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Le cercle rouge (The red circle), Melville, Jean-Pierre, 1970

Léon Morin, prêtre (Leon Morin, priest), Melville, Jean-Pierre, 1961

The Driver, Hill, Walter, 1978

Les enfants terribles (The strange ones), Melville, Jean-Pierre, 1949

Un flic (Dirty money), Melville, Jean-Pierre, 1972

The asphalt jungle, Huston, John, 1950

L'armee des ombres (Army of shadows), Melville, Jean-Pierre, 1969

Bob le flambeur (Bob the gambler), Melville, Jean-Pierre, 1956

Point blank, Boorman, John, 1967

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Jean-Pierre Melville: The French Connection

Friday, May 17 through Wednesday, June 26, 1996

An almost-complete retrospective of the films of Melville, along with American and French films that he loved or inspired.

"A fine hoodlum face!" Bob-le-Flambeur mutters to his image. Image is important for the professional criminal as it is for the modernist film director—keep your hat on indoors; be outwardly cool, inwardly precise. Jean-Pierre Melville (1917-1973), one of cinema's great modernists, is both heir to the American film noir that he admired and emulated, and a true French independent and forerunner to the New Wave. Less known is his connection to Cocteau and to the cinema that would become associated with Bresson and Resnais. If the trademark Melville style is straight-faced economical, he revels in the tricks of that trade: distancing devices (jarring jump cuts, vast fast pans); spare interiors explored, like his chilling protagonists, with even sparer dialogue; some jazz, much silence.

***The Army in the Shadows* shows just how much the wartime Resistance stayed with Melville ("The war period," he said, "was awful, horrible and...marvelous!"); its lessons became the credo of the Melville gangsters (and the one-off intelligent cop) who recognize each other immediately and have their own codes of honor and betrayal. It may be the Melville romanticism, but it's also his cynicism: "Where you have two, one betrays," he said.**

A station platform filled with cops and crooks and probably some quite ordinary fellows, all in their Magritte overcoats and hats, is a wordless tone poem typical of Melville's cinematic humor—the most fun you'll have without laughing. "Ambiguity and derision are the only emotions that a cop can inspire," Alain Delon's *flic* opines. In the end, Melville doesn't try to inspire emotions other than love of cinema, and that covers the rest.

To quote Elizabeth in *Les Enfants terribles*, "Et maintenant, admirez!"

Presented in association with the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and French Cultural Services, Los Angeles. The series is organized by Dennis Bartok/American Cinematheque, Los Angeles. Prints are from the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs unless otherwise noted.

Quotations from Melville in our notes are taken from *Melville on Melville*, an interview with Rui Nogueira (Viking, 1971).

FRIDAY MAY 17

Le Samourai 7:00

Jean-Pierre Melville (France, 1967)

Melville's masterpiece. Alain Delon gives one of his best performances as "The Samurai," so called in obvious homage to the Japanese masterless *ronin* who answers only to an internalized code of honor. A killer by contract in the world of Paris nightclubs and hidden bosses, he has a polished, chilling method perfectly suited to Melville's own style: economical and elegant, full of dangerous invention. When *Le Samourai* was released here in 1972 as *The Godson*, one of the few critics to notice it was Penelope Gilliatt in *The New Yorker*. She called Melville "the poet of the implacable" and *Le Samourai* "a fascinating and important picture...a sort of meditation on solitude, embodied in a lonely, rigorous mercenary....It is a study of someone who listens all the time and seems to be responding to harmonics beyond most people's range. Odd that it should be possible to give a killer so many of the attributes of the sanctified."

• Written by Melville. Photographed by Henri Decaë. With Alain Delon, François Périer, Nathalie Delon, Cathy Rosier. (109 mins, In French with English subtitles, Color, 35mm, From Artificial Eye, permission Pathé Television)

Second Breath 9:10

Jean-Pierre Melville (France, 1965)

(*Le Deuxième Souffle*). Aging gangster Gustave "Gu" Minda (Lino Ventura) escapes from prison into an underworld society of professional thieves, killers and cops that has functioned without him for ten years. Invited to participate in a heist, he proves his skills are still intact. But an accusation that he has betrayed his cohorts proves his undoing; only the "correct" action of the policeman on the case can clear his name. Honor among thieves, and a bond between the intelligent crook and the smart cop, are identifiable trademarks of the Melville *policier*, as emblematic as the familiar American gangster film conventions he honors. But Melville isolates all of this in an austere visual style, while the characters remain impassive in the extreme. If there is loyalty, even love, between these men, they are not allowed one luxury: trust.

• Written by Melville, from the novel by José Giovanni. Photographed by Marcel Combes. With Lino Ventura, Paul Meurisse, Raymond Pellegrin, Christine Fabrega. (125 mins, In French with English subtitles, B&W, 16mm, From Films Inc.)

SATURDAY MAY 18

Bob-le-Flambeur 7:00

Jean-Pierre Melville (France, 1954)

(*Bob the Gambler*). *Bob-le-Flambeur* is Melville's love poem to Paris's Pigalle and its lowlife denizens. It's a gangster film that is turned by Melville's taste for the absurd into what he calls "a comedy of manners," albeit cast in the shades of the pure *policier*. Been downbeat so long it looks like up to us! Bob (Roger Duchesne) was the first of Melville's gangsters to cruise Paris streets in a big American car dogged by a daring camera, a swinging jazz track, and a cool obsession. An aging safecracker and compulsive gambler, Bob's going for the big stakes now: the casino vault in Deauville. Bob lives by night and sleeps by day, thrives on his nostalgia for the pre-war gangster milieu (before the infiltration of the Gestapo upset the delicate balance between cop and criminal), and takes in stray youngsters such as Isabelle Corey. He feels his age when the blank-faced girl sleeps with his "adopted son" with more nonchalance than even Bob himself can affect. "I like futility of effort," Melville says. "The uphill road to failure is a very human thing....Even so, Bob is still a light-hearted film, [one which] ends on a pirouette."

- Written by Melville. Photographed by Henri Decaë. With Roger Duchesne, Isabelle Corey, Daniel Cauchy, André Garret. (102 mins, In French with English subtitles, B&W, 35mm, Courtesy Columbia Pictures, permission Lumière Films)

Le Samourai 9:00

Jean-Pierre Melville (France, 1967)

For program notes, please see May 17.

FRIDAY MAY 24

The Silence of the Sea 7:00

Jean-Pierre Melville (France, 1947/released 1949)

(*Le Silence de la mer*). Melville's first film is one of the most disturbing and poetic films on the Occupation. In the tradition that would become associated with Bresson, it is a film of interiors and silence, of gazes and time passing, but all, in fact, with narrative justification. A German officer is billeted in the country with an old man and his niece. They maintain a disdainful silence in the soldier's presence as he sorts aloud through his feelings towards the French, the Occupation, and the niece. Too late the icy silence is broken with a barely audible word. (It has the effect of the blink in *La Jetée*.) Melville shot the film in the house of the author, Vercors. This precise interiority (which looks forward to *Les Enfants terribles*) gives a shock to the film's exterior sequences in which the soldier begins to see the naiveté of his "marriage of our two people." A montage of Paris through his awed eyes can't help but recall the Nazi newsreel of Hitler's dawn tour of his newly acquired gem.

- Written by Melville, from the novel by Vercors [Jean Bruller]. Photographed by Henri Decaë. With Howard Vernon, Nicole Stéphane, Jean-Marie Robain. (88 mins, In French with English subtitles, B&W, 35mm, permission Teledis Films)

The Army in the Shadows 8:45

Jean-Pierre Melville (France, 1969)

(*L'Armée des ombres*). The Resistance drama *The Army in the Shadows* is based on Joseph Kessel's novel translated through Melville's personal recollections of the period, and of course his extraordinary cinema technique. Lino Ventura stars as a member of a Resistance unit in the early years of the war, when nobility and recklessness were called for in equal measure. He wears a suit in prison but sangfroid masks purity of mission: he'll give you his last cigarette or execute you, depending. In a marvelous cast, Simone Signoret stands out as a master of disguises—bomb-maker, whore, old woman, collaborationist nurse, and, fatally, mother. Georges Sadoul's comment on *The Silence of the Sea* applies equally to this film made twenty years later: "It goes right to the heart because its director's heart was in it." Great escapes, intricate plotting, superb suspense in secret acts of courage: following all the great gangster films, the experiments in form, here is the original underworld. *The Army in the Shadows* is the Melville blueprint, revealed post-construction.

- Written by Melville, from the novel by Joseph Kessel. Photographed by Pierre Lhomme. With Lino Ventura, Paul Meurisse, Simone Signoret, Jean-Pierre Cassel. (140 mins, In French with English subtitles, Color, 35mm, permission UGC Films)

SATURDAY MAY 25

Jean-Pierre Melville: Portrait in 9 Poses 6:15

(André Labarthe, France).

A documentary study of Jean-Pierre Melville and his work.

- (51 mins, English version, 3/4" video)

Les Enfants terribles 7:30

Jean-Pierre Melville (France, 1949)

After seeing *The Silence of the Sea*, Jean Cocteau chose Melville to direct a screen adaptation of his novel *Les Enfants terribles*. Melville preserved Cocteau's voice and heart (figuratively and literally—he narrates the film, and it is his heartbeat we hear for that of Paul) in a film that deeply understands what its characters do not. It is the story of an obsessive love between a brother and sister, isolated in a room intended to defend their union against the world but which instead sends their passion back on them. More an environment than a story, the film moves as in a dream to the pace of poetry, slowed with the weight of its symbolic charge yet electric at every turn. The baroque assemblage of sickbeds, bathrobes, personal mementos, and idiosyncratic movements (into which Vivaldi and Bach concertos are brilliantly integrated) was shot on a shoestring budget in "real" settings—clarity, as always with Melville, being the door to the intangible.

- Written by Melville, Jean Cocteau, from the novel by Cocteau. Photographed by Henri Decaë. Narrated by Cocteau. With Nicole Stéphane, Edouard Dhermitte, Jacques Bernard, Renée Cosima. (105 mins, In French with English subtitles, B&W, 16mm, From Kit Parker Films)

Le Doulos 9:30

Jean-Pierre Melville (France, 1962)

(*The Finger Man*). A Melvillean roundabout of ambiguity and betrayal in the underworld: Serge Reggiani is an ex-con who suspects his best friend (Jean-Paul Belmondo) of being a stool pigeon, or finger man. "Again Melville is concerned less with the thriller mechanism than with [a] Pirandellian moral tangle" (Tom Milne). As in *Bob-le-Flambeur* and *Le Samourai*, here Melville's gangsters display an impassive, underplayed demeanor, increasing a sense of equivocity in the characters. "The characters are all double," Melville noted, "they are all false. I even signal this...at the beginning of the film with the truncated line from Celine: 'One must choose: Die...or Lie?' I cut the end, which is 'Me, I live!'"

- Written by Melville, from the novel by Pierre Lesou. Photographed by Nicolas Hayer. With Jean-Paul Belmondo, Serge Reggiani, Jean Dessailly, Michel Piccoli. (108 mins, In French with English subtitles, B&W, 35mm, From Interama)

FRIDAY MAY 31

Léon Morin, Priest 7:00

Jean-Pierre Melville (France, 1961)

(*Léon Morin, prêtre*). Melville made *Léon Morin, prêtre* in a conscious attempt to reach a wider audience than the New Wave cineastes at his fatherly knee. Still, taking two actors recently associated with the New Wave—Belmondo of *Breathless* and Emmanuelle Riva of *Hiroshima, mon amour*—he created a film that has more ties to Bresson and his own (pre) Bressonian *The Silence of the Sea* than to the freewheeling *Bob-le-Flambeur*. Casting the boyish Belmondo as a priest with a missionary bent is one of the intriguing ambiguities of this film. Riva is a Communist drawn to the cleric and, through desire, into an attempt at religious conversion. The spiritual desolation wrought by the Occupation has rarely been so sensitively

delineated as in this portrait of a town suddenly exposed to its underlying social disarray. The vigor of Melville's filmmaking, from crane shots and quick pans to caressing close-ups of obscure objects of desire, gives this contemplative film a thrilling beauty.

- Written by Melville, from the novel by Béatrix Beck. Photographed by Henri Decaë. With Jean-Paul Belmondo, Emmanuelle Riva, Irène Tunc, Nicole Mirel. (128 mins, In French with English subtitles, B&W, 16mm, From Interama)

The Diary of a Country Priest 9:25

Robert Bresson (France, 1950)

(*Le Journal d'un curé de campagne*). Melville settled the chicken-and-egg question regarding the influence of Robert Bresson as follows: "I'm sorry, but it's Bresson who's always been Melvillian. *Le Journal d'un curé de campagne* is *Le Silence de la mer*!....[Nor did] Bresson deny...that he had been influenced by me. All this has been forgotten since." Georges Bernanos's novel concerns a young priest who, in his simplicity and purity, suffers the scorn of his parishioners. Bresson adapted the novel to the screen using Bernanos's original dialogue and diary entries; what he cut from the novel seems only to add to this fidelity. (Critic Albert Beguin notes, "The film's true merit is in having rejected everything in the novel that could be already thought of as 'cinematic' in the popular sense of the word.") The austere narrative is punctuated by a low-toned, voice-over reading. Episode by episode, like stations of the cross, the priest progresses through pain to grace.

- Written by Bresson, from the novel by Georges Bernanos. Photographed by Leonce-Henri Burel. With Claude Laydu, Nicole Maurey, Jean Riveyre, André Guibert. (120 mins, In French with English subtitles, B&W, 35mm, From Interama)

SATURDAY JUNE 1

Two Men in Manhattan 5:30

Jean-Pierre Melville (France, 1958)

(*Deux Hommes dans Manhattan*). Before the so-called New Wave *père* Melville went his own experimental way with this low-budget film set in the heart of the Asphalt Jungle, New York. Melville's Manhattan is how he found it, "as dark as it is beautiful." A French journalist (played by Melville himself) and photographer follow the story of a missing French diplomat who, it seems, has died in the apartment of his mistress. The journalists can aid the homeland or abet the scandal—or adhere to principle, if one knew what that was. Melville essentially follows his nose in this one, through semi-documentary New York exteriors cunningly cut with French interiors, working a jazz score into the plot itself, and giving in to the hopelessness of French actors speaking American in the bit parts. It's lots of fun in a *Killer's Kiss* kind of way, even without English subtitles for the French dialogue as we, alas, must show it (synopsis provided).

- Written by Melville. Photographed by Nicolas Hayer, Melville (New York sequences). With Pierre Grasset, Melville, Christiane Eudès, Ginger Hall. (84 mins, In French and English, synopsis, B&W, 35mm, permission Teledis Films)

The Red Circle 7:10

Jean-Pierre Melville (France, 1970)

(*Le Cercle rouge*). A caper film, but almost twenty years post-*Rififi* it's a colder world for the jewel thief. Alain Delon, a highline thief who lives in studied elegance when he's not languishing in jail, plans an elaborate jewelry-store heist with two cohorts picked up almost at random: an escaped convict (Gian-Maria Volonté) and an alcoholic lapsed-lawman rescued from a lost weekend (a great role for Yves Montand). The popular French actor André Bourvil is superbly cast against type as the nemesis cop,

Mattei, a straight guy who lives alone with cats (Melville's). We learn his routine; he's a male Jeanne Dielman and can twist the knife when needed. Twisting *his* handle is the police commissioner who took his lessons well from the Gestapo: everyone's guilty. Typically of Melville, the exciting moments are not the violent ones; the thrill is in the camera, with its "gaze" of surveillance and fraternity. Long live the guilty.

- Written by Melville. Photographed by Henri Decaë. With Alain Delon, Yves Montand, André Bourvil, Gian-Maria Volonté. (130 mins, In French with English subtitles, Color, 16mm, permission UGC Films)

Dirty Money 9:30

Jean-Pierre Melville (France, 1972)

(*Un Flic/A Cop*). Melville said, in relation to *Le Doulos*, that his cops have "that layer of cynicism and vulgarity which all policemen acquire after associating with crooks for a certain number of years." Alain Delon, who embodied the Melville crook, plays the Melville cop better than anyone. He is an impassive but harried Paris cop who shares drinks and a girlfriend (Catherine Deneuve) with a nightclub owner pal (the American actor Richard Crenna, nicely cast), who robs banks and runs drugs on the side. The classic Melvillian elements are here more abstractly inscribed than ever in cuts and moody eyeline matches, from a bank heist in a stormy seaside suburb to a gang meeting amid a gallery of Van Goghs, and the fatal hospital visit which harks back ironically to the faked medical mission in *The Army in the Shadows*. The elaborate setpiece in which a train robbery is conducted by helicopter is Hitchcockian in the morbidly amusing accuracy of detail, and even in the evident fakery of the models used. "It is curiously fitting that Melville's last feature should reaffirm the genre's hardest conventions in a context of disenchantment and failure; and happy that this final, equivocal embrace of the genre should be distinguished by the director's most adventurous experiments with form." (Tony Rayns)

- Written by Melville. Photographed by Walter Wottitz. With Alain Delon, Catherine Deneuve, Richard Crenna, Riccardo Cucciolla. (100 mins, In French with English subtitles, Color, 16mm, permission UGC Films)

FRIDAY JUNE 7

The Asphalt Jungle 7:00

John Huston (U.S., 1950)

The Asphalt Jungle is the big daddy of big caper movies and for Melville was the *ne plus ultra* of cinema. It is a brilliant, chilling thriller whose criminal anti-heroes plan and execute a million-dollar jewel heist. A haunting urban jungle, from seedy dive to unattainable penthouse, as well as a central sequence that describes the heist with documentary-like precision, earned the film its critical tag: "American neorealism." Sam Jaffe as Doc, the little German genius who masterminds the robbery and then falls prey to his own gluttony; Sterling Hayden as a small-time hoodlum, and Louis Calhern as a big-time lawyer, contribute to a disquieting portrait of the new urban citizenry: hoods in three-piece suits who are every bit as greedy, and ultimately as weak, as the western bums who sought the *Treasure of the Sierra Madre* two years earlier.

- Written by Huston, Ben Maddow, from the book by W. R. Burnett. Photographed by Harold Rosson. With Sterling Hayden, Louis Calhern, Sam Jaffe, Jean Hagen, Marilyn Monroe. (112 mins, Color, B&W, 35mm, From MGM/UA Classics)

The Set-Up 9:05

Robert Wise (U.S., 1949)

Robert Wise was up there with John Huston in Melville's pantheon. *The Set-Up* has been unfairly overlooked as a boxing film rather than appreciated as the superb film noir that it is. Robert Ryan (who

was an amateur boxer himself) gives a canny performance as an aging middleweight who spoils a racketeer's arrangement for a fix by insisting on a win—despite fierce punishment in the ring from his younger opponent. Audrey Totter is his wife, as desperate for an end to the boxing life as her husband is for redemption in the ring. Inspired by a jazz-age poem by Joseph Moncure March (“Cheap seats, the crowd was rough/ None of your high-hat Gershwin stuff”), the film itself is a bruising bit of American poetry, from the bleak town with its Cozy Hotel and I Dream Cafe, to the vicious gangster named Little Boy and the spectator who constantly shouts “Kill him! Kill him!”

- Written by Art Cohn, based on the poem by Joseph Moncure March. Photographed by Milton Krasner. With Robert Ryan, Audrey Totter, George Tobias, Allan Baxter. (72 mins, B&W, 35mm, From Paramount Pictures)

SATURDAY JUNE 8

Orpheus 9:05

Jean Cocteau (France, 1949)

(*Orphée*). Of Cocteau, Melville said, “I loved that man. He was intelligence, charm, talent itself...one of the real elite.” Cocteau’s interpretation of the Orpheus myth is dreamlike—at once personal and distanced, classic and terminally mod. Maria Casarès as the Princess of Death travels in a Rolls Royce, receives her instructions in code via radio, and is escorted in her journeys between this world and the next by an entourage of living-dead leather-clad motorcyclists. Orphée (Jean Marais) is a Left Bank poet who becomes fascinated by these radio messages and determines to discover their secret for himself. Cocteau and cinematographer Nicolas Hayer create an imaginary town out of Paris locations; the mirrors which lure the poet also draw the viewer into his fascination with the real world, the world of the imagination, and the surface tension between them.

- Written by Cocteau. Photographed by Nicolas Hayer. With Jean Marais, Maria Casarès, François Perier, Marie Dea. (c. 95 mins, In French with English subtitles, B&W, 35mm, From Kino)

SATURDAY JUNE 15

Point Blank 8:40

John Boorman (U.S., 1967)

At a time in the early fifties when film noir was dying in the States, Melville kept the torch alight...then handed back the flame to the Americans when Hollywood entered its modernist phase of noir with films like *Point Blank*...which virtually reinvented the genre. Lee Marvin, the lethal “Walker,” double-crossed and left for dead on Alcatraz, comes back from the grave to collect his money and can find only faceless executives and plastic cards. A fabulous, vicious allegory for modern corporate America, filmed in a dreamlike, sensuous style, all of which may be the last few seconds of a dying man’s thoughts.—Chris Peachment, National Film Theatre, London

- Written by Alex Jacobs, from the novel *The Hunter* by Richard Stark. Photographed by Philip Lathrop. With Lee Marvin, Angie Dickinson, Keenan Wynn, Carroll O'Connor. (92 mins, Color, 35mm, From MGM/UA Classics)

SATURDAY JUNE 22

Breathless 9:20

Jean-Luc Godard (France, 1959)

(*A bout de souffle*). In *Two Men in Manhattan*, a cigarette pack carelessly thrown on a bed was Godard’s brand (Boyards); Godard returned the tip-of-the-hat in *Breathless*, and moreover signalled his admiration

for Melville and *Bob-le-Flambeur* by casting Melville as the writer Parvulesco who is interviewed by Jean Seberg. (He played it like Nabakov: “subtle, pretentious, pedantic, naive.”) One almost has to see *Breathless*’s homage to/parody of the American thriller as filtered through Melville’s. Russell Merritt called *Breathless* “the outlaw artifact of the *nouvelle vague*. In *Breathless*, Godard captured the spirit of a disillusioned generation and fashioned a style—a melange of past movies, books, jump-cuts, film noir posters and postcards—to parade that disillusionment. The theme of the film, like the essence of its driven hero, is precisely the futile struggle to be original ‘in the manner of something or someone else.’ The notion of individuality and of forthrightness is as American as the movies, and as fully processed.”

- Written by Godard, based on an idea by François Truffaut. Photographed by Raoul Coutard. With Jean-Paul Belmondo, Jean Seberg, Jean-Pierre Melville. (90 mins, In French with English subtitles, B&W, 35mm, From New Yorker Films)

WEDNESDAY JUNE 26

The Driver 7:00

Walter Hill (U.S., 1978)

The Driver is a virtual remake of Jean-Pierre Melville’s *Le Samourai*. This simple fact explains a lot: the characters without names (The Driver, Ryan O’Neal; The Cop, Bruce Dern; The Player, Isabelle Adjani; other characters named Glasses, Teeth, Fingers, and The Connection); the script, practically devoid of dialogue; the non-scenery; the bizarre, ultra-modern police station; and finally, the plot. None of the above were particularly understood or appreciated by critics at the time of the film’s release, but then, the austere visuals and impassive characters of the Melville *policier* were almost unknown here. The plot revolves around a getaway-car driver who is pursued by a ruthless, philosophical cop. Both are compulsive professionals, but where O’Neal is laconic, Dern is manic-electric. “The chases are the very best ever seen, Ryan O’Neal wears dark glasses at night and, as *Time Out* remarked, everyone looks like they haven’t slept for weeks. A fine genuflection to the master” (NFT).

- Written by Hill. Photographed by Philip Lathrop. With Ryan O’Neal, Bruce Dern, Isabelle Adjani, Ronne Blakley. (91 mins, Color, 35mm, From Films Inc.)