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Jean-Pierre Melville, LE CERCLE ROUGE, 1970 140 minutes



**Directed and written by** Jean-Pierre Melville  
**Produced by** Robert Dorfmann  
**Original Music by** Éric Demarsan  
**Cinematography by** Henri Decaë  
**Film Editing by** Marie-Sophie Dubus and Jean-Pierre Melville

**Alain Delon...** Corey  
**André Bourvil...** Le Commissaire Mattei  
**Gian Maria Volonté...** Vogel  
**Yves Montand...** Jansen  
**Paul Crauchet...** Le Receleur  
**Paul Amiot...** L'inspecteur général de la police  
**Pierre Collet...** Le Gardien de prison  
**André Ekyan...** Rico  
**Jean-Pierre Posier...** L'assistant de Mattei  
**François Périer...** Santi  
**Yves Arcanel...** Le juge d'instruction  
**René Berthier...** Le directeur de la P.J.



**Jean-Pierre Melville** (October 20, 1917, Paris, France—August 2, 1973, Paris, heart attack) directed 14 films: *Un flic* (1972), *Le Cercle rouge/The Red Circle* (1970), *L'Armée des ombres/Army of Shadows* (1969), *Le Samouraï* (1967), *Le Deuxième souffle/The Second Breathe* (1966), *L'Aîné des Ferchaux/An Honorable Young Man* (1963), *Le Doulos/Doulos: The Finger Man* (1962), *Léon Morin, prêtre/The Forgiven Sinner* (1961), *Deux hommes dans Manhattan/Two Men in Manhattan* (1959), *Bob le flambeur/Bob the Gambler* (1956), *Quand tu liras cette lettre/When You Read This Letter* (1953), *Les Enfants terribles/Jean Cocteau's Les enfants terribles* (1950), *Le Silence de la Mer* (1949), and *Vingt-quatre heures de la vie d'un clown* (1945).

**Alain Delon** (November 8, 1935, Sceaux, Seine [now Hauts-de-Seine], France) appeared in 89 films, among them *Astérix aux jeux olympiques/Asterix at the Olympic Games* (2008), "Frank Riva" (2003-2004), "Fabio Montale" (2002), *Une chance sur deux/Half a Chance* (1998), *Le Jour et la nuit/Day and Night* (1997), *Les Cent et une nuits de Simon Cinéma/A Hundred and One Nights* (1995), *L'Ours en peluche/The Teddy Bear* (1994), *Le Retour de Casanova/The Return of Casanova* (1992), *Nouvelle vague/New Wave* (1990), *Le Passage/The Passage* (1986), *Notre histoire/Our Story* (1984), *Un amour de Swann/Swann in Love* (1984), *Le Toubib/The Medic* (1979), *The Concorde ... Airport '79* (1979), *Attention, les enfants regardent/Careful, the Children Are Watching* (1978), *Armageddon/Armageddon* (1977), *Comme un*

boomerang/Boomerang (1976), *Mr. Klein* (1976), *Le Gitan/The Gypsy* (1975), *Zorro* (1975), *Borsalino & Co.* (1974), *Les Seins de glace/The Icy Breasts* (1974), *Tony Arzenta/No Way Out* (1973), *Scorpio* (1973), *Un flic/Dirty Money* (1972), *The Assassination of Trotsky* (1972), *Soleil rouge/Red Sun* (1971), *Il était une fois un flic/There Was Once a Cop* (1971), *Le Cercle rouge/The Red Circle* (1970), *Borsalino* (1970), *Le Clan des Siciliens/The Sicilian Clan* (1969), *La Piscine/The Swimming Pool* (1969), *Diaboliquement vôtre/Diabolically Yours* (1967), *Le Samouraï* (1967), *Texas Across the River* (1966), *Paris brûle-t-il?/Is Paris Burning?* (1966), *Lost Command* (1966), *Once a Thief* (1965), *The Yellow Rolls-Royce* (1964), *Il Gattopardo/The Leopard* (1963), *Mélodie en sous-sol/Any Number Can Win* (1963), *L'Eclisse/Eclipse* (1962), *Rocco e i suoi fratelli/Rocco and His Brothers* (1960), *Plein soleil/Purple Noon* (1960), *Christine* (1958), and *Quand la femme s'en mêle/When a Woman Meddles* (1957).

**André Bourvil** (July 27, 1917, Prétot-Vicquemare, Seine-Inférieure [now Seine-Maritime], France—September 23, 1970, Paris, France, Kahler's syndrome) appeared in 62 films, among them *Le Cercle rouge/The Red Circle* (1970), *Le Mur de l'Atlantique/The Atlantic Wall* (1970), *L'Étalon/The Stud* (1970), *Clodo* (1970), *L'Arbre de Noël/The Christmas Tree* (1969), *Monte Carlo or Bust!* (1969), *Le Cerveau/The Brain* (1969), *Les Grandes gueules/The Wise Guys* (1966), *The Dirty Game* (1965), *Un drôle de paroissien/The Light-Fingered George* (1963), *Les Bonnes causes/Don't Tempt the Devil* (1963), *The Longest Day* (1962), *Le Capitain/Captain Blood* (1960), *Sérénade au Texas/Serenade of Texas* (1958), *Le Miroir à deux faces/The Mirror Has Two Faces* (1958), *Les Misérables* (1958), *Les Trois mousquetaires/The Three Musketeers* (1953), *Seul dans Paris/Alone in Paris* (1951), *Le Rosier de Madame Husson/The Prize* (1950), *Le Coeur sur la main* (1949), *Blanc comme neige* (1948), and *La Ferme du pendu* (1945).

**Gian Maria Volontè** (April 9, 1933, Milan, Italy—December 6, 1994, Florina, Greece, heart attack) has 64 acting credits, including *Tirano Banderas* (1993), *Funes, un gran amor* (1993), *Un Ragazzo di Calabria/The Boy From Calabria* (1987), *Cronaca di una morte annunciata/Chronicle of a Death Foretold* (1987), *Il Caso Moro/The Moro Affair* (1986), “La Certosa di Parma”/“The Charterhouse of Parma” (1981), *Stark System* (1980), *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli/Christ Stopped at Eboli* (1979), *Il Sospetto* (1975), *Lucky Luciano* (1973), *L'Attentat/The Assassination* (1972), *Sacco e Vanzetti/Sacco & Vanzetti* (1971), *Le Cercle rouge/The Red Circle* (1970), *Indagine su un cittadino al di sopra di ogni sospetto/Investigation of a Citizen...Above Suspicion* (1970), *L'Amante di Gramigna/The Bandit* (1969), *La Strega in amore/For a Few Dollars More* (1966), *Per un pugno di dollari/A Fistful of Dollars* (1964), *Un Uomo da bruciare/A Man for Burning* (1962), and *Ercole alla conquista di Atlantide* (1961).

**Yves Montand** (Ivo Livi, October 13, 1921, Monsummano Terme, Pistoia, Tuscany, Italy—November 9, 1991, Senlis, Oise, Picardie, France, heart attack), discovered by and lover of Edith Piaf, popular French crooner, husband of Simone Signoret, lover of Marilyn Monroe, voice of the Italian



skunk Pepé Le Pew in Italian dubbings of Looney Tunes, and actor in 59 films, among them *IP5: L'île aux pachydermes/IP5: The Island of Pachyderms* (1992), *Garçon!/Waier!* (1983), *Le Choix des armes/The Choice of Arms* (1981), *Les Routes du sud/The Roads to the South* (1978), *La Menace/The Threat* (1977), *Le Sauvage/Call Me Savage* (1975), *État de siege/State of Siege* (1972), *Tout va bien/All's Well* (1972), *Le Cercle rouge/The Red Circle* (1970), *On a Clear Day You Can See Forever* (1970), *L'Aveu* (1970), *Z* (1969), *Vivre pour vivre/Live for Life* (1967), *Grand Prix* (1966), *Paris brûle-t-il?/Is Paris Burning?* (1966), *La Guerre est finie/The War Is Over* (1966), *Compartment tueurs/Sleeping Car Murder* (1965), *Sanctuary* (1961), *Let's Make Love* (1960), *Les Sorcières de Salem/The Crucible* (1957), *Django Reinhardt* (1957), *Napoléon* (1955), *Le Salaire de la peur/The Wages of Fear* (1953), *Les Portes de la nuit/Gates of the Night* (1946), and *Étoile sans lumière/Star Without Light* (1946)

**Henri Decaë** (July 31, 1915, Saint-Denis, Seine-Saint-Denis, Île-de-France, France—March 7, 1987, Paris, France) worked with several directors who strongly influenced or were part of the French New Wave: Melville, François Trouffaut, Claude Chabrol and Louis Malle. He has 81 cinematography credits, including *La Vengeance du serpent à plumes/The Vengeance of the Winged Serpent* (1984), *Exposed* (1983), *Le Professionnel/The Professional* (1981), *An Almost Perfect Affair* (1979), *The Boys from Brazil* (1978), *Bobby Deerfield* (1977), *Seven Nights in Japan* (1976), *Operation: Daybreak* (1975), *Les Aventures de Rabbi Jacob/The Mad Adventures of 'Rabbi' Jacob* (1973), *The Light at the Edge of the World* (1971), *Le Cercle rouge/The Red Circle* (1970), *The Only Game in Town* (1970), *Le Clan des Siciliens/The Sicilian Clan* (1969), *Castle Keep* (1969), *The Comedians* (1967), *Le Samouraï* (1967), *Le Voleur* (1967), *The Night of the Generals* (1967), *Hotel Paradiso* (1966), *Viva Maria!* (1965), *Le Corniaud* (1965), *Week-end à Zuydcoote* (1964), *La Ronde* (1964), *Les Félines* (1964), *La Tulipe noire/The Black Tulip* (1964), *Les Dimanches de Ville d'Avray/Sundays at Cybele* (1962), *Les Sept péchés capitaux/The Seven Deadly Sins* (1962), *Vie privée/A Very Private Affair* (1962), *Léon Morin, prêtre* (1961), *Che gioia vivere/The Joy of Living* (1961), *Plein soleil/Purple Noon* (1960), *Les Quatre cents coups/The 400 Blows* (1959), *Les Cousins/The Cousins* (1959), *La Sentence/The Verdict* (1959), *Les Amants/The Lovers* (1958), *Le Désir mène les homes* (1958), *Ascenseur pour l'échafaud/Elevator to the Gallows* (1958), *Bob le flambeur/Bob the Gambler* (1956), *Crèvecoeur/Heartbreak Ridge* (1955), *La Course de taureaux/Bullfight* (1951), *Bertrand coeur de lion/Bernard and the Lion* (1951), *Si ça vous chante* (1951), *Les Enfants terribles/Jean Cocteau's Les enfants terribles* (1950), and *Le Silence de la Mer* (1949)

**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 Bèby, 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 non-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 "*cinéma 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, 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.”

Melville considered Alain Delon one of the most accomplished actors in France, and he used him again in *Le Cercle rouge* (*The Red Circle*, 1970), along with André Bourvil, Yves Montand, and Francois Périer (who had given a notable performance in *Le Samourai* as the shrewd policeman). *Le Cercle rouge* was one of the most profitable of all Melville’s films. The director said that all his original scripts were “transposed Westerns,” and *Le Cercle rouge*, the story of a robbery was precisely that, “with the action taking place in Paris instead of the west, in our own time rather than after the Civil War. And with

cars replacing the horse.” Delon also appears in Melville’s relatively insignificant last film *Un Flic* (*Dirty Money*, 1972).

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 *Le Cercle Rouge* Criterion dvd, 2003** ***Le Cercle Rouge* By Michael Sragov**

With his 1970 gangster epic, *Le Cercle Rouge*, Jean-Pierre Melville finally landed his white whale.

The French maverick who changed his last name from Grumbach out of admiration for Herman Melville had long since established himself as that most contradictory, elusive, and essential character in narrative moviemaking—an individualistic genre master. *Bob Le Flambeur* (1956), *Le Doulos* (1962), and *Le Samourai* (1967), stood out as elegant explorations of underworld style, duplicity, and professionalism. Of course, Melville had other credits, including his formidable 1950 rendering of Jean Cocteau’s *Les Enfants Terribles*. But his on- and off-screen affection for hard-guy glamour (he always wore a signature Stetson hat) and his aesthetic preference for the tough-minded, strong-boned storytelling of American directors such as John Huston (another Herman Melville admirer) drew him toward life-or-death drama in a criminal vein.

In *Le Cercle Rouge*, Melville set out to synthesize all the thoughts and feelings he’s acquired about cops and robbers in

fifteen years of genre moviemaking and a lifetime of movie watching. He emerged with something greater than a summing up. With *Le Cercle Rouge*, Melville hikes to the fictional heights of his adopted namesake. Seeing this movie restored to its full 140-minute length and proper 1.85:1 widescreen ratio persuaded me that Jean-Pierre's assumption of Herman's last name was the work of a creative heir, not just a fan. Alain Delon's Corey and his crew pulling off an epochal Paris jewelry heist may not seem as grand as Ahab and his crew harpooning Moby Dick. Yet the director imagines the preparation, execution, and aftermath of Corey's quest with such an unerring command of human and technical detail that the film becomes a metaphoric net capturing everything the *auteur* intuits about hubris, strength and fallibility. *Moby Dick* teaches you about rigging a whaling ship and steering her and hauling in a huge cetacean; *Le Cercle Rouge* teaches you about casing a joint, manufacturing custom bullets, and orchestrating a heist. In both these works, the creators' cunning combination of hardscrabble physical authority and characters that prompt identification with their honor and their weakness compel audiences to enter a world of genuine moral ambiguity.

*Le Cercle Rouge* carries a Buddhist epigram basically stating that people who are meant to meet will do so "in the red circle" no matter what crazy routes they take to it. To illustrate his own aphorism (we are told), Buddha took a piece of red chalk and tracing a circle—on the tip of his cue at a billiard hall. The men in this film make their own fates. True, the red circle refers to their common, bloody destiny. But it also conjures a bullet through the heart.

If bourgeois viewers of *Le Cercle Rouge* find themselves alarmingly sympathetic to these bandits, it's because they navigate ethically compromised waters that register as a true, if bleak, projection of a polluted mainstream. *Amoral* is a term often used to describe the Melvillean universe. *Le Cercle Rouge*, however, proves rigorously moral in its dramatic evaluation of five men and their responses to a heist and its aftermath.

Delon's Corey is the catalyst: just out of jail, his biggest asset is a plan to strip clean a *bijouterie* on the Place Vendôme. He lands an impromptu partner when Gian Maria Volonté's wild-eyed mystery-man, Vogel, escapes arrest and hides in the trunk of Corey's car. Vogel knows just the marksman and getaway artist for the job: an x-policeman named Jansen (Yves Montand). Meanwhile, the police captain Vogel gave the slip to, Mattei (André Bourvil), moves to hunt down his ex-prisoner. His best bet for information: nightclub owner Santi (François Périer), who knows everyone—and vows to rat on no one.

The way Melville's script presents each of these characters, they're battle-scarred and newborn. Corey cancels his relationship with a Marseilles-based Mr. Big, who rewarded him for courthouse loyalty by stealing Corey's mistress. Although Melville once referred to Corey and Vogel as "professionals," Vogel himself insists that he's an amateur, at least at this sort of game; when Mattei tells a colleague that Vogel is "no terrorist," he suggests that violent political crime is precisely what Vogel stands accused of. Jansen has an awful bout of the DTs right before Corey calls on him; He sees the job not as a chance to net

millions but as a shot at gaining self-respect. Santi, a mainstay of the criminal *demimonde*, finds himself facing unprecedented pressure to inform for the first time. Mattei must exert it because he too is at a crossroads: the head of Internal Affairs calls Mattei on the carpet and derides him for not believing that all men are guilty—"They're born innocent, but it doesn't last."

Melville uses music minimally, deploys natural sounds like a virtuoso, and along with cinematographer Henri Decaë evokes vibrant color with a restricted palette by staying alert to the shifts in light that come with changing time and weather. One could call the result a feast for the senses, except that would imply satiation, even gluttony, and one emerges from *this* film with senses primed. That's not only because of Melville's cinematic mastery, but also because he draws the viewer into the drama surely and intimately. His instinctive understanding of theatrical psychology and real-life grace—and gracelessness—under pressure (he was a veteran of the Resistance) heightens every scene with a scabrous subtlety.

His partnership with the actors borders on the miraculous. Delon's Corey may look like a men's-magazine mannequin, but he's no dummy. When Corey confronts his former boss, with pictures of their mistress in his pocket, Delon somehow conveys Corey's knowledge that the woman is in the bedroom—and that she is eavesdropping from behind the door. Viewers might predict a punchy confrontation: by playing off a stock expectation, Melville gives himself and his actors the time and space to show their characters in the process of creating new selves and testing them. Corey doesn't slap his former gal around; he takes the money and gun from her new boyfriend's safe and deposits his pictures of her there.

Corey wants to make a clean break from his past, but partly because of the volatile Vogel he's always getting blood or mud on his hands. Melville's handling of Volonté in the role (he always said that he disliked the actor) showcases the filmmaker's ability to exploit associations audiences bring to stars. Volonté's collaborations with directors like Elio Petri (*We Still*



*Kill the Old Way*, *Investigation of a Citizen Above Suspicion*) had already placed him as a member of cinema's left-wing vanguard. That's one reason why when Mattei says "no terrorist," the audience thinks, "Yes, terrorist." When he ruthlessly knocks off a couple of gunmen after he and Corey already have the drop on them, it's clear the criminal code means nothing to Vogel. François Périer's Santi functions like a corrupted version of his Heurtebise in Cocteau's *Orpheus*; there he was a kind of intermediary between the living and the realm of the dead; here he's a humane yet vulnerable and ultimately destructive intermediary between the straight world and another kind of underworld. (There's something Cocteau-like, too, about the elegant leather masks the gang members wear in the jewel heist).

Casting a famous actor-singer-personality like Yves Montand to depict a character sobering up might be a nod to Otto Preminger using Frank Sinatra to play a junkie going cold turkey in *The Man with the Golden Arm*; Montand pulls it off with a minimum of histrionics and a similar rhythmic flair. Best of all, André Bourvil—usually billed only as "Bourvil" and beloved for his team-ups with fellow *farceur* Louis de Funès—imbues Mattei

with a mildness and ruefulness that enrich his character. He might run like a *jeune fille* and live with three cats, but he has a knack for applying his low-key touch to others' excruciating pressure points.

It's Bourvil's Mattei who presides over the devastating denouement. In early action scenes Melville shows his command of action-film geometry with a train window exploding across half the screen, or Corey's blocky American car bisecting the landscape. In the heist scene he progresses to action trigonometry as he keeps us focused almost simultaneously on Corey, Vogel, and Jansen. But the end is a portrait of disaster rendered in movements as abrupt and spasmodic as the killings in Bertolucci's *The Conformist*. Mattei shakes his head and concludes that the Internal Affairs boss was right—innocence doesn't last, so all men are guilty. But Melville doesn't ask us to agree with him. The final effect of *Le Cercle Rouge* is to fling at the audience the same question the American Melville hurled out in *Moby Dick*: "Where do murderers go, man! who's to doom when the judge himself is dragged to the bar?" As Huston said of *Moby Dick*, *Le Cercle Rouge* is a great blasphemy.

### MELVILLE ON LE CERCLE ROUGE

The following are excerpts from a 1971 interview with director Jean-Pierre Melville by Rui Nogueira from the book *Melville on Melville*. (Viking Press, 1971).

*How do you feel about your twelfth film, Le Cercle rouge?*

Since there's no knowing if there will be a thirteenth, I have to talk about *Le Cercle Rouge* as though it were my "latest" film—as you say when you've just completed a picture—but also my "last film." Which in turn obliges me to speak about my filmmaking career as a whole, as well as my life as a spectator. Maybe I won't want to make any more films. That could happen, supposing fate decreed that I wasn't able to rebuild my studios here, and I decided to go live in America, not to make films there, but to write. So I really am obliged at this point to take stock of twenty-five years of professional activity and some forty-five years activity as a moviegoer. I'll begin by being hard on myself before moving on to other people. Then I'll talk about the film, but also about what it's like working on a film surrounded by people who haven't at all the same reasons for being involved in it, while it's being made.

All right, then, if I look at myself very objectively. I realize that I have become *impossible*. Not egocentric (I'm not in the least egocentric) but—if I may be allowed to coin a word—opocentric ("opo" from *opus*). As I grow older, in other words, nothing matters except my profession and therefore my work, by which I mean the work on hand, which I think about day and night and which takes precedence over everything, I repeat *everything* else in my thoughts...I'm not talking about my affections, of course. So, I begin thinking about the film I'm working on as soon as I wake up in the morning—and I'm always working on one, even if I'm not actually shooting—and only when I go to sleep at night do I stop thinking about it. That's pretty extreme, and I was made aware of it last night. I was having dinner with Léo Fortel, and at the next table there were two girls and two young men. One of the two men was obviously part French, part Indo-Chinese...and opposite him was a ravishing Asian girl; I think she must have been of mixed parentage, with extraordinary hair—probably a wig—pitchblack, in Joan of Arc style but longer—and the most fantastic face. I was staring at her throughout the meal,

but when Léo asked me if I wanted him to get her name and address, I said no. "Really?" he said. "But why not?" "Because I don't have a film in mind for her," I said. And I realized that beautiful women interest me only insofar as I can use them in a film. You see how far it's gone?

*Le Cercle Rouge* is by far the toughest movie I have tackled, because I worked the plot out myself and I didn't do myself any favors in writing my scenes. I said to myself, "This is going to be difficult to shoot, but I don't care, I want to do it." And I did manage to film what I had written. But instead of completing it in fifty days, which would have been normal, it took me sixty-six days.

What is *Le Cercle Rouge*? *Le Cercle Rouge*, to my mind, is first and foremost a heist story. It's about two professional crooks (Delon and Volonté) and another man (Montand) who is a sort of unplanned helper.

As I've told you, I wanted to write a heist script long before I saw *The Asphalt Jungle*, before I'd even heard of it, and well before things like *Rififi*. [John Huston's *The Asphalt Jungle* (1950) features a memorable heist sequence. The tour-de-force heist sequence in Jules Dassin's *Rififi* (*Du Rififi chez hommes*, 1955) lasts thirty minutes, with no dialogue or music. Disappointed at not making *Rififi*, Melville consoled himself by making *Bob le Flambeur* (1956) in collaboration with *Rififi* author Auguste Breton.] I think I also told you that I was supposed to make *Rififi*? No? Well, I was the person who got the producer to buy the rights: he announced that I was to direct the film, and then I didn't see him again for six months. Finally the film was made by [Jules] Dassin, who had the extreme courtesy to say that he would do it only if I wrote to tell him that I was happy about the arrangement, which I did.

So I've wanted to "do a robbery" since about 1950, around the time I finished Cocteau's *Les Enfants Terribles*. I'd like *Le Cercle Rouge* to be masterly, of course, but I don't know yet if it will be; I think the elements are sufficiently interesting to make a good sequence, and time will tell if I've set the robbery in the right context or not. It's also a sort of digest of all the thriller-type films I have made previously, and I haven't made things easy for myself in any way. For instance, there are no women in the film; and it certainly isn't taking the easy way out to make a thriller with five leading characters, none of whom is a woman.

*Is Le Cercle Rouge one of the twenty-two scripts destroyed when your studio burned down?*

No. Actually, with my memory, I could have taken any one of those scripts and rewritten it down to the last comma. But if I had, I would have done it differently. I don't like to repeat myself. I will never film those burned scripts, because I wouldn't want to do them now even if I still had them in my drawer—which doesn't mean that I won't use ideas from those scripts, as I in fact did for the relationship between the head of Internal Affairs and Captain Mattei in *Le Cercle Rouge*.

The *Cercle Rouge* script is an original in the sense that it was written by me and by me alone, but it won't take you long to realize it's a transposed western, with the action taking place in Paris instead of the West, in the present day rather than after the Civil War, and with cars instead of horses. So I start off with the traditional—almost obligatory—conventional situation: the man just released from jail. And this man corresponds pretty much to the cowboy who, once the opening credits are over, pushes open the doors of a saloon.

*Originally you had a different cast in mind, didn't you?*

Yes. Captain Mattei, who is played by André Bourvil—and played beautifully—was a part originally intended for Lino Ventura. The ex-cop Jansen, turned crook and alcoholic, was to have been played by Paul Meurisse and not Yves Montand. And I had thought of offering Belmondo the role of Vogel, finally played by Gian Maria Volonté. I think that if Delon hadn't wanted to do *Borsalino* with Belmondo, I would have got them both together in *Le Cercle Rouge*....But every film is what it is, and it stands or falls by its own merits. A film is a moment out of one's life. In my case, at least, you must remember, it represents fourteen months of uninterrupted work squeezed into twelve—1968 was a completely wasted year for me, because I'd signed a contract with the Hakim brothers to make *La Chiienne*, and they found a way not to honor it. They made me lose a whole year immediately following the fire at my studios, which was a terrible blow in a lot of ways; because losing the studios and all they represented in terms of money and opportunities was bad enough, but then to be reduced to twelve months of unemployment by a contract retaining exclusive rights over your services and preventing you from doing anything else whatsoever—that is a terrible blow. So those fourteen months of work squeezed into twelve, because in 1966 I made *Le Deuxième Souffle*, in 1967 I made *Le Samouraï*, in 1968 I did nothing, in 1969 I did *l'Armée des Ombres*, and in 1970, *Le Cercle Rouge*. Well, when you reach my age, you're entitled to think that a film is an important thing in your life, because it represents at least a year's work and then dogs you for another year: you remain the man of last year's film, or of your last film shown. So in fact a film may be said to take up to two years of your life.

*In the shooting script for Le Cercle Rouge, when Captain Mattei is hunting Vogel after his escape you have him say, "He isn't Claude Tenne. I couldn't ask the Minister of the Interior to block every road in France." Who is this Claude Tenne?*

Claude Tenne was a member of the OAS, and during the Algerian crisis he was tried and imprisoned for his anti-government activities. He managed to escape from prison on the Ile de Ré by folding himself into four and hiding inside a military trunk, a sort of big iron trunk, though not so very big actually—I have no idea how he did it. And at the time, roadblocks were set up all over France.

*At another point in the script, you describe Jansen as follows: "Jansen, stretched out on his bed, fully dressed, filthy, unshaven, with a three day beard. Like Faulkner in one of his alcoholic bouts."*

Yes. I imagine Faulkner or Hemingway as being like that in their bouts of alcoholism. As a matter of fact I think there are many eyewitness accounts of how Faulkner sometimes used to stay shut up in his room with his bottles for a week with orders that he wasn't to be disturbed.

*But Jansen's hallucinations—rats and spiders crawling slowly toward him—are the sort of nightmares Edgar Allan Poe might have dreamed up?*

Well, of course. You know that Poe and Melville have a great deal in common. But now I'm getting mixed up, forgetting when I say Melville that it's not me, but the great...

*Could you tell us about your working relationship with the cast of Le Cercle Rouge?*

I had an excellent relationship with Delon during shooting. We have an extraordinary personal understanding which enables us to work in a very special way.

This was the first time I worked with Yves Montand, who is a very fine actor, but he comes from the music-hall and that's what sets him apart from Delon. Delon is enormously gifted and doesn't need as much preparation as Montand, who is a perfectionist like me. Montand is the sort of actor who arrives on the set in the morning with the whole thing in his head. Everything went beautifully with him, too—he's enormously willing and dedicated. If you want proof, consider what he's just been doing in [Costa Gavras'] *The Confession*. This man, known to the whole world as a Communist, has had the courage to accept the role in *The Confession* of a character who accuses the Communist regime of having committed inconceivable crimes.... Anyhow, it was marvelous working with Montand, and I hope to make many more films with him. In the first place because he is a man of about my age—he's three years my junior, actually—so he's easier to use as a vehicle than a much younger actor. Alain and Jean-Paul [Belmondo], let's say, are vehicle-characters for me because they are thirty-five years old, and if I give Delon a moustache, that's it, he's the man, not just a nice-looking young man, but the man. Handsome, maybe, but it doesn't matter because it no longer gets in the way. Anyway, to my mind, Montand is also handsome.

André Bourvil is an excellent actor, one of the best in France, but he probably isn't *a priori* a Melvillian actor. I think he gives a very fine performance in my film, and I'm all the more convinced of this after going through the whole film again on the cutting table: there are moments when Bourvil is absolutely staggering. In his case I'm very happy about the casting change, because Bourvil brings an element of humanity to the part which I hadn't expected and Lino Ventura certainly wouldn't have provided. Lino Ventura would have been "The Police Captain," and there would have been no surprises. Whereas with Bourvil—thanks to Bourvil—there are quite a few.

As for François Périer, there's really nothing more to be said. Everyone knows he's one of our finest actors. I remember the evening I met you outside a cinema where they were playing *Le Samouraï*, and we both exclaimed together, "Périer is fantastic!" This film can add only a little to his reputation. The astonishing thing, though—and it's one of the the distressing aspects of this business—is that at this moment François Périer isn't rated as a star, and he should be. This upsets me, just as it upsets me that Richard Boone isn't a star. But in this area it's still the distributor who lays down the law and not the filmmaker....Distributors won't take the risk. They always say, "No, no, think of the billing, use name actors, etc." I think it's a pity you can't even think of making an expensive film, costing, say, a billion old francs, with unknowns. I could make a film tomorrow with unknowns if it cost three hundred million, but not a billion. They'll pay out three hundred million on my name because they know more or less what sort of merchandise they'll get from me, but they won't give me more. The billion for *Le Cercle Rouge* was possible because I had Delon, Bourvil, and Montand, and because there was a sizeable Italian coproduction interest since I was using an Italian actor, Gian Maria Volonté—totally unknown in France. I might add—whom I'd had in mind to play Vogel after seeing him in Carl Lizzani's *Banditi a Milano*.

If you want me to talk about Gian Maria Volonté, that's a very different story. Because Gian Maria Volonté is an instinctive actor, and he may well be a great stage actor in Italy, he may even

be a great Shakespearean actor, but for me he was absolutely impossible in that on a French set, in a film such as I was making, he never at any moment made me feel I was dealing with a professional. He didn't know how to place himself for the lighting—he didn't understand that an inch or two to the left or to the right wasn't at all the same thing. "Look at Delon, look at Montand," I used to tell him. "See how they position themselves perfectly for the lights, etc., etc." I also think the fact that he is very involved in politics (he's a leftist, as he never tires of telling you) did nothing to bring us together. He was very proud of having gone to sit at the Odéon during the "glorious" days May-June 1968; personally I didn't go to sit in at the Odeon. It seems, too, that whenever he had a weekend free he flew back to Italy. That's what I call a supernationalist spirit. I once said to him, "It's no use dreaming of becoming an international star as long as you pride yourself on being Italian—which is of no consequence. any more than being French is." But for him everything Italian was marvelous and wonderful, and everything French was ridiculous. I remember one day, we were setting up a rear projection scene and he was smiling to himself. I asked him why, and he said, "Because...you've seen *Bandito a Milano*? There are no rear projections in *Bandito a Milano*. Everything was shot direct inside a moving car." "Really?" I said. "And were you shooting night scenes like this? Were you inside a car filming the action going on outside at night?" "Well, no," he said, and it seemed to sink in that we weren't using rear projection just to amuse him. He's a strange character. Very wearying. I can tell you. I won't be making any more films with Gian Maria Volonté.

*Can you draw any conclusions from the twelve films you've made since 1947?*

In these twenty-three years, or let's say these twenty-five years, because after all it was in 1945 that I founded my production company—I was demobilized in October 1945 and formed the company on November 5, 1945—in these twenty-five years of professionalism I've done lots of things. First, in 1947, I got the idea of building my own studios which I did. At one point I was the only filmmaker in the world to have his own studios. This period lasted from 1949, when I made *Les Enfants Terribles*, till 1967—eighteen years in all, with a short break when I gave the studios up for a time before being able to rebuild them as I wanted. Then in June 1967, they burned down. Nothing much remains, but I am rebuilding them, even though I haven't received the permit yet from the city of Paris. So parallel to the films I have made...Well in an article I received yesterday, there's a sentence that reads, "...the novel *Le Silence de la Mer*, which was adapted for the screen by the father of new French cinema Jean-Pierre Melville." This was published in the Algerian newspaper *El Moudjahid*, by the critic Ahmazid Deboukalfa. I don't know this man except by name, but I'm delighted to show that someone outside France remembers him from time to time that it was Melville, after all, who shook things up in 1947.

Then in 1957 I built a screening room on the rue Washington, along with editing rooms, but since leasing out screening space and editing rooms isn't my business, I sold my interest. However, I've always felt the need for some parallel creative activity, in building and materials, because cinema isn't created with ideas alone. There's the whole mechanical side of it, and of course projection. For instance, during the three years my studios were leased out to Pathé-Marconi, I couldn't stand not having my own screening room, so I built one, which I leased out to other people but could use myself in the evenings to run

through any films I wanted to see. This sort of thing will always happen with me. At the moment I'm ruining myself in advance to create a screening room here in the rue Jenner, which is going to be marvelous because if, for instance, Monsieur Cocteau of Fox were to lend me a print of *The Kremlin Letter* tomorrow morning, what a joy it would be to screen it here during the morning and then return it to Balzac Cinema at 1:30 P.M. in time for the first show.

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. My guess is that the final disappearance of cinemas will take place around the year 2020, so in fifty years' time there will be nothing but television. Well, I would be happy if I get one line in the "Great Universal Encyclopedia of the Cinema," and I think that's the sort of ambition every filmmaker must have. This is a business in which you have to be not *arriviste*, certainly not that, nor yet ambitious, which I'm not, but you have to have ambition in what you do, which isn't at all the same thing. I'm not ambitious, I don't want to *be* something; I have always been what I am, I haven't *become* anything; but I've always had, and I shall always try to retain, this feeling that ambition in one's work is an absolutely healthy, justifiable thing. You can't make films just for the sake of making films. If fate wills that I should make more films, I'll try to remain faithful to this ideal of being ambitious when I start a film; not being ambitious between films, but being ambitious when I start work, telling myself, "People have to enjoy this." That's my ambition: to fill cinemas.

#### **Composer Eric Demarsan on Melville and *Le Cercle Rouge***

After *L'Armée des Ombres* (*Army of Shadows*), Melville and I stayed in touch, either by phone or visits to his home on the rue Jenner to talk about music. One day he announced: "I'm going to make a new film. You're not composing the score for it; I've contacted Michel Legrand..." Of course I was disappointed. We'd just had a big success, he'd appreciated my work, and he'd told me so many times. And then, bang, he changed composers. So logically I kept my distance and stopped my visits to the rue Jenner...Months later I got a call from Melville: "'Monsieur d'Marsan,' could you stop by Boulogne next Tuesday at three?" I made a note of the rendezvous, but I didn't ask him why. He added, "Come as you are—a grey suit." Which meant I shouldn't stand out by dressing in my Carnaby Street clothes. I should remain as discreet as possible. I turned up early for in Boulogne that Tuesday, waited behind the studio door for five minutes, and then exactly at three o'clock I saw Melville: "Ah, Monsieur Demarsan. This is the situation: I don't like Monsieur Legrand's work. Do you agree to write the music for *Le Cercle Rouge*? If you accept, you have three weeks to do it..." It was quite a reversal, and I had mixed feelings: On the one hand, I was delighted to be reunited with Melville; on the other hand, I hadn't the slightest idea why he'd disagreed with Michel Legrand...and I didn't want to replace him unfairly. So on principle I didn't accept straightaway, I just asked if I could think about it.

The next day, before I'd even had time to contact him, Michel Legrand called me: "Melville wants you to do the music for *Le Cercle Rouge*. Don't be embarrassed on my account... It's very short notice, so if you need a hand with the arrangements, just let me know..." It was extremely fair play, very gentlemanly of him...I'll always be thankful to Michel; in this business it's rare to find people who behave so elegantly. His call let me accept Melville's offer, but the proposal was still a challenge, given the

calendar we had to work with.

Shortly afterwards I saw a screening and discovered the film without Michel's music. *Le Cercle Rouge* appeared different from *L'Armée des Ombres*: it was more contemporary, obviously, but above all it wasn't as lyrical. It was much more abstract. It's an icy film about people's trajectories. Melville asked me for a minimalist piece of music in the orchestral spirit of the Modern Jazz quartet. He'd kept a sort of nostalgia over John Lewis and their botched collaboration non *Le Deuxième Souffle* (*Second Breath*). To guide my inspiration, Melville brought me back to rue Jenner to have me listen to a 35mm tape of the mixed soundtrack to Robert Wise's movie *Odds Against Tomorrow*, which was an original score by John Lewis. "That's the color I need!" he said to me. Hence the main theme for *Le Cercle Rouge*: brass chords, and a jazz quintet for a simple melody drawn back into itself.

Melville's request was clear: in *Le Cercle Rouge*, the music has to give you the feeling of being trapped, the idea of fate. All these characters, sooner or later, have an appointment with their destiny. In fact, I remember one particular sequence, with Delon inside a lift, and you can see the light from the interior pass fleetingly from one floor to the next. Melville said to me: "That image, it's a premonition of death. Your music has to give us that feeling...." And yet, at that point in the film, no one has an inkling of the character's tragic end. So when I was writing it I tried to intensify that vision as something fugitive and almost subliminal. The score for the film, as a whole, is run through with anxiety. As always with Melville, feelings had to pass through very fine sieve. And what was very important was that he didn't want to dramatize in the traditional way, with old-style effects. He preferred to feed *Le Cercle Rouge* with a more secret score, music that carries the abstract and metaphysical aspect of the film.

As I remember, I began by composing the numerous sound-pieces the film needed. Melville wanted to personalize places by using specific themes: jazz radio in the car, a musette

waltz for the tarts' hotel, a big band for the nightclub.... Another difficulty: The dance scenes in the club had been shot using playback tapes of Michel Legrand's music so the only choice left for me was to write new themes that fit the choreography to a T.... The only part Melville refused was my end-title: the film tells the story of a circle that closes in on a handful of men. To come full circle, it absolutely had to have an end-theme that had been heard before, for symmetry's sake.... Melville preferred the quintet version of the theme, which was bare and uncluttered, to the end-title originally planned, which was orchestral and broader. Maybe I'd fallen into the trap of the "nice, grand-sounding end-title." Melville wanted to play squaring the circle. At the time I was sorry he did, but I could understand. His approach was coherent.

In any case, when you write music to go with a visual image, you can't always be 100 percent in the director's head. You try to share his vision.... But, especially in Melville's case, it was impossible to anticipate all his reactions; in the end it was his own gaze, his point of view that counted. That said, the dialogue was much simpler in *Le Cercle Rouge*. I'd gained in assurance, and our relationship had changed into a professional friendship. We gradually got to know each other better and, more than that, to understand each other better. At the same time, I never got too familiar with him: we were always politely distant and he called me Monsieur Demarsan" for ages before he ventured a timid "Eric!" At the end of the mixing, Melville turned to me and said, "You know, Eric, I've made my decision. This time you'll be in the opening credits!" It was a reward, an unparalleled honor. I took it as a mark of respect on his part.... And it was quite an exploit—I was (and still am) the only composer to work with him twice! I didn't know that our adventure would end there: Melville died three years later in 1973. Deep inside, I feel a certain pride in having Melville as my first film director.

—We're programming our Fall 2009 series, BFS XIX. Please send your suggestions to [suggestions@buffalofilmseminars.com](mailto:suggestions@buffalofilmseminars.com)  
 —This week in **3 x 3 @ AKAG**, Thursday Evenings at the Albright-Knox, 7:30 p.m.: **Federico Fellini's *I Vitelloni***, 1953. For more information go to <http://3x3.cc>  
 —BFS will be on break next Tuesday, March 10, but our space will be used for a special event: the WNY premiere of ***Dalai Lama Renaissance***, narrated by Harrison Ford. Producer-director Khashyar Darvich will answer questions after both screenings (5:30 and 7:30 p.m.). Further information at [www.dalailamafilm.com](http://www.dalailamafilm.com) .

### COMING UP IN BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS XVIII:

March 17 Robert Altman, *THE LONG GOODBYE*, 1973

March 24 Andrei Tarkovsky: *NOSTALGHIA* 1983

March 31 Larisa Shepitko *THE ASCENT/VOSKHOZHDENIYE* 1977

April 7 Warren Beatty *REDS* 1981

April 14 32 *SHORT FILMS ABOUT GLENN GOULD*

April 21 Pedro Almodóvar *ALL ABOUT MY MOTHER/TODO SOBRE MI MADRE* 1999

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