Gu's long-suffering wife-lover but with whom Gu most does not want to be bound. The man only wants to remain in his strange, doomed Melvillian loneliness. Gu even elicits a grudging loyalty from Inspector Blot, in whose arms Gu dies. The bond between Blot and Gu is unspoken yet is acknowledged, and Gu's honor is saved in the end. This is a Melvillian universe where women play no part. It is the tacit agreements between men that matter most.

Le Samouraï (1967) commences the trilogy of Melville noirs starring Alain Delon. The film is loosely based on *This Gun for Hire* (1942), both stylistically and in terms of plot, constituting a *homage* to the American model. The opening shot of Delon smoking a cigarette while lying on his bed is a tour de force, as Melville's color schemes make Delon disappear into the aesthetics of the cool noir landscape, like a chameleon that changes color to suit its en-

vironment. The post-credit texts informs us: “There is no more deeper solitude than the samurai’s ... unless perhaps it be that of the tiger in the jungle,” allegedly a quote from the *Bushido* (The Book of the Samurai). In fact, the quote was fabricated by Melville for this film. The director’s use of color in *Le Samourai*, the deliberately muted combinations of gray, green and light blue—which extends to interiors, exteriors, and wardrobes as well—points to a thematic “coolness,” that suggests the vision of someone who has accepted death’s thrill and has no use for even trace elements of vibrant life.

The second Delon film, *Le cercle rouge* (1970), is again a heist film, again in beautifully rendered color. It was Melville’s most popular film in France, both commercially and critically, the exception being the *Cahiers du Cinema* group, who believed the director had “sold out.” Melville’s last film, *Un Flic* (A Cop, 1972), again starring Delon (with Catherine Deneuve in a small role), was also badly received by the critics. The attacks put Melville in the doldrums. Stubbornly, self-reflexively, Melville had *again* made a heist film.

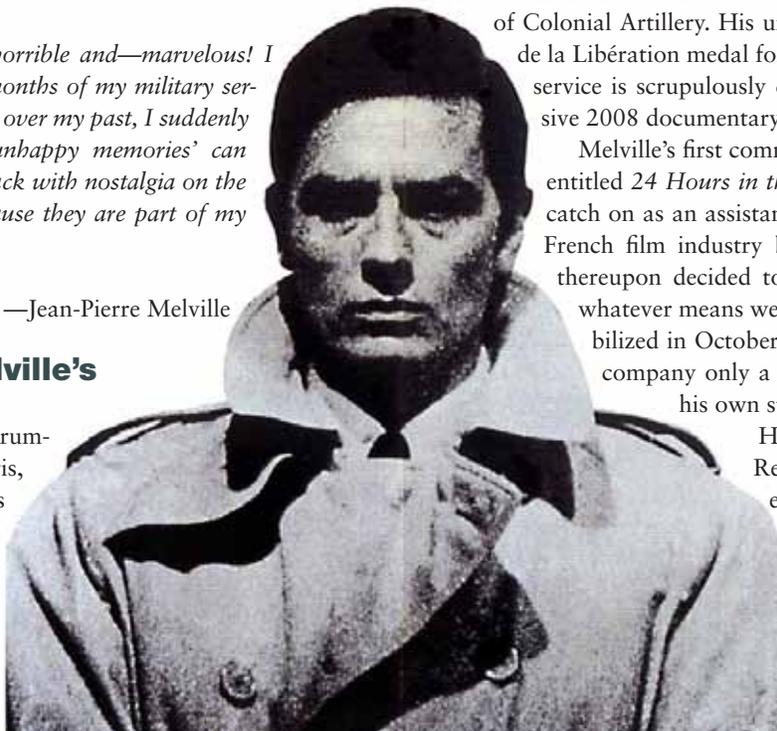
“The war period was awful, horrible and—marvelous! I suffered a lot during the first months of my military service Then, one day, thinking over my past, I suddenly understood the charm that ‘unhappy memories’ can have. As I grow older, I look back with nostalgia on the years from 1940 to 1944, because they are part of my youth.”

—Jean-Pierre Melville

Youth, war, and Melville’s “other” oeuvre

Jean-Pierre Melville, né Grumbach, was born in 1917, in Paris, to which his Jewish parents had moved from Alsace. He described his family as *petit bourgeois*; his father was a tradesman and socialist.

From an early age, Melville—he took the name while fighting for the French Résistance, in honor, he said, of the



Iconic image of Alain Delon in *Le Samourai*

London, where he became an agent for the Central Bureau of Intelligence and Operations, working for DeGaulle’s Free French Forces.

He was in Tunisia in 1943 as a member of the First Regiment of Colonial Artillery. His unit was later awarded the Croix de la Libération medal for its services. (Melville’s wartime service is scrupulously detailed in Olivier Bohler’s incisive 2008 documentary *Code Name Melville*.)

Melville’s first commercial feature was a 1946 short entitled *24 Hours in the Life of a Clown*. He failed to catch on as an assistant director in features due to the French film industry being so heavily unionized. He thereupon decided to make movies on his own, by whatever means were available. Having been demobilized in October 1945, he founded a production company only a month later. By 1947 he’d built his own studio on the rue Jenner.

His war experience and role in the Resistance was an immense influence on his outlook and would lead to a “second oeuvre,” as gripping in its own way as his noirs. His films about the Résistance and life in France under Nazi occupation possess an unusually detached quality, and Melville always claimed this was the impres-

American writer—was obsessed with film. At the age of seven, he received a Pathé Baby camera and soon after a small projector, with which he could shoot and view films he made of his family. He claimed that by 1939 he had shot around 30 “features” in diverse, non-commercial formats.

He entered the military in 1937, aged 20, and served in the colonial cavalry. In September 1940, his unit was trapped in Belgium. He was part of the evacuation at Dunkirk, came to England, and was repatriated to France, where he moved to the southern region and joined the “Liberation” and “Combat” Resistance groups. Following the landings in North Africa in 1942, he attempted to reach London on a ship, but it was seized and he was imprisoned for several months in Spain. During this time his older brother Jacques, who was also active in the French Resistance, was killed attempting to cross the border into Spain.

Melville eventually made it to



sion he wanted to make on audiences, his own variation of Brecht's "alienation effects." Whatever the inspiration or intention, the films have not become dated. In many ways, they laid the groundwork for present-day, politically inspired filmmaking such as Olivier Assayas's epic *Carlos* (2010).

His first Resistance reminiscence, *Le silence de la mer* (The Silence of the Sea, 1949), revolves around a farmhouse where a refined, intellectual German officer lives in the company of an older Frenchman, as well as the man's niece, whom the German seems to fall for. It is based on a famous novel by Vercors (the pseudonym of Jean Brullers), published clandestinely during the Occupation. Melville shot the film without the permission of the author, and Vercors and others in the Resistance feared the director would sully the honor of their cause. When Melville showed Vercors the finished product, the author and his colleagues gave the adaptation their seal of approval. The film's success launched Melville's career.

The following year Melville further asserted himself as a filmmaking force when he shot Jean Cocteau's *Les Enfants Terribles* under the auspices and approval of the author. Melville managed to keep his independence, and control of the production, despite the huge gap in experience and stature between himself and the world-famous Cocteau.

Melville would return to WWII in 1961 with *Léon Morin, Prêtre*

(Leon Morin, Priest) starring Jean-Paul Belmondo and Emmanuelle Riva. It is an astonishing intersection of politics, religion, war, secrecy, and seduction. The movie was immensely popular in France.

L'armée des ombres (Army of Shadows, 1969) stars Lino Ventura as a key member of an isolated Resistance group fighting the Germans in France. This extremely somber film follows its protagonists through a perilous environment, their interactions marked by remarkable friendship and courage, despite all of them being doomed. When it was released, the *Cahiers* crowd attacked Melville as "right-wing" and "Gaullist." Recently restored and re-released, the film is now regarded as an undisputed classic.

In movies about the Resistance and the Occupation, Melville shows the reality of executions: fighting and dying are presented in a direct, brutal manner. In an indirect way, however, Melville was always integrating his wartime experience into his revisionist gangster pictures: the clandestine living, the fearful distrust; the ever-present danger; the sudden life-and-death decisions that affect not only an individual, but also his friends and allies.

And it's no coincidence that this is how Melville's gangsters and cops live—lonely souls in a world without women and children, where there is no room for mundane things like paying taxes and washing dishes. Melville's heroes do not care about sex; it's colleagues who count. "Never betray a friend," Silien instructs Faugel

toward the conclusion of *Le Doulos*. The dandy, the samurai, the lonely cop: their friendships with other men aren't based on whether they really like each other, but on a pact of *omerta*—a survivalist's code of unbreakable solidarity that ordinary people cannot penetrate.

In all of Melville noirs, the police inspector has an unspoken pact with the criminal protagonist. It doesn't mean the criminal is spared, only that there is respect and even a lingering affection between the men, which for them exists nowhere else. When, in *Le cercle rouge*, Inspector Mattei (André Bourvil) goes home to his lonely apartment to be greeted only by his three cats, is it any different from the domestic squalor and melancholy existence of the criminals he hunts? These knights of sad countenance are a displaced echo of the desperately pitched battle, fought by a minority at the cost of many lives, against the Nazi occupiers. Without a trace of irony, Melville transposes to his gangster dramas his remembrances of the Resistance's urgent collaborations and bitter betrayals.

“Commerce with men is a dangerous business. The only way I have found to avoid being betrayed is to live alone. . . . But I'm a tremendous believer in friendship . . . in my films.”

—Jean-Pierre Melville

Surviving the Nouvelle Vague

From *Bob le flambeur* in 1955 through *Le samourai* in 1967, Melville's noir films were well received in France, each film eliciting a growing amount of critical praise, as well as popularity with the public—until the scathing *Cahiers* critique of *Army of Shadows* poisoned the director's critical reputation. A backlash against Melville, originating from his former champions in the *Nouvelle Vague*, spread to his gangster films, particularly for his last, *Un Flic*. Yet

Bob le flambeur had been heavily influential in terms of what the *Cahiers du cinéma* crowd initially advocated in the '50s: a purging of French filmmaking from outdated “quality” standards and a renewal of more immediate, less commercialized filmmaking.

Melville, of course, had led the way in that regard, using real settings in his film; the interiors were shot in his own rue Jenner Studio. The younger *Cahiers* filmmakers and critics were enthusiastic about such innovations, its freshness and naturalness, citing *Bob* as an example of French filmmaking turning away from “Grandpa's cinema.”

New Wave directors who'd written for *Cahiers*, including Francois Truffaut, Claude Chabrol, Jean-Luc Godard and others, were keen on re-evaluating as *auteurs* American directors who had previously been regarded as merely commercial hacks. Melville was a living encyclopedia on American film history, devoted to '30s gangster films and '40s film noir, and admiring of Hollywood's professional aesthetics and production values. Yet, anticipating the *Nouvelle Vague* style, he shot outdoors, eschewing the artificiality of studios; his films avoided the appearance of being slick products; he exuded authenticity. It was not Melville who had changed by 1969; it was the *Cahiers* crowd, caught up in the frenzy of the “Paris Spring” of '68, seduced into thinking the old codes had been swept away.

Melville remained impassive in the face of all this. He did not get a chance to answer his critics in the way that he would have preferred—with a new heist film. In 1973, only a year after the critical lynching of *Un flic*, Melville died of coronary failure.

A great revival of interest in his work took place in the 1990s and has continued to this day. His strain of self-conscious noir may not have had the freshness of the original wave of films made in the '40s and '50s, but they can be seen as the genesis of Noir 2.0, a self-reflexive second generation of film noir made by directors consciously aware of what they were doing. It was soon followed by what we might call Noir 3.0: obvious Melville heirs such as Walter Hill, John Woo, Quentin Tarantino, Luc Besson and the Coen Brothers.



Melville doing what came naturally to him ... directing a film.

“What do gangsters represent for you?” Melville was once asked in an interview.

“Nothing at all. I think they're pathetic losers. But it so happens that the gangster story is a very suitable vehicle for the particular form of modern tragedy called film noir, which was born from American detective novels. It's a flexible genre. You can put whatever you want into it, good or bad. And it's a fairly easy vehicle to use to tell stories that matter to you about individual freedom, friendship or rather human relationships, because they're not always friendly. Or betrayal, one of the driving forces in American crime novels.”

“Do you know any gangsters?”

“Yes, I knew quite a few. *But they're nothing like the ones in my films.*” ■