

53rd Sydney Film Festival-Part 7

Jean-Pierre Melville—a minor but intriguing figure

By Richard Phillips
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This is the seventh and concluding part to a series of articles on the 2006 Sydney Film Festival, held from June 9-25. Parts one, two, three, four, five and six were published on July 17, 19, 22, 25, August 1 and 3, respectively.

Under the title “A Band of Outsiders—The Cinematic Underworld of Jean-Pierre Melville”, this year’s Sydney festival screened seven films by post-WWII director Jean-Pierre Melville, who made 13 features, half of them crime films, between 1947 and his death from a sudden heart attack in 1973.

While lavishly praised by contemporary filmmakers Quentin Tarantino, Michael Mann, Martin Scorsese and John Woo, who has famously declared that the French director was “God for me”, Melville’s legacy is contradictory.

Melville was without doubt a cinematic innovator. His best work is visually mesmerising with complex narratives and real psychological tension. At the same time, his work is often deeply pessimistic and, particularly his later gangster films, infused with a cold fatalism and preoccupation with the studied gestures and accoutrements of their protagonists—guns, overcoats, hats, etc.

Born Jean-Pierre Grumbach in 1917 to Jewish parents in Paris, Melville was raised in a left-wing environment where he was exposed to a range of cultural influences—surrealism, American movies and literature, and jazz. He was given a small movie camera for his seventh birthday and apparently made dozens of short films as a child.

Adopting the name Melville after he joined the French Resistance and out of admiration for the nineteenth century American novelist Herman Melville, he claimed that from 1933 until 1939 he was a communist. There are no details available in English, however, as to whether he ever formally joined the French Communist Party or any other left-wing organisation, or why he no longer considered himself a communist after 1939. In the post-war period Melville claimed to have no political ideology, but when pressed described himself as an “extreme individualist” or “right-wing anarchist”.

Melville was conscripted into the French army in 1937 and, following the German occupation of France in 1940, was evacuated with sections of his regiment to Britain. He returned to southern France in 1941 and in 1942 joined the Resistance. From then until 1945 Melville saw military action in North Africa, Italy and France and spent some time in London as part of the Free French Movement.

While the ever-enigmatic director revealed little about his experiences in the Resistance, these years provided Melville with background material for three of his most important movies—*Le Silence de la mer* (The silence of the Sea [1949]), *Léon Morin, prêtre* (Leon Morin, Priest [1961]) and *L’Armée des ombres* (The Army of Shadows [1969])—the latter, in my view, his best film.

After the war Melville returned to Paris, rekindled his passion for 1930s American movies, and began mixing with like-minded writers and artists. While he was at first regarded as an amateur by the local film industry, he established a small studio in 1947 and, using non-union labour, black-market film stock and without securing official rights from the author of the book on which the story was based, produced *Le Silence de la mer*, his first feature.

Unfortunately, the Sydney festival was unable to obtain this important film, which was set during the Nazi occupation of France and centred on the relationship between a cultured German officer and a French family who had been forced to billet him. The officer is eventually sent off to the Russian front.

His next film, *Les Enfants terribles*, was based on surrealist writer Jean Cocteau’s novel of the same name and explores the strange and ultimately fatal relationship between a teenage brother and sister—Paul (Edouard Dermithe) and Elisabeth (Nicole Stéphane).

The siblings come from an extremely wealthy family and inhabit a claustrophobic world, largely cushioned from the rest of society. Paul is recovering from an after-school prank that went wrong and most of the film occurs in his bedroom. Melville, who collaborated closely with Cocteau on the script, creates a hothouse hypnotic atmosphere and Nicole Stéphane’s performance, as the ever-more disoriented Elisabeth, is convincing and intense.

This movie established Melville as a serious filmmaker. His next important work, *Bob le flambeur* (1955), a stylish and entertaining movie about an aging small-time criminal and gambler recently released from prison, who concocts a plan to rob the Deauville casino, further enhanced Melville’s reputation.

Bob (Robert Duchesne) is the archetypical Melville character—a world-weary figure with a loosely defined personal sense of honour and morality. Most of the movie, which pays homage to American crime films, occurs at night or in the early morning hours in Montmartre and was expertly shot by cinematographer Henry Decae.

Bob le flambeur was a critical success. It tapped into the increasing popularity of American gangster movies and French pulp novels of the time. Such works were regarded by some as subversive alternatives to introspective French literature and the refined naturalism of film directors such as Jean Renoir.

Of course, support for these films was not unanimous. Film critics from the Stalinist French Communist Party were particularly hostile, denouncing American gangster films as “agents of youth contamination” and “Hollywood decadence”. These comments, however, would have boosted the popularity of these movies amongst sections of French youth, particularly those that later formed the New Wave movement.

Among the most enthusiastic supporters of *Bob le flambeur* were the

emerging writers and directors of the French New Wave, who were attracted to its clipped street language, low budget on-location work, moody street scenes and contemporary jazz soundtrack. Jean-Luc Godard's *Au bout de soufflé* (*Breathless* [1961]) is clearly influenced by the film and Melville was given a small role in it.

But even as Melville, with his trademark Stetson hat, sunglasses and trench coat, was becoming a role model for radical French filmmakers, he refused to be pigeonholed and sought to reach larger audiences. When he announced in 1960 that he was going to produce a big budget movie—*Léon Morin, prêtre*—he was denounced by *Cahiers du cinéma*, mouthpiece of the New Wave film critics, for selling out to commercial interests.

Léon Morin, prêtre was a French/Italian co-production with established film stars—Jean Pierre Belmondo and Emmanuelle Riva—and set in a French provincial town during WWII, which is occupied, first by Italian troops and then the Nazis.

Rejecting those who denounced the film for its alleged commercialism, Melville told one interviewer: “There is no question for me to stop having a style—since people are kind enough to recognise that I have one—but why should I not put my way of conceiving a story, of developing an adaptation, of directing a film, to the service of a cinema that is intelligent without being intellectual, efficient without being basely commercial.”

Belmondo plays Morin, the young priest and Riva plays the part of Barney, a local woman whose Jewish and communist husband has gone into hiding. Barney is a vocal critic of religion, which she decries as “opium of the people”, but is sexually attracted to Morin and falls in love. Notwithstanding her overtures and fantasies, their relationship is platonic.

In contrast to the extended silences of *Bob le flambeur*, the movie has lengthy discussions on religion and philosophy. While it was a commercial success, the film is hardly a landmark work and Melville returned to crime thrillers, which, apart from *L'Armée des ombres*, he continued making until his death.

When *L'Armée des ombres* was released in 1969, *Cahiers du cinéma* denounced it as “the first and greatest example of Gaullist film art”. This criticism was unfair and false. Notwithstanding weaknesses in Melville's later work, *L'Armée des ombres* is an extraordinary film and, in its own way, punctures some of the mythology that sections of the French bourgeoisie and figures like de Gaulle spun about their role in the Resistance.

Starring Lino Ventura, Paul Meurisse, Jean-Pierre Cassel and Simone Signoret, the movie, which was adapted from a 1943 novel by Joseph Kessel, is a visually austere but terrifyingly real work about a small group of Resistance fighters in Paris and Lyon. It opens with Nazi troops marching into Paris and then moves forward to a daring escape from the Nazis by Philippe Gerbier (Lino Ventura), the middle-aged leader of the group.

Like all Melville's films, while there is some onscreen violence it is restrained by today's standards and there are no significant action scenes. The tension, however, is acute. Melville brilliantly recreates the daily mental terror that confronts these self-sacrificing men and women and their constant fear of being captured, tortured and betraying their comrades. The most difficult and distressing task they face is having to murder their own comrades in order to protect the group.

One could argue that *L'Armée des ombres* does not elaborate on the underlying political motivations that animated these extraordinary individuals, but in the light of the film's tremendous artistic honesty and power, this would be churlish. The movie concludes by noting that every member of the group was captured and killed, many of them tortured to death, by the Nazis.

Melville's contribution to the post-WWII crime thriller genre was to take the essential elements of classic American gangster films and transpose them to urban France. Unlike his peers and most contemporary

filmmakers, his particular skill lay in rejecting the usual action devices and stripping down characters and scenes to their bare essentials. While his films move at a slow pace, time seems to be extended in some sequences, and the drama is intense and entirely character driven.

Le Doulos (1963), in my opinion, is probably Melville's best crime film. Absent is the sardonic humour of *Bob le flambeur* and in its place, the vicious reality of life in the criminal underworld, where no one can be trusted.

Le Doulos, which means “the hat” and is Parisian gangster slang for an informer, is like many of Melville's movies about hit men, burglars, informers and crooked police. It is complex and cleverly structured to keep audiences guessing as to plot direction, with numerous betrayals and double crosses and an unpredictable ending. It starred Jean-Paul Belmondo, as Silien, a police informer, and Italian actor Serge Reggiani as Faudel, a recently released burglar.

The film's opening scene—which includes an almost 10-minute shot, tracking Reggiani as he walks along a dark and dinghy footpath under a rail track—is masterful and menacing. The walk ends at the rundown home of a former criminal associate in some shadowy industrial badlands. The film's real strength, however, is that in recreating such visual and psychological atmospherics it contains an element of protest against this vicious and inhumane world.

Most contemporary critics hail Melville's *Le Samourai* and *Le Cercle rouge*, both starring Alain Delon, as masterpieces. Typical is the following overblown and superficial comment from the *Washington Post* on *Le Cercle rouge* entitled, “The rebirth of cool”: “There's something so elegant about these men, you feel as though you're watching a trench-coat ballet.”

Le Samourai (1967) explores the last hours of Jef Costello, a Parisian hitman, who has killed a nightclub owner and is involved in a desperate and complex cat and mouse game with the police. *Le Cercle rouge* (1970) is a slow-moving story about an elaborate jewel heist involving two criminals and an alcoholic former police marksman. Much of the film resembles Jules Dassin's *Rififi* made 14 years earlier in 1956.

These movies are without doubt expertly filmed with every movement and facial expression carefully choreographed, and various cunning plot twists. But they are detached from life, infused with a deep existential gloom and tend to venerate the criminal underworld.

As Bertrand Tavernier remarked in 1978 about *Le Samourai*: “You are in a cinema which copies or reproduces another cinema, without the slightest relationship with French society.” Tavernier, an earlier enthusiast of Melville's work, had previously worked as an assistant director and publicist for the filmmaker.

The underlying message of Melville's increasingly abstract and mannered work is that the world of the criminal is a metaphor for society as a whole. For Melville, the gangster—an amoral and backward declassed element—perfectly expressed urban alienation and therefore his often-tragic story reflected the “real human condition”.

By the late 1960s, Melville's gangster films had become more and more artificial. His stoic characters had no historical or social context and therefore always remained abstract and superficial.

In the sort of dialogue that became typical of Melville's later work, one of the characters in the *Le Cercle rouge* tells the police as he is being arrested, “Nothing can change a man's basic nature”. And in another scene, a police inspector declares, “All men are guilty. They're born innocent, but it doesn't last.”

In fact Melville, who always claimed to reject religion and ideology, had developed his own variation on Christianity's “original sin”. Humanity was essentially doomed, he claimed, and all it could do was stoically face this dark reality and try to soldier on.

In the last years of his life, Melville became even more cynical, particularly following the failure of his last film, *Un flic* (1972). As he

told one interviewer: “You do not put people in a cinema to teach them something, but to amuse them, to tell them a story as best you can, and deliver the kind of music-hall that, in the end, cinema is.”

In other words, Melville, who began his artistic life determined to challenge the existing cinematic forms, had decided that movies could do nothing more than superficially entertain their audiences. This pessimistic conclusion flowed organically from his existentialist outlook. If humanity can do nothing to fundamentally change its conditions of existence, then why should art have a higher social purpose or play an enlightening role?

Concluded

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