

# HONOR AMONG THIEVES

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THE CINEMA OF

Andrew Dickos

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# HONOR AMONG THIEVES

The Cinema of Jean-Pierre Melville



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*J. Melville*

The Cinema of Jean-Pierre Melville

by

Andrew Dickos



Contra Mundum Press · New York · London · Melbourne

*Honor Among Thieves:  
The Cinema of Jean-Pierre  
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Press Edition 2021.

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Library of Congress  
Cataloguing-in-Publication  
Data

Dickos, Andrew, 1952-

Honor Among Thieves:  
The Cinema of Jean-Pierre  
Melville / Andrew Dickos;

—1<sup>st</sup> Contra Mundum Press  
Edition  
244 pp., 6×9 in.

ISBN 9781940625478

I. Dickos, Andrew.  
II. Title.

2021933903





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# INTRODUCTION



When we watch Jean-Pierre Melville's films, especially his great film noirs, we feel as though we participate in a ceremony of observing heroic behavior, preordained and poetic. His characters are detached from us, yet their code of behavior reaches back to the classical codes defining moral acts. "A man has no choice," wrote Stephen Schiff, "if he's in a gangster picture, he looks a certain way, behaves a certain way, and dies in a certain way. Genre is destiny—and ethics."<sup>1</sup> And such behavior also permeated the protagonists in Melville's war films. As a *résistant* during the Occupation, Melville learned that the different modes of resistance by a French citizenry of ambiguous moral stature was fraught with uncomfortable truths and tragedy, from the quiet resistance of Vercors in *Le Silence de la mer* (*The Silence of the Sea*) to the uncompromising loyal commitment of the French *résistants* depicted in his peerless work, *L'Armée des ombres* (*Army of Shadows*). This form, this attitude, this commitment portrayed by the characters of his films, and indelible in his greatest characters, showed Melville to be an original force throughout his thirteen feature films.

His first film was the short, *24 Heures de la vie d'un clown* (*24 Hours in the Life of a Clown*), inspired by his childhood love of circus performance. And after that, he adapted Vercors's novel, and then Cocteau's *Les Enfants terribles*, before he then started shooting his film noirs. In the process, Melville restored to the French cinema the creative power of the director of the prewar years, unfettered by studio and



# THE GUY IN THE TRENCH COAT



# Flashbacks ON the Life and Career of Jean-Pierre Melville

*Do you remember the first film you saw?*

It was in a tavern in Belfort. I was a very little boy. Suddenly, the lights went off and a white sheet was pulled down on a wall, and then a projection started. It seemed amazing to me. It was a gangster story, with secret passages and all ...

—Jean-Pierre Melville<sup>1</sup>

Jean-Pierre Melville was born Jean-Pierre Grumbach on October 20, 1917 in the Chaussée-d'Antin quarter, in Paris's 9<sup>th</sup> arrondissement, to Berthe and Jules Grumbach, of Alsatian Jewish ancestry, who had moved there sixteen years earlier. The Grumbachs, including an older son and daughter, were socialist and cultured. Jean-Pierre's father and uncle, a successful Paris antiques dealer, were part of an extended family that infused an appreciation of the arts in the family's life.<sup>2</sup> His parents were enlightened enough to see the value in giving their young son a camera to play with when he was only six years old. "I got my first camera, a hand-cranked Pathé Baby, in January 1924," said Melville. "My first film was about the Chaussée d'Antin — where we were living at the time — as seen from my window. You could see the Cadum Baby, cars passing by, a little dog with St. Vitus's dance belonging to the lady who lived across the street."<sup>3</sup> Soon after, he was given a projector to view the short films he had made of "my father, my mother, my brother, my sister, and our apartment." By 1939, he had shot around thirty short films, his "features."<sup>4</sup>

“My love for cinema began with the talkies around 1929 or 30,” Melville recalled. “The first time I heard a word coming from a screen was in *White Shadows in the South Seas* [released in late 1928] by [W.S.] Van Dyke & [Robert] Flaherty...”<sup>5</sup> “The pull was stronger than anything else. I couldn’t shake off this absolute *need* to absorb films, films and more films all the time.”<sup>6</sup>

It wasn’t until after the coming of sound, on his 12<sup>th</sup> birthday, when he was given a 16mm camera, that his passion for shooting film grew; he still preferred going to the movies, though, which he would do all day long into early morning. The Cinémathèque Française did not yet exist — Henri Langlois and Georges Franju would establish it in 1936 — so Melville “created an impromptu course of self-directed film instruction,” film historian Tim Palmer noted. “He would regularly spend twenty-four consecutive hours in Parisian ciné-clubs and his favorite movie theaters, especially the Paramount, the Palais-Rochecouart, and the Apollo Gaité-Rochecouart.”<sup>7</sup>



Jean-Pierre Melville  
at 15 (1932).

Melville was sent to the Lycées Condorcet and Charlemagne in Paris and at the Lycée Michelet in Vanves, where he was a poor student all around and spent all his time reading Fantômas thrillers.<sup>8</sup> Along with some of his Condorcet classmates, he belonged to a street gang that used the Saint-Lazare railroad station as its headquarters. "In time we left school but continued to hang around Saint-Lazare. I must say that by the end of 1939," Melville recalled, "we were a real gang of hooligans."<sup>9</sup> The neighborhood provided them with adventures, and the flavor of Montmartre fueled the imagination of the young Melville, an imagination that would later find expression in the filmmaker's gangster noirs, especially *Bob le flambeur*. "You must remember that I knew the Cité Jeanne d'Arc — and anybody who never knew the 'Cité Jeanne d'Arc' in Paris doesn't know anything. It was a 'casbah' where no policeman ever dared set foot and where guys used to hide out when the police were after them ... From time to time the police made raids in an attempt to clean it up, but they just got bottles and things on their heads and had to retreat."<sup>10</sup>

Melville began his military service in October 1937 in the French colonial cavalry. He was conscripted into the army two years later and, by the time France surrendered to the Germans in June 1940, found himself trapped in action at Dunkirk. He was evacuated to England in October 1940. "I met Jean-Pierre Melville in Marseilles in 1940 or 41," said actor and future Melville star Pierre Grasset. "He was waiting for passage to Gibraltar in order to reach London, via Morocco or Algeria. I was in the same situation. His passage was well planned — even if he made jail in Spain, like everyone else. At the time, he was still called Jean-Pierre Grumbach."<sup>11</sup> Melville had taken the name 'Melville' in homage to one of his favorite American writers during his time undercover in

the Resistance, but once the war was over and he wanted to restore his family name, he found it cumbersome, now being known as Melville on his military papers and by hundreds of people. "I was even decorated under the name of Melville," he noted.<sup>12</sup>



Jean-Pierre Grumbach  
(right) in the military  
before the war, c. 1938.



Jean-Pierre Grumbach  
(right) in Bourne-  
mouth, England after  
the defeat at Dunkirk,  
June 5, 1940.

# Melville, the War, and the Resistance

It was a disgusting period for the French. Most of the French were shutting their mouths ... You had two kinds of French: you had people like Gerbier [the résistant in Melville's *L'Armée des ombres*], and you had the working class, and the Communist party, and the left parties, and the unions who were really organizing the Resistance to the Germans. The ones who refused, they saved the honor of the country.

— Pierre Lhomme, cinematographer on  
*L'Armée des ombres*<sup>13</sup>

“Don’t forget,” Melville recounted, “that there are more people who didn’t work for the Resistance than people who did. Do you know how many Résistants there were in France at the end of 1940? Six hundred.” By March 1943 the occupying Nazis began to deport forced French labor to Germany, sending many young people into the underground. “It was not a matter of patriotism,” he made clear, but much more of survival.<sup>14</sup>

Melville’s involvement with the Resistance came during this morally ambiguous epoch in modern French history. The French government surrendered to the occupying German forces on June 22, 1940, with control of the north and west of the nation ceded to them and the remaining two-fifths of the country left unoccupied. Marshal Philippe Pétain, a World War I hero, would govern this territory, with its capital at the spa town of Vichy. In the beginning, he had the support of the people; however, as the war took shape and German terror permeated the south, Pétain functioned as a collaborator enabling the fascist paramilitary police,

*Milice française*, to hunt down Resistance fighters. After being repatriated in France upon returning from London in 1941, Melville moved to the southern region and joined the liberation and Resistance groups, *Combat* and *Libération*. Following the landings in North Africa in 1942, he attempted to reach London again by ship, but the ship was seized by the Spanish, and he was imprisoned for several months on suspicion of espionage. During this time, his older brother Jacques, who was also active in the Resistance, was killed attempting to cross the Spanish border to reach him.



Jean-Pierre Melville (right) as a *résistant* in Marseille, 1941.

Melville then fought with the Free French forces in North Africa and Italy. He eventually made it back to London, where he became an agent for the Central Bureau of Intelligence Operations, the World War II forerunner of the French intelligence service working for DeGaulle's Free French forces. At this time, he also read for the first time Joseph Kessel's newly published novel, *L'Armée des ombres*, later to serve as a key document channeling Melville's passionate connection to the Resistance into one of his greatest works.

When I arrived in London in 1943, I saw twenty-seven films during my week's leave, and I quickly realized that the cinema had changed ... It was in London that I discovered a whole transatlantic cinema I did not know. I'm not talking about *Gone with the Wind*, which did resemble prewar cinema, but about the other twenty-six films made between 1942 and 1943. In London, the cinema and the world took a new turning point for me ... The American films of that time were landmarks in our lives.

— Jean-Pierre Melville<sup>15</sup>

Later in 1943, Melville found himself back in North Africa, in Tunisia, as a member of the First Regiment of Colonial Artillery. In March 1944, he was crossing the Garigliano River in central Italy fighting in the Battle of Monte Cassino. "There were still Germans at one end of the village," said Melville, "and Naples radio was playing Harry James's *Trumpet Rhapsody*."<sup>16</sup> By August 19, 1944, Melville's division was on the outskirts of Toulon, in France, chasing surrendering Germans. Death surrounded him. At one point a fellow soldier set down another young wounded fellow soldier. "They put him down under an apple tree in blossom," recalled Melville. "It was springtime, and I could see he was going to die.

So I did something I must have remembered from a film — you see how the cinema can haunt you? — I lit a cigarette and placed it between his lips. He looked at me for a second, took a couple of drags on it and died.”<sup>17</sup> In September of 1944, he was among the first uniformed Frenchmen to liberate Lyon when it was still overrun by Germans.

Back home now, toward the end of the war, Melville endured the hardship of wartime privations. “There was no coal left during the war, and fuel oil wasn’t used for heating in Paris,” he recalled. “So apartments were freezing cold, especially in old houses with huge rooms; and

people built these little wooden living spaces to go inside rooms, where they could eat or read and be more or less sheltered. You can’t imagine what life in Paris was like at that time. People often slept fully dressed, shoes and socks included, because there was nothing one could do about the cold... Things weren’t much better where food was concerned. Hunger became an obsession. You thought of nothing else. I can still remember the indescribable joy I experienced one day when I managed to make a sort of sandwich with lard and garlic.”<sup>18</sup>

More than any other postwar French filmmaker, Melville fought bravely and saw the ravages of war. “I was a soldier for six years, two years in the Resistance,” he said. “You didn’t have to be a soldier to live the war — you only had to be machine-gunned, bombed, or sent to a concentration camp.”<sup>19</sup> Years after his death, his wife Florence Welsh summed up Melville’s experience during those years: “He loved ‘his war.’ He said that childhood, prison, and war are the places where you make friends.”<sup>20</sup>

After the war, Melville first and foremost resumed his avid indulgence in moviegoing as American films were now flooding the theaters. Romances, westerns, melodramas, and, above all, film noirs – noirs such as *Double Indemnity*, *Murder, My Sweet*, *Laura*, and *The Big Sleep* – were seen for the first time on French screens. In 1946, the influx of American noirs shown cast a decidedly different worldview than that of the prewar French noirs, which, as critic Jean-Pierre Chartier wrote in 1946, “struck fewer chords of revolt, love was passing through them like a mirage of a better world, an implicit social demand was opening the door to hope and, if figures in these films were desperate, they sustained our pity or our sympathy.” In the American film noirs, “there’s nothing like that. These are monsters, criminals, or sick people that nothing excuses and who act as they do only by fate of the illness which is in them.”<sup>21</sup> It was these works, and among the many gangster films of the 1930s, which would inspire Melville to infuse the totemic language of the genre he reinterpreted, but would pay homage to, in creating his own film noirs a decade later. Along with these movies, there were other American cultural imports that captivated him and his friends. “We saw Huston’s *The Asphalt Jungle* ten times together,” recalled Pierre Grasset. “We often went to the Blue Note on the rue d’Artois to listen to all the American jazzmen. He loved jazz. We saw Dizzy Gillespie together, two nights in a row, when he came to Paris after the war.”<sup>22</sup>

Before loving the cinema, I loved the circus. Of this love, I had kept a friendship with the clown Béby, who was at that time the greatest living clown to honor ... He could have become, before the war and before he was too old, a wonderful movie comedian.

—Jean-Pierre Melville<sup>23</sup>

Just as American films were often preceded by short films or newsreels during the 1930s through the early 60s, the French screen showed shorts, usually of vaudeville and music-hall performers, before the feature began. Melville decided to make his “trial run” as a professional filmmaker by shooting a short film of his friend Béby. “It was 1947 and I had Agfa film that I bought in 1942,” he said. “The patina of age, this time, was stubborn. There was another little problem. We were shooting a silent film and the stenographer scrupulously noted everything that Béby said in his scenes. But once filmed, we realized that he could not read, and we had to synchronize everything word by word.”<sup>24</sup> Melville was embarrassed by the product, although producer Pierre Braunberger liked it and asked him for a copy, which Melville agreed to give him on condition that his name be taken from the credits. Braunberger had some success distributing it.<sup>25</sup>

The project of making a film by the end of the war in France was a challenge for anyone with no connections to the film industry and unions of the day. A filmmaker had to qualify as such through previous work and union representation but could receive neither without this previous experience. This irony compounded such film production because, as in the hardened studio period of the Golden Age of Hollywood, any film made outside the system faced the additional burden of finding distribution throughout the

several theater circuits tied in to the industry. The process in many ways resembled the one independent filmmakers in the United States faced toward the end of the twentieth century: producers came together with a project proposal; found investors, often with the commitment of a creative team for the project; and then proceeded to film without the support of a studio structure. During the 1930s — the first golden age of French cinema, which brought Jean Vigo, Jean Renoir, Marcel Carné, René Clair, and other directors to screen prominence — this style of filmmaking, eminently more personal and limited, predominated to great artistic success, for although filmmaking artisans had been part of a loose production community, they had yet to be considered part of a production *industry*.<sup>26</sup> By the end of World War II, the landscape had changed, and with that change, Melville found himself unable to break into a field that now insisted on a professional background. And union membership, controlled by a Communist-inspired leadership, was not only restrictive, but also necessary and costly. “This was the new French film industry at its most inflexible,” wrote Tim Palmer. “No IDHEC, no training, no prospects.”<sup>27</sup>

# The Jenner Studios

It was during the night of May 10, 1944, that I really decided to have a studio. I was on the banks of the Garigliano. The offensive had begun ... I really had this feeling that the war was going to end, and for the first time since it started, I was surprised to find myself making plans that night. All at once I said to myself, 'Maybe I won't be killed. Maybe the war will end. The first thing I'll do in Paris is look for a place to set up a studio ...'

— Jean-Pierre Melville<sup>28</sup>

The idea of establishing one's own film studio to make movies in a city facing postwar privations sounds as audaciously inventive as it does foolish. However, Melville had nothing to lose by it; he had been driven to it. He formed the Organisation Générale Cinématographique (O.G.C.), his production company, on November 5, 1945, and opened his own studio, Studios Jenner, at 25 bis rue Jenner in the 13<sup>th</sup> arrondissement, in 1946. A two-story building, it would serve not only as Melville's studio but also as his home. "The studio wasn't especially large," noted Volker Schlöndorff, who later on assisted Melville on film projects. "He had more or less built it himself after the war in an old factory on the Place d'Italie, but it was large enough nonetheless to house two sound studios, one small wardrobe room, two cutting rooms, and a screening room. We would rehearse downstairs in the studio, but Jean-Pierre, complete with coat and hat, wouldn't arrive until the scene was ready to be shot. Then he would take his place in his director's chair, next to the camera, and would not leave that spot until the evening ... The directions given the actors were never of a psychological nature, but always behavioristic: gesture, pace, where and how to look."<sup>29</sup>



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HONOR AMONG THIEVES  
was handset in InDesign CC

The text font is OHno *Swear Text*

The display font is Astigmatic *Makeshift*

Book design & typesetting: Alessandro Segalini

Cover image: Jean-Pierre Melville, *Un flic* (1972)

Cover design: CMP

HONOR AMONG THIEVES  
is published by Contra Mundum Press.



Contra Mundum Press · New York · London · Melbourne

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The crosscurrents between the classic Hollywood cinema and France's postwar cinema are rich in producing iconic imagery with philosophical resonance, and no filmmaker has immersed himself in this project more than Jean-Pierre Melville (1917–1973). Nurtured on American movies, and living through the turbulent years of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, Melville memorialized his wartime experiences in the Resistance with works like *Le Silence de la Mer* and *L'Armée des ombres* while alternately presenting the stark glamor of his postwar film noir heroes in films like *Bob le flambeur* and *Le Samouraï*.

A filmmaker who redefined the rules of independent filmmaking and influenced a generation of New Wave acolytes, Melville was also able to captivate the popular audience with stories of beleaguered existential outsiders — gangsters, thieves & rogue cops — as they wend their way toward a greater definition of our modern human condition.

*Honor Among Thieves* profiles this filmmaker's eventful life and discusses his cinema as an essential body of work in our reckoning of postwar European cinema, and of Melville's own influence on the filmmakers who admire him.

 Contra Mundum Press

ISBN 978-1-940625-47-8



9 781940 625478

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