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Jean-Pierre Melville

ARMY OF SHADOWS/L'ARMÉE DES OMBRES

1969 145 minutes

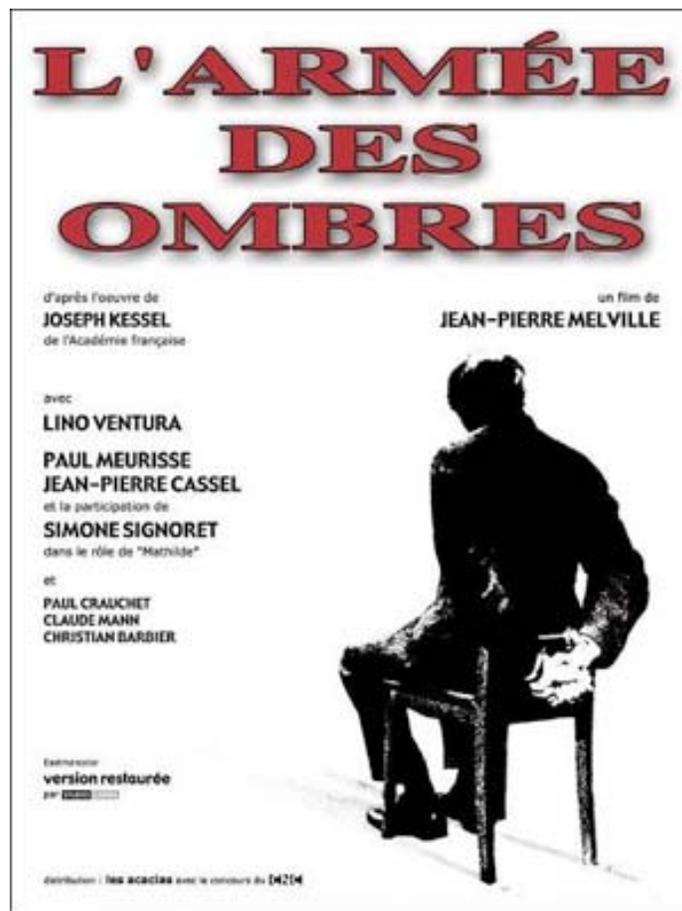
Written and Directed by Jean-Pierre Melville
 Based on the novel by Joseph Kessel
 Produced by Jacques Dorfmann
 Original Music by Éric Demarsan
 Cinematography by Pierre Lhomme and Walter Wottitz
 Film Editing by Françoise Bonnot

Lino Ventura...Philippe Gerbier
 Paul Meurisse...Luc Jardie
 Jean-Pierre Cassel...Jean François Jardie
 Simone Signoret...Mathilde
 Claude Mann...Claude Le Masque
 Paul Crauchet...Felix
 Christian Barbier...Le Bison
 Serge Reggiani...The hairdresser
 André Dewavrin...Colonel Passy
 Alain Dekok...Legrain
 Alain Mottet...Commander of the camp

JEAN-PIERRE MELVILLE (20 October 1917, Paris, France—2 August 1973, Paris, heart attack) directed 14 films and wrote 15 screenplays. The films he directed were *Un flic/A Cop* (1972), *Le Cercle rouge/The Red Circle* (1970), *L'Armée des ombres/Army in the Shadows* (1969), *Le Samouraï* (1967), *Le Deuxième souffle/The Second Breath* (1966), *L'Aîné des Ferchaux/Magnet of Doom* (1963), *Le Doulos/The Finger Man* (1962), *Léon Morin, prêtre* (1961), *Deux hommes dans Manhattan/Two Men in Manhattan* (1959), *Bob le flambeur* (1955), *Quand tu liras cette lettre* (1953), and *Les Enfants terribles/The Strange Ones* (1950).

LINO VENTURA (14 July 1919, Parma, Italy—22 October 1987, Saint-Cloud, Hauts-de-Seine, France, heart attack) appeared in 78 films, the last of which was an uncredited role in *La Rumba* (1987). Some of the others are *Les Misérables* (1982), *The Medusa Touch* (1978), *La Cage* (1975), *Tough Guys* (1974), *The Valachi Papers* (1972), *Leds Grandes gueules/The Wise Guys* (1966), *Le Diable et les dix commandements/The Devil and the Ten Commandments* (1962), *Die Dreigroschenoper/Three Penny Opera* (1962), *Le Fauve est lâché/The Beast is Loose* (1959), *Maigret tend un piège/Inspector Maigret* (1958), and *Touchez pas au grisbi/Hands off the Loot* (1954).

SIMONE SIGNORET (25 March 1921, Wiesbaden, Germany—30 September 1985, Authueil-Anthouillet, Eure, Haute Normandie, France, pancreatic cancer) acted in 71 theatrical and tv films, the last of which was "Music Hall" (1985). Some of the others were: *Guy de Maupassant* (1982), *La Vie devant soi/Madame Rosa* (1977), *Les Granges brûlées/The Investigator* (1973), *Le Chat/The Cat* (1971), *The Sea Gull* (1968), *Paris brûle-t-il?/Is Paris Burning?* (1966), *La patronne du bistrot/Cafe Owner*, *Le Jour et l'heure/Today We Live* (1963), *Barabba/Barrabas* (1961), *Les Sorcières de Salem/The Witches of Salem* (1957), *Les Diaboliques/Diabolique* (1955), *Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder* (1955), *Casque d'or* (1952), *La Ronde* (1950), and *Boléro* (1942). She won a Best Actress Oscar for *Room at the Top* (1965) and was nominated for *Ship of Fools* (1965).



Alain Libolt...Paul Dounat
 Jean-Marie Robain...Baron de Ferte Talloire
 Albert Michel...Gendarme
 Denis Sadier...Gestapo doctor
 Georges Sellier...Colonel Jarret du Plessis
 Marco Perrin...Octave Bonnafous
 Hubert de Lapparent...Aubert, Pharmacien
 Colin Mann...Dispatcher
 Anthony Stuart...R.A.F. Major
 Michel Fretault...Anonymous Patriot

JEAN MOULIN (1899-1943) is the real-life prototype for the film's Luc Jardie. He was tortured to death by Klaus Barbie. According to BBC.CO.UK: "Moulin was a hero of the French Resistance in World War Two who united the scattered elements of spontaneous French resistance to German occupation. Jean Moulin was born on 20 June 1899 in Beziers, south-west France the son of a history professor. He enlisted in the army in 1918 but never saw action. After World War One, Moulin joined the civil service and rose rapidly to become prefect, or regional administrator, of Chartres, the youngest holder of the office in France. Moulin's politics were of the extreme left, and it was no surprise when, in June 1940, he was arrested by the occupying Gestapo and tortured as a suspected communist. Moulin tried to commit suicide by cutting his own throat but a guard found him and he was taken to hospital, where he recovered. By November 1940 the Vichy government ordered all elected left-wing officials to be sacked. Moulin, now recovered, refused to sack anyone and was himself dismissed from his post. From then on he devoted his life to resisting the Germans. In September 1941 he was smuggled out of France to London to meet Charles de Gaulle, leader of the French Resistance, and other exiled French leaders. In January 1942 he was parachuted back into France, to set up an organised Resistance movement. His code name was 'Max'. Shortly after setting up the National Council of the Resistance in May 1943, Moulin was betrayed and on 21 June he was captured. He was interrogated by the Gestapo in Lyon and Paris and died, as a result of torture, on 8 July 1943 on a train taking him to Germany." According to Wikipedia, "Moulin was initially buried in Le Père Lachaise Cemetery in Paris. His ashes were later transferred to The Panthéon on December 19, 1964. The speech that André Malraux, writer and minister of the Republic, gave upon the transfer of his ashes is one of the most famous speeches in French history. In France, many schools and a university (Lyon III), as well as innumerable streets and squares, have been named after him."



From World Film Directors, V. II. Ed. John Wakeman. H.W. Wilson Co., NY 1988

"Melville," Jean-Pierre (Jean-Pierre Grumbach). French director, scenarist, photographer, actor, and producer, was born in Paris, the son of a wholesale merchant. He said that he was first attracted to the entertainment world in early childhood "through reading plays which were published with photographs in the series 'La Petite Illustration.' Then I became fascinated by the circus, and after that, the music-hall," which "interested me much more than the cinema because it was endowed with words and music."

Nevertheless, Melville was given a 9.5mm movie camera and a projector when he was six years old and made his first

amateur films then, shooting from a window on the Chaussée d'Antin. At that time he preferred the projector, for which he was able to rent silent comedies and Westerns, in this way laying the basis of his "cinematographic culture." Melville's "mania" for the cinema came with the coming of sound. In his early teens he would often sit in movie theatres from 9 a.m. until 3 a.m. the following morning: "I couldn't shake off this absolute need to absorb films, films and more films all the time." He decided at the age of fourteen to become a filmmaker himself, inspired by Frank Lloyd's 1933 Hollywood version of Noel Coward's *Cavalcade*. It was the Hollywood cinema of the 1930s that shaped Melville's taste. Years later, asked to name his principal influences, he listed sixty-three directors of that period, from Lloyd Bacon to William Wyler. His habit of directing his own movies wearing a white stetson and dark glasses was another homage to the American cinema.

Melville's formative years were not spent entirely in the darkened fantasy world of the movies; he also found time to attend the *lycées* Condorcet, Michelet, and Charlemagne. Along with other Condorcet pupils he was a member of a street gang that used the Saint-Lazaire railroad station as its headquarters: "In time we left school but continued to hang around Saint-Lazaire. I must say that by the end of 1939 we were a real gang of hooligans." Melville's loving and detailed knowledge of Montmartre and its criminal *milieu* dates from this period of his life.

In 1937, when he was nineteen, he began his obligatory military service in the French army. His service was extended by the outbreak of World War II, and there followed two years with the *Combat* and *Libération* resistance groups before Melville left occupied France to fight with the Free French. According to one account, it was in a Marseilles hotel room, just before he left France, that he first read Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, an experience so overwhelming that he adopted the author's name as his pseudonym. Melville's passion for the cinema was unabated, however. During a week's leave in London in 1943 he saw twenty-seven movies (including Welles' *Citizen Kane*, which impressed him deeply). The following year he took part in the Allied invasion of Italy and the battle for Cassino, and in 1945 he was among the

first Frenchmen to enter Lyon in uniform. “The war period,“ he said, “was awful, horrible and ...marvelous!”

Demobilized in October 1945, Melville tried to join one of the filmmakers’ unions but was refused because he had no job in the industry (and couldn’t get one without a union card). He was “madly in love with the cinema” and had “a huge cinematic baggage”—“I knew everything, even the credit titles by heart. I have always learned cinema. I have never ceased to learn cinema.” Unable to enter the industry in any conventional way, Melville simply set up his own production company and began. His first professional film was *Vingt-quatre heures de la vie d’un clown* (1946), a comedy short featuring Melville’s friend Béby, one of the great stars of the French circus. It was shot on some 1942 blackmarket filmstock and was badly fogged and “such a horror” that Melville wanted to forget it. Pierre Braunberger liked it, however, and distributed it with some success.

Melville’s first feature, *Le Silence de la mer* (1948), was adapted by the director from a short story by Vercors. Published clandestinely during the German occupation, it had become something of a “bible” for the French resistance, and Vercors did not want it filmed for fear that it would be vulgarized. Melville had to agree to submit his film to a jury of former resistance fighters who would have the right to destroy the negative if they disapproved. He set to work with no union card, no authorization to buy filmstock, and ridiculously little money, shooting one day at a time, as and when he could afford it. Vercors had set the story in his own house, and it was there that much of the film was shot. After an abortive start with another cameraman, Melville had hired a man named Henri Decaë who exactly shared his tastes: “We got on so well that we did everything together: shooting, editing, dubbing and mixing.” Decaë mastered his craft on the films he made for Melville, and went on to become “cameraman to the *nouvelle vague*.”

Melville began *Le Silence de la mer* in August 1947 and finished it a year later—“the happiest year of my life, I must admit,” in spite of “total penury.” It was seen and approved by Vercors’ “jury” in October 1948 and released the following year. The film studies the relations between an old Frenchman and his niece (Nicole Stéphane) and the German officer who is billeted with them during the German occupation. The German (Howard Vernon) is a musician, a sensitive and cultured idealist who gradually wears down the hostile silence of his hosts and wins the girl’s love. By then, however, he has learned the ugly truth about Hitler’s intentions in France. His ideals shattered, he leaves to die on the eastern front.

Vercors’ story is almost entirely a monologue spoken by the officer and essentially uncinematic, as Melville recognized. Tom Milne wrote that “Melville’s solution, which was later taken over and polished to perfection not only by Bresson but by Dreyer in *Gertrud*, was to use his images as notations to the presence of an unwritten melody: ‘I wanted to attempt a language composed entirely of images and sounds, and from which movement and action would be more or less banished. So I conceived the film a little like an opera...’ His words which increasingly cry out for the right to be silent; her silence, increasingly crying out for the power of speech; the uncle’s calm voice bridging the gap with a veiled, neutral commentary; the sense of absolute stasis in which the German’s awaited arrival every night, simply to stand in the doorway and think aloud, exploded like a tidal wave of movement in the still, quiet sitting-room. In *Le Silence de la mer*, everything happens beneath the surface. There is a touch of Racine about...[the

film], a tang of pure poetry which is unique in Melville’s work, except perhaps for his second film, *Les Enfants terribles*.”

It was not only Bresson and Dreyer who learned from the technique Melville originated in his first feature—the combination of commentary and images also anticipates a number of younger directors, including Godard. And *Le Silence de la mer* so impressed Jean Cocteau that he invited Melville to direct the film version of his novel *Les Enfants terribles*. Cocteau and Melville worked together on the adaptation, which was made very cheaply, mostly on location and with little-known actors. Decaë was again the director of photography and, instead of commissioning an original score, Melville made brilliant use of music by Bach and Vivaldi, at that time a striking innovation....”Truffaut saw it twenty-five times as a young *cinéaste*. Years afterwards Melville explained how, on his small budget, he had contrived so many striking effects: the “crane” shot of Elizabeth’s suicide was in fact taken from a rising elevator, and other extraordinary shots employed the huge mobile stages of the Théâtre Pigalle. ...



Quand tu liras cette lettre (1953) was by contrast an expensive international coproduction. Melville took it on to prove that he could handle such an assignment, and to finance the building of the studios (on the Rue Jenner in Paris) where his subsequent films were made. The movie was written by Jacques Deval, for once without Melville’s collaboration. ...

Melville’s lighthearted first attempt at the gangster *genre* which had “formed and deformed” his childhood was *Bob le Flambeur* (Bob the Gambler, 1956), which was mostly shot on location in Montmartre. Melville worked on the script with Auguste Bebreton, who had already written two classics of the *genre*, Jacques Becker’s *Touchez pas au grisbi* and Jules Dassin’s *Du Rififi chez les hommes*. Melville’s film tells the story of an aging gambler (Roger Duchesne) who sets out to bring off one final coup by robbing the casino at Deauville. The job is planned but at the last moment Bob Montagné hits a winning streak in the casino and quite legally breaks the bank he had intended to rob. It is well that the caper is not put into operation, since Bob has been betrayed by his young protégé Paulo (Daniel Cauchy) and Paulo’s perverse teenage girlfriend Anne (Isabelle Corey), whom Bob secretly loves.

This very profitable and successful movie remains one of the most likable of Melville’s films, as well as one of the most personal. It reflects not only his admiration for the Hollywood gangster movies of the mid-1930s but also his nostalgia for Montmartre in the same period. A writer in the London *Times* called Melville (who speaks the film’s commentary himself) “a sort of Runyon of Pigalle, fascinated by the life of the night streets, the

cars and neon signs, the law-defying citizens.” The themes of friendship, loyalty, and betrayal introduced in *Bob le Flambeur* were to recur repeatedly in Melville’s work. What this film did for Montmartre, his next film did for the sleazier purlieus of New York. *Deux hommes dans Manhattan* (1959), which followed after two abortive projects had been abandoned, is an almost documentary piece about a search by two journalists for a missing French diplomat. The slim story line, which turns on a question of journalistic ethics gave Melville an excuse for a delighted exploration of the city, “a love letter to New York.” The director did much of the location shooting himself from his own script, and also allowed himself a lead role as one of the two journalists.



By this time Melville was established as “the spiritual father” of the *nouvelle vague*—an influential innovator, soaked in cinema lore, who had demonstrated the possibility of making completely original films uncompromised by any kind of dependence on the entrepreneurs and money-men of the French movie industry. It is a mark of the affection and respect in which he was held that Godard gave him a part in *Breathless* (as a literary celebrity holding a press conference) and included a reference to *Bob le Flambeur* in the same movie. Unfortunately, Melville derived little satisfaction from finding himself the idol of an *avant-garde* coterie, and regarded many of the *nouvelle vague* directors as incompetent amateurs. He wanted the kind of success achieved by his heroes, the Hollywood directors of the 1930s, and this he did not have. Melville himself believed that it took fifteen years to learn the art of filmmaking and, as Roy Armes says, at this stage in his career it was not entirely clear whether he was “a true professional or simply a gifted amateur working in 35mm. His very versatility seems to have led some critics to suggest the latter.” In 1961, with *Léon Morin, prêtre* (*Leon Morin, priest*), Melville announced that he intended forthwith to make films that would be commercially successful as well as artistically uncompromising.

Léon Morin, prêtre is in fact far from being an obvious candidate for success at the box office, though it was financed by a major production company (Carlo Ponti and Georges de Beauregard’s Rome-Paris Films). The film is set during the German occupation and is related in tone and subject matter to *Le Silence de la mer*. Based on an autobiographical novel by Béatrix Beck, it is the account of a young widow’s developing love for the handsome, unconventional young priest who tries to comfort her. The priest (Jean-Paul Belmondo) sets out to convert her and Barny

(Emmanuelle Riva), who is an anti-clerical communist, sets out to seduce him: it is the priest (or God) who wins the contest.

The action is seen through the eyes of the woman. There are very few close-ups and the priest remains an enigmatic and slightly ambiguous figure, secure in his faith but well aware of his physical attractions. Henri Decaë’s low-key photography was much praised and John Coleman found the camerawork endlessly inventive and the editing equally effective, “matching Morin’s no-nonsense brusquerie with a series of swift, extinguishing fades and kindled reentries.... Sheer technique, the adroit use of the woman’s voice in commentary, and the tough, sustained brilliance of both Belmondo’s and Emmanuelle Riva’s performances conspire not only to lift a somewhat ornate script...into that place in art where things are temporarily plausible; they also permit the director to touch in the finest atmospheric landscape of France under the occupation that has yet appeared on the screen.” David Robinson pointed out that here, as so often in Melville’s “*cinema de flâneur*,” the casual way in which scene seems to follow scene is deceptive. What seems at first only curious observation in fact conceals a very firm narrative structure; and it is this certainty of the dramatic progress which gives such hypnotic interest to the spiritual exposition of *Léon Morin, prêtre*.”

The most obvious difference between Melville’s first five films and the more “commercial” ones that followed is that the latter benefited from performances by stars—actors, as he said, with that “something else extra” that “shows in their direct, dynamic impact on the public.” Jean-Paul Belmondo lent that quality to the two movies that followed *Léon Morin*. In the gangster film *Le Doulos* (*Doulos—the Fingerman*, 1963) he is an informer, torn between his loyalty to a friend on the run (Serge Reggiani) and his equal commitment to a ruthless detective (Jean Desailly). The *doulos* dies for betraying his friend but, with typical Melvillean ambiguity, it remains less than certain that he did so.

Although *Le Doulos* is set in Paris, the décor (by Daniel Guéret) is full of affectionate reminiscences of the American gangster movie. The police headquarters is a copy of one in Mamoulian’s *City Streets*, one of the earliest gangster films, and the stable scene at the end is a direct reference to the close of Huston’s *The Asphalt Jungle*. Melville explained that “these details are sufficiently dissimulated not to shock the French spectator. I’m not trying to bewilder him at any price. What is important is that he feels a sort of magic, due to this unaccustomed décor, that he submits to it without noticing it.”

...Melville’s cycle of gangster movies resumed with *Le Deuxième souffle* (*Second Breath*, 1966), a major critical and commercial success...The picture was based on a novel by José Giovanni, as was Becker’s *Le Trou*, which Melville regarded as the greatest French film ever made. In its stylistic rigor and its ethical concerns, *Le Deuxième souffle* evoked comparisons with both Becker and Bresson (to which Melville replied, “I’m sorry, but it’s Bresson who has always been Melvillean.”).

The essentially romantic notion of honor among criminals is carried further in *Le Samourai* (*The Samurai*, 1967), whose hero is a hired killer, Jeff Costello (Alain Delon). Secure in the knowledge that he has an unshakeable alibi provided by his mistress (Nathalie Delon), Costello walks into a nightclub and carries out a contract killing with precise, ritualistic efficiency. He owes this efficiency to the fact that he is a totally alienated personality, incapable of feeling—Melville called the film “an analysis of a schizophrenic by a paranoiac, because all creators are paranoiac.” The washed-out colors in Costello’s room—an attempt to make a

color film in black and white” contribute powerfully to this sense of emotional alienation, as does the opening sequence in which we see Costello stretched out on his bed alone. In Rui Nogueira’s invaluable *Melville on Melville*, the director explains that in this scene, “instead of simply resorting to the now almost classical technique of a track back compensated by a zoom forward, I uses the same movement but with stops. By stopping the track but continuing the zoom, then starting the track again, and so on, I created an elastic rather than classical sense of dilation—so as to express this feeling of disorder more precisely.”

But Costello is also “an ‘innocent’ in the sense that a schizophrenic doesn’t know he’s a criminal”—a warrior in love with his craft. At the nightclub where he executes his “contract,” he is seen by an enigmatic and beautiful black pianist (Cathy Rosier). He knows that he should kill her too but, tempted into feeling, he fails to do so. For this offense against his warrior code, there is only one punishment. The girl inadvertently betrays him and Costello is assigned to murder her. He goes after her, but with an empty gun, and is shot down in what Nogueira calls “one of the great *hara-kiris* of the cinema.” Tom Milne regards *Le Samourai* as the most accomplished of Melville’s films.: “The impossibility of love, of friendship, of communication, of self-respect, of life itself: all the themes from Melville’s work are gathered up in one tight ball in *Le Samourai*.”

Much the same was said of *L’Armée des Ombres* (*The Army in the Shadows*, 1969). Based on Joseph Kessel’s novel and drawing on Melville’s own experience of the occupation, it is an account of the last desperate battle of a doomed resistance group, with a cast that includes Simone Signoret, Lino Ventura, Jean-Pierre Cassel, Paul Merisse, Claude Mann, and Serge Reggiani. According to Roy Armes, Melville employs in it “the classic means of the form of cinema he most admires—a taut story line, finely acted characters and an economical, non-flamboyant style of shooting and cutting—to portray his particular concerns....Melville deals...with unfashionable subjects like heroism and its converse, treachery, and proved that the style he has forged in his gangster films is still capable of further development.”

Long respected as an important forebear of the *nouvelle vague*, Melville has been recognized increasingly as a master in his own right, and as a director almost unique in his ability to show “that the cinema, for all its technical complications, can still be an extremely personal art.” Tom Milne has drawn attention to several paradoxes in Melville’s work, including the fact that his films “are invariably and unmistakably French, no matter how much inspiration they draw from American models,” and that, “like so many supposedly tough, cynical observers of a predominantly masculine milieu...Melville is at heart a tender romantic”—there is in all his heroes as they struggle to meet their own impossible standards, “a sort of purity.” Melville said: “A film is first and foremost a dream, and it’s absurd to copy life in an attempt to produce an exact recreation of it.”

Melville was a romantic in his life as well as his work, but an increasingly disenchanted and bitter one. He became a communist when he was sixteen and ceased to be one in August 1939 when Stalin signed his pact with Hitler, ending up “wary of any political credo.” Nor did he have any religious faith, though when he made *Léon Morin, prêtre* he still believed in a “great edifice of universal brotherhood which must one day be erected.” Increasingly he came to believe that “if there are two of you, one

betrays.” His disillusionment even spread to his colleagues in the French film industry, and he found it harder and harder to recruit artists and technicians who shared his compulsive perfectionism. He never lost faith in the movies themselves, however, and told Nogueira that for him “the cinema is a sacred thing, and it’s the ceremony, the service celebrated during the shooting, that governs everything else.”

Melville died of a heart attack at the age of fifty-five. According to David Robinson, the director “with his stocky form, his impishly poker face, his choice of clothes and his fondness for overgrown Fords,” had himself “rather the look of a French film gangster.” Roy Armes wrote that Melville was “a night-bird, a man who only really came to life after eleven in the evening.” He lived with his wife and three cats in an apartment where, during the day, “everything is closed up. Not a ray of light filters into my room. It is ‘claustrophilia’ to the last degree.”



from Jean-Pierre Melville ‘An American in Paris.’ Ginette Vincendeau. bfi publishing. London 2003

The details of Jean-Pierre Melville’s life are sketchy and ambiguous—he deliberately cultivated mystery, and the meagre sources that exist are mostly interviews, with all the possibilities for biases, exaggerations and contradiction that such encounters contain.

Melville was born Jean-Pierre Grumbach on 20 October 1917. His ancestors were Eastern European Jews who had settled in Belfort, in Alsace, in the 1840s. Several generations of Grumbachs were butchers in the old part of the city. They were a close-knit. Extended family: Melville’s parents were first cousins. His father, a businessman, moved to Paris where Jean-Pierre was born. He grew up in rue d’Antin in the ninth *arrondissement* in central Paris, in a cultured, bourgeois-Bohemian environment, and a family with socialist leanings. Although he would later move to the right, Melville declared that he was ‘a Communist from the age of 16, in 1933, until 25 August 1939. After that I stopped being a Communist. I am not religious either.’ Melville’s family was sufficiently unconventional to give young Jean-Pierre a Pathé Baby camera in 1924 for his seventh birthday, and soon after a projector which delighted him even more since it enabled him to view recent releases on 9.5 mm. According to Jean Wagner. Starting in February 1925 he shot a number of films during his youth; by 1939 he had totalled the equivalent of thirty features in various non-theatrical formats. ...

Melville started his military service in the Spahis (colonial calvary) at the age of twenty in 1937. He was still a conscript when the war began. In September 1940, his regiment got caught in Belgium. He was evacuated to England via Dunkirk and repatriated to France. On his return he moved to Castres in the South, where his family had relocated, and spent the period to 1942 there, joining the Resistance networks 'Libération' and 'Combat' under the name Cartier, and later Melville. After the Allied landings in North Africa in 1942, Cartier-Melville tried to reach London via Algiers. His ship was stopped and he was jailed in Spain for two months (his brother Jacques died tragically while attempting to get to Spain). At some point in 1942—3 Melville spent some time in London, where he says he worked as a sub-agent for the BCRA. He reached Tunisia in autumn 1943, where he joined the First Regiment of Colonial Artillery of the Free French. At first assigned as a colonel's chauffeur, he took part in the Italian and French liberation campaigns. On 11 March 1944 he was crossing the Garigliano below Mount Cassino. On 15 August of the same year he landed in Provence and in September he was in Lyon. His regiment was awarded the Croix de la Libération in 24 September 1945.

These are the facts, as far as they can be ascertained, of Melville's war and his involvement with the Resistance. While he unarguably belonged to the First Regiment of Colonial Artillery, as confirmed to me by one of his former co-soldiers, it has proved more difficult to trace his London activities. Dates are hazy and testimonies contradictory. This does not signify that the claims he makes are false or incorrect, since by definition records of underground movements are scanty. Two things in any case are certain. On the one hand, there is no doubting Melville's bravery in joining the Free French, however modest his part and however much he played it down, claiming that 'being in the Resistance if you're a Jew is infinitely less heroic than if you're not. The second, and to us today particularly important, certainty is the deep impact the experience left on his work. Melville acknowledged the trauma the war and the German occupation left on his generation. After seeing Marcel Ophüls' documentary *Le Chagrin et la pitié* (1969-1971), he recalled: 'The first feeling we experienced was *shame*. [...] Grief, of course. But above all, shame.' But he was also able to rework this trauma creatively through all his films. 'Melville' after all was the name he took as a *Résistant*. A number of his later film collaborators, such as Jean-Marie Robain, Nicole Stéphane and Pierre Grasset were wartime contacts. It was while he was in the Resistance that he read both Vercors' *Le Silence de la mer* and Joseph Kessel's *L'Armée des ombres*—books which he adapted respectively in 1947-9 and 1969, and which have stood the test of time as two great French classics.

After being demobilised between October and November 1945, Melville returned briefly to Paris. There he encountered a young woman called Florence, whom he had met briefly in 1939. They remained together from that moment until the end of his life. They married in 1952 and Florence was to act variously throughout Melville's career as adviser, production manager and studio administrator. Although her name appears only occasionally on the credits, she was an important, if discreet, presence. Melville set about doing various jobs such as, allegedly, travelling salesman, while planning his first film, *24 heures de la vie d'un clown*. This short, amateurish film completed in 1946 is about a famous clown, Béby. As such it is a tribute to one of Melville's passions, the circus. It is also an indication of his pressing desire to become a film-maker—on his own terms—without serving an apprenticeship, the usual way to get into the profession at the time.

Apart from his interest in cinema and the circus, as well as the music hall (to which an uncle took him regularly), Melville was passionate about more 'legitimate' culture. As an adolescent he had discovered French and American literature, in particular three writers who 'left their mark on my adolescence: Poe, London, and of course Melville' [...] I discovered Melville, long before Jean Giono's translation of *Moby Dick*, by reading in English *Pierre: or the Ambiguities*, a book which left its mark on me for ever.' Melville thus spoke English at an early stage; he certainly became fluent, as we can hear in *Deux hommes dans Manhattan* in which he plays the lead, and, for instance, in a 1961 radio interview with Gideon Bachmann. Melville moved in the fashionable milieu of post-war left-bank Paris, and was familiar with such figures as Jean Cocteau and Juliette Greco. The latter, whom he would cast in *Quand tu liras cette lettre* in 1954, was a good friend from the Saint-Germain days of '47, '48, and '49. At that time, I remember, I often went to the Club Saint-Germain where they had a band with fabulous musicians. It was there I had some marvelous times with Django Reinhardt. [...] Saint-Germain became something else after 1950, but before then... it was marvellous. Cocteau, American literature, St-Germain-des-Prés chanteuses and jazz—all these ingredients place Melville within the intellectual and cultural milieu which would some years later produce the New Wave. His 'schooling' in the Parisian left-bank culture also clearly left a mark on his beliefs: 'I'm wary of any political credo, and I have no religious beliefs whatsoever. So what I have left is morality and...conscience,' an 'existentialist philosophy' that can, as we will see, be traced in many of his films.

...Melville's perfectionism and obstinately independent stance came at a price which is directly reflected in his filmography: 'just' thirteen features in twenty-four years.

...The closeness with the New wave was short-lived, however—on both sides. *Léon Morin, prêtre*, which signalled Melville's move to mainstream cinema and the use of stars, also heralded the third phase of Melville's critical reception during his lifetime....Such hostility came about as the result of dramatically divergent agendas in the highly politicised climate which followed the events of May 1968. Melville's Resistance epic *L'Armée des ombres* released just before [an attacking article], was instantly (and wrongly) perceived as a 'Gaullist film'. Meanwhile *Cahiers* was in its most fiercely political phase. The politics of Melville's films were also confused with his own—he would candidly say: 'I am an extreme individualist, and to tell you the truth I don't wish to be either Right or Left. But I certainly live as a man of the Right. I'm a Right-wing anarchist.' He was nevertheless a friend of left-wing icons such as Simone Signoret and Yves Montand. But the divergence between Melville and *Cahiers* went deeper. In this political phase, *Cahiers* was rejecting aesthetic approaches, cinephilia, almost the cinema itself—in other words everything Melville held dearest as he was making his most stylish, even *mannerist*, thrillers, veritable odes to film-making. The flaunting of *mise en scène* which had made him a pioneer in the 1950s now made him *passé*.

...When Nogueira suggested that 'The line from the Book of Bushido with which you open [*Le Samouraï*]—"There is no greater solitude than that of the Samurai, unless perhaps it be that of the tiger in the jungle"—might apply equally well to your situation as an independent film-maker outside the industry...', Melville replied enthusiastically: 'Absolutely!'—unsurprisingly perhaps,

since this so-called quote from the Book of Bushido was his own invention.



Melville's War: *Le Silence de la Mer* (1947-49), *Léon Morin, prêtre* (1961), *L'Armée des ombres* (1969)

"It seems to me that all over the world, cinema has reached its definitive though imperfect form as a 'monument', whose keystones are action and movement.

"So do we have to stick forever to the rules, followed a thousand times, which, year in year out, produced five good films? Can we not try something new? Can we not learn from the lessons of the past and try to renew this art form? [...] It is the war which, by providing us with topics, allows us to attempt such an evolution. The war is also the hidden ringmaster behind the three characters of *Le Silence de la mer*." —**Jean-Pierre Melville**

"Under the impetus of de Gaulle, France had, at the end of the war, the historical and political ambition to belong fully to the circle of victors. The Resistance, therefore, even when underground, needed to appear as the detachment of a regular, perfectly organised army, and the life of the French, even when full of conflict and ambiguities, needed to appear as a contribution to victory. These conditions were not favorable to a renewal of the cinematographic image, which found itself constrained within the framework of a traditional action-image, at the service of a properly French 'dream'. The result of this was that the cinema in France was only able to break with its tradition rather belatedly and by a reflexive or intellectual detour which was that of the New Wave." —**Gilles Deleuze**

Melville's remarks above, taken from his first published article in *L'Ecran français*, show extraordinary prescience about film history. Deleuze, who ignores Melville in his two-volume work on cinema, would have done well to look at *Le Silence de la mer*, a groundbreaking film which heralded the changes he was calling for and which influenced, among others, the film-maker of the New Wave. But where Melville and Deleuze converged is on the importance of World War II for European and French cinema. The centrality of the Occupation and Resistance to Melville's life and cinema as well as French society runs through this chapter, which brings together three films spanning almost the whole of his career—films linked by their historical topic but which also at different points in Melville's career raised different aesthetic questions about literary adaptation, *mise en scène* and Melville's place in French cinema.

The war and the Resistance played a crucial part in Melville's life....The importance of *Le Silence de la mer*, *Léon Morin, prêtre* and *L'Armée des ombres* as 'war films', however, is not only a function of Melville's *private* experience, but of how they explore and rework the *public* 'myth' of the Resistance. André Bazin remarked that 'in France Resistance immediately entered the realm of legend', and this legend, or myth, as Sylvie Lindeperg puts it, was crystallised during the period of the Liberation and then subjected to successive transformations'.

The Search for Authenticity

Melville's three war films are all based on autobiographical books by writers with impeccable Resistance credentials. *Le Silence de la mer*, 'probably the single most famous Resistance story', was a 1942 clandestine publication by 'Vercors' (his real name was Jen Bruller), whose stature as a *Résistant* and co-founder of the underground press Editions de Minuit was considerable if at times controversial, as we will see. Béatrix Beck's *Léon Morin, prêtre* (1952) forms part of a series of novels featuring a central female character, Barny, who, as the widow of a communist Jew, is a thinly disguised version of the author. Her vision of France under the Occupation was effectively approved by the award of the Goncourt prize to *Léon Morin, prêtre* in 1952. Kessel's credentials were if anything loftier still. A World War I hero and prize-winning novelist and journalist, he was co-author (with his nephew Maurice Druon) of *Le Chant des partisans*, the anthem of the Resistance composed in May 1943 in London, where he also wrote *L'Armée des ombres* in the same year. In 1964 he was elected to the Académie Française.

All three source books, written during or shortly after the war, belong to the first phase of works on the Resistance in which personal experience was paramount as a guarantee of authenticity...Kessel begins *Armée des ombres* thus: 'There is no propaganda in this book and there is no fiction. No detail has been forced and none has been invented. In presenting their works as the quasi-spontaneous emanation of a people united in resistance, Vercors and Kessel worked with what Henry Russo calls the Gaullist resistancialist myth', which 'celebrated people in resistance, a people symbolised exclusively by the "man of June Eighteenth" (de Gaulle)', and played down internal ideological conflicts—what he terms the 'Franco-French war'—as well as other aspects of World War II such as the Holocaust. Melville used these texts as sources of authenticity, but also, in adapting them in ways which served his own purposes, as screens between him and the events and ideology of the time....

Released on 12 September 1969, *Armée* completed Melville's triptych about the Occupation and Resistance: 'Now I have said everything about the war', he told *Paris-Presse*. Although in colour, unlike *Silence* and *Léon Morin*, *Armée* is an exceptionally dark film, a twilight vision of the Resistance, supported by powerfully restrained performances, especially by Lino Ventura in the lead. Today *Armée* is Melville's best-known and highest-rated war film, but it was not always so. The film's critical reception was split and box office considered disappointing....Like *Silence* and *Léon Morin*, *Armée* needs to be understood in relation to Melville's own past, to the book on which it is based and to the moment of its making and release. In respect of the latter, it suffered from spectacularly bad timing.

Melville had thought of adapting *Armée* ever since the release of Kessel's book in 1943. He said: 'This is the film I have

wanted to make for 25½ years, exactly since I read Joseph Kessel's book, that is to say in July-August 1943, in London, at the same time as *Le Silence de la mer*.' The scale of the project, other film offers and Lino Ventura's unavailability delayed him until the late 1960s. When Melville started the film in early 1969 de Gaulle was still in power, but by the time it came out the General had retired from politics after a vote of no confidence in the referendum which followed the events of May 1968. Sarcastically dubbed 'the first and greatest example of Gaullist film art' by *Cahiers du cinéma*, *Armée* appeared (to some) out of date, a last stand against the tide of history. These reactions make sense in the post-1968 context. Georges Pompidou, de Gaulle's successor, was leading France into a new age, and attitudes to the war were about to take a U-turn. From serious historiography to literature and the movies, new voices were exploding the Resistentialist myth, which, for Rousso, had 'reach[ed] its apogee between the end of the Algerian war and May 1968. Soon the four-hour-long documentary *Le Chagrin et la pitié*, shot during 1967 and 1968 but not released until 1971, would put the final nail in the coffin of old-style Resistance myth by documenting a nation not only split between collaborationists and resisters, but largely composed of uncommitted or indifferent *attentistes*; in 1974 Louis Malle's *Lacombe Lucien* illustrated this in fictional form. Mentalities were changing fast, and it would seem that, as Rousso puts it, *Armée* 'arrived on the scene too late'.

...To call Melville's film 'Gaullist film art' as *Cahiers* did, is, apart from the calculated insult, a gross simplification. As we will see, that title would be better suited to René Clément's bombastic *Paris brûle-t-il?* (1966), or even Chabrol's Manichean *La Ligne de démarcation* (1965). With *Armée* Melville certainly produced a deeply felt tribute to the Resistance and de Gaulle (Kessel's book in itself was a guarantee of that), but, unlike Clément's, it was also a profoundly ambivalent one. Its pessimistic narrative and bleak minimalist style turn it into a reflection on solitude and on the tragic futility of war, life, and death. No wonder contemporary reactions were split.

Melville, Kessel and the Resistance

Like *Silence* and to some extent *Léon Morin*, *Armée* the book is the work of a high-profile Resistance member, with whom Melville stressed personal connection. He told Nogueira:

As the story proceeds, my personal recollections are mingled with Kessel's, because we lived the same war. [...] The Gerbier of the concentration camp is my friend Pierre-Bloch, General de Gaulle's former Minister. The Gerbier who escapes from the Gestapo headquarters at the Hôtel Majestic in Paris is Rivière, the Gaullist deputy. As a matter of fact, it was Rivière himself who described this escape to me in London.

Resistance hero Jean Moulin is also a model for Gerbier and Luc Jardie, who 'died revealing only one name, his own' as Moulin had done. The release of the film was surrounded by accounts of Melville's Resistance past in the papers. This was in contrast with his more discreet public image of 1949. Apart from the fact that Melville by then was an altogether more public person, the era was one of commemoration, and the release of the film roughly coincided with the twenty-fifth anniversary of the liberation of Paris.

Although Kessel, unlike Vercors, appears not to have exerted control over the adaptation of his book, Melville arranged a screening of *Armée* for the twenty-two 'great Resistants', as he had done for *Silence*. Since this time he did not need their approval, the

gesture must be seen as part respect and part quest for authenticity, for a book which itself claimed to stem directly from the true spirit of the Resistance. After the showing Melville said: 'I could see how moved they were. They were all Gerbiers, Jardies, Félixes.'

But for all this recourse to authenticity, Melville's attitude to his source and to 'real life' was highly ambivalent. He repeatedly claimed that there was only one unspecified 'two-minute' scene in the film which related to his own past, and he made many changes to the book. For him *L'Armée des ombres* was the book about the Resistance: the greatest and the most comprehensive of all the documents about this tragic period in the history of humanity. Nevertheless, I had no intention of making a film about the Resistance, so with one exception—the German Occupation—I excluded all realism.

As the last sentence betrays (how can the German Occupation be just an 'exception'?), in *Armée* more than in the previous two films, Melville plays a game of hide and seek, both grounding his film in the historical reality of the Occupation and elevating it to a more abstract level.



From book to film

Kessel and Melville's *Armée* plunge reader and viewer alike into the intense internal world of the Resistance. German and French collaborators are not absent: German soldiers parade on the Champs-Élysées and are glimpsed in hotels and prisons; an internment camp is run by a French official under a portrait of Pétain; two *bon vivant* gendarmes stop at a farm to buy black-market food; members of the French *milice* arrest Gerbier. Nevertheless book and film concentrate on the Resistance, from a very specific angle. This is not the Resistance of spectacular action—the sabotaged train of *Jéricho* or the storming of the Préfecture de police in *Paris brûle-t-il?* In *Armée* as in *Silence*, Resistance is a moral and intellectual concept. ...The dark, morbid tone of the film is set within an overall aesthetic project and is indicative of a different take on the war, compared to the poetic *Silence* and the more humanist *Léon Morin*.

While Melville adopted Kessel's concept of the Resistance, his adaptation significantly altered the novel. He kept the basic sequence of events—Gerbier's escape, Dounat's execution, the submarine, London, the shooting gallery, Gerbier going into hiding and the killing of Mathilde—but drastically edited and redistributed the large section of anecdotes...which dominates the second half of the book. Although some commentators criticised the film's fractured, episodic narrative, Melville turned Kessel's

uneven patchwork of anecdote into a structured narrative which culminates halfway through in London (*Armée* was sometimes shown in two parts, the first ending with the London sequence, the second beginning with Gerbier being parachuted into France....

Kessel's account, written in 1943, is tragic but hopeful. It ends with Gerbier travelling to London after liquidating Mathilde and returning to France 'in good health and calm. He was able to smile again.' Melville's choice of Lino Ventura already signals a more sombre character. Of Gerbier's death in the film, he said 'the film must resemble one of life's truths. And the truth is that man is always defeated.' While Gerbier in the book successfully escapes from the internment camp, Melville has him taken away by the Gestapo just before his carefully worked out escape plan with the young communist Derain can be implemented.... Melville's 1969 film ends with a bleak roll-call of the main protagonists' deaths under torture or in combat. The difference reflects the disillusion of the post-Liberation period and symbolically inscribes atrocities only revealed after the war. A sense of futility, morbidity and the absurd pervade the film and give it its uniquely disturbing feel....

As in *Léon Morin*, Melville also deleted much social and political background. The book contains explicit details about torture and radio work; it discusses the complex role of the communists, the special plight of the Jews and the evolution of Gestapo policies. But Melville 'didn't want to make a picturesque film about war.'



The opening

The one-minute, single-take opening sequence showing the Wehrmacht marching down the Champs-Élysées is one of only two shots Melville claimed he was 'proud of'. Notwithstanding Melvillian exaggeration, it was an exploit: It was a crazy idea to want to shoot this German parade on the Champs-Élysées. Even today I can't quite believe I did it. No one managed it before me, not even Vincente Minnelli for *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*, because actors in German uniform had traditionally been banned from the Champs-Élysées ever since the First World War.

The soldiers file first left to right in the distance; as they arrive in front of the Arc de Triomphe they turn abruptly ninety degrees to the right towards the camera. The vision of German soldiers advancing towards the spectator to the sound of military music and marching feet (Melville used the 'inimitable' sound of real German soldiers but employed dancers to enact the goosestep),

shot from a static camera, is an aggressively powerful opening. It is therefore a surprise to find that Melville had initially placed it at the end of the film. The script states that 'this last scene must give both a feeling of terrible truth and unreality, like a nightmare'....In contrast to the exuberant parade in the archive footage (presumably shot by German cameramen), Melville's parade with its military march, unusually, played in a minor key, announces the 'funereal' tone of the whole film....

Armée blatantly exploits similarities with the gangster film in its iconography and the direction of very Melvillian action set pieces, with their suspenseful slow rhythm, meticulous detailing and technical mastery. *Armée* was made between *Le Samourai* and *Le Cercle rouge*, and it bears many stylistic similarities with these two films....

Throughout *Armée*, blue-greys dominate, occasionally relieved by muted yellows. The only vibrancy occurs in the London outdoor shots and the vivid blue and red of Mathilde's van in the attempted escape sequence.

For Jean-Marie Froudon, this scene acts as a metaphor for the film's undermining of genre conventions: 'Under the "cover" of maker of popular gangster movies, [Melville's] work aims to undermine not only the genre he appears to illustrate brilliantly, but the aesthetic, economic and sociological apparatus he epitomises: classical cinema.' Froudon's piece, like the rest of the 1996 *Cahiers du cinéma* special dossier, aims to re-claim Melville as auteur after the long disparagement and neglect of his work since the mis-1960s—especially in *Cahiers*.



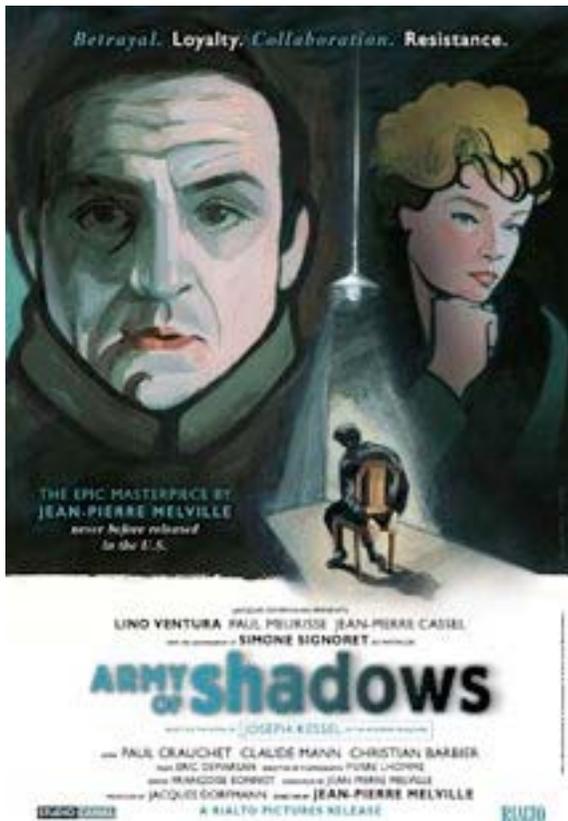
In *Armée*, despite numerous notations about women's Resistance work in the novel, and real-life *Resistantes* as inspiration, the character of Mathilde is significantly reduced. In Melville's thrillers, women are also peripheral or absent.... Despite the erasure of her sexuality, and despite her courage and brilliance as an agent, celebrated by the male characters and graphically illustrated during the attempted raid to free Félix, Mathilde's femininity makes her the weakest link: against Gerbier's express advice she keeps a picture of her daughter, providing a point of vulnerability that leads to her death and possibly that of others. In this context, two changes made by Melville to Kessel's story suddenly make more sense: the fact that Jean-François and Luc never know of each other's Resistance activity on the one hand, and Jean-François' anonymous sacrifice on the other. Both modifications reveal Melville's extreme gender polarisation. Femininity, associated with connectedness, spells danger. The other betrayer, Dounat, is 'feminised' through his youth and soft good looks. ...Mathilde's death concludes the trajectory of women in Melville's three war films on a shocking note which in its own way

signals a wider loss of idealism. The niece in *Silence* was a pure, exalted emblem of the Resistance spirit; Barny in *Léon Morin* was a compromised figure (because of her desire for the priest) whose Resistance work was largely suppressed by the film; but with Mathilde, femininity has become a weakness and a threat. It is a measure of Signoret's talent that against all these odds she is still emerging as a moving and memorable figure, as powerful as anything in the film—including the men....

In *Armée*, the death-driven trajectory of Melvillian characters finds its apotheosis and historical justification. The romantic vision of *Silence* in the immediate post-war gave way to a skeptical humanism in *Léon Morin* in the early 1960s and in turn to a deep melancholy in *Armée* in 1969....

Melville's career itself shows a compulsion to return to the Occupation and Resistance. His personal history, engaging with the *zeitgeist*, produced three fundamentally different films about them. In the late 1940s, *Silence* was an emblematic 'peace film', ostensibly warning of the danger of Nazism yet giving so much

space to von Ebrennac's harmony between the two nations; in 1962 *Léon Morin*, was, even in attenuated form, an Occupation film; it took until 1969 and *Armée* for the Resistance proper to appear—in however minimalist a fashion. At the same time at these three different points of his career and life, Melville searched for, and found, imaginative solutions to the different aesthetic questions that interested him at each period. *Silence* was a breakthrough in literary adaptation and a prototype of early modern cinema in its depiction of interiority and rule-bending noir photography, in all these respects anticipating the New Wave; *Léon Morin* created Melville's special niche in French cinema for the rest of his career with a unique classical-New Wave hybrid; in *Armée* Melville showed that he could still reach a mass audience with a deeply pessimistic account of the Resistance couched in the austere yet suspenseful *mise en scène* of his late thrillers. In each of these films Melville responded to his own need for aesthetic renewal while addressing the most traumatic moment in twentieth-century French (and European) society.



FALL 2007 SCREENING SCHEDULE:

- Oct 9 Akira Kurosawa **Ikiru** 1952
- Oct 16 Jiří Menzel **Closely Watched Trains** 1966
- Oct 23 Buñuel **That Obscure Object of Desire** 1977
- Oct 30 Werner Herzog, **Aguirre: the Wrath of God** 1972
- Nov 6 Charles Burnett **Killer of Sheep** 1977
- Nov 13 Stanley Kubrick **Full Metal Jacket** 1987
- Nov 20 Woody Allen **Crimes and Misdemeanors** 1989
- Nov 27 Elia Suleiman **Divine Intervention/Yadon Ilaheyya** 2002
- Dec 4 Ang Lee **Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon** 2000

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-for cast and crew info on any film: <http://imdb.com/>

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