

Jean-Pierre Melville and 1970s French film style

Tim Palmer

Abstract

This article examines the career of Jean-Pierre Melville, and argues that his impact upon French cinema has been neglected. First, it outlines the institutional and (non-) professional contexts of Melville's work in film, as an independent producer-director. Next, it considers the difficulties that Melville has presented to scholars and critics alike, in terms of his idiosyncratic historical placement within accounts of French cinema. Finally, the essay addresses Melville as a stylist, analysing not only the key aesthetic qualities of his films, but also how they relate to certain of his film-making contemporaries, in particular Robert Bresson. Working primarily from Melville's last completed film, *Un Flic/Dirty Money* (1972), this section traces out the director's ascetic approach to film style, focusing on Melville's use of colour, sound and performance.

Just as the 1970s remain an under-represented period in French film studies, so too have many of that decade's most significant film-makers been overlooked. The paucity of scholarship on the multifaceted career of Jean-Pierre Melville, in the 1970s and elsewhere, is a testament to this critical neglect. Yet in his public persona, industrial practice and film directing alike, Melville cultivated a bold, unusual and often exceptional style. Occasionally hailed as the 'Father' of the New Wave, that most decisive of French cultural moments, but famous also for his symbolic appropriation of Herman Melville's surname as a *nom-de-guerre*, Melville drew equally upon both French and American sources. Acclaimed by some critics as a pioneer, even a director who embodied a Resistance mentality, Melville was nonetheless recognized by others as being significantly, perhaps integrally, indebted to American classicism and the Hollywood tradition. Yet crucially, outside of cult cinephile circles, Melville's position in both French and American film histories has typically been on the fringes, or else marginalized completely.

Sporting dark glasses, a large Stetson and thick cigars for most of his public appearances, Melville was an unabashed Americanophile, retaining his taste for things Hollywood long after the vogue had passed among his more celebrated New Wave contemporaries. In equally individualistic fashion, when Melville first turned his hand to film-making at the end of World War II, he refused to let any institutional or production protocols hamper his ambitions. So in August 1947, with a minimal crew, black-market film stock and a shoestring budget, he began the principal photography of *Le Silence de la mer*, his first 'professional' feature production, with neither the rights from its author, Vercors, nor the required film industry membership card from the Centre National de la Cinématographie. Indeed, as Melville later recounted in interview, but for the timely intervention of GLC Laboratories, whose post-production costs were waived as a loan on the director's projected profits, the film's negative could never have been developed at all.¹

Undaunted by this fraught but ultimately successful initial venture, Melville went on to forge links with one of France's most famous artists, Jean Cocteau, with whom he collaborated in the making of his second film, *Les Enfants terribles/The Strange Ones* (1949). More unconventionally still, in the early 1950s Melville bought an abandoned

1 See Nogueira (1971: 22-24) for a full account of *Le Silence de la mer's* makeshift production circumstances.

warehouse in the 13^{ème} arrondissement of Paris, then used the proceeds from his subsequent films to turn it into his own production base. Work on what became his Studio Jenner was eventually completed in 1956 – a facility that Melville would also occasionally hire out to other companies. Operating himself as an independent producer/film-maker, or infrequently as a director for hire, Melville typically assembled his own cast, crew and film-making staff, and allowed himself considerable freedom in his choice of projects. Over the course of his career, Melville frequently switched genres, was often forced to trim his budgets drastically, yet all the while worked with pre-eminent figures in the French film industry: from influential cinematographer Henri Decaë to stars such as Jean-Paul Belmondo, Alain Delon and Catherine Deneuve. His body of work encompassed wartime dramas (*L'Armée des ombres/Army In the Shadows*, 1969), melodramas (*Quand tu liras cette lettre/When You Read This Letter*, 1953; one of the many films Melville subsequently disowned) and a series of increasingly stark, urban police thrillers (*Bob Le Flambeur/Fever Heat*, 1955; *Le Doulos/The Finger Man*, 1962; *Le Samouraï/The Godson*, 1967; *Un Flic/Dirty Money*, 1972) in the later years of his career. But even when he made recognizable genre pieces, Melville's films remained stylized and distinctive. As Philippe de Comès and Michel Marmin have emphatically put it, 'Melville's oeuvre defies all traditional classification' (Comès and Marmin 1985: 64).

In the course of this unpredictable career, Melville carried out substantial location shooting in both France and America, sometimes blurring the actual geography of the settings, particularly in *Deux Hommes dans Manhattan/Two Men in Manhattan* (1958). As well as directing, Melville served variously, when circumstances demanded, as his own producer, screenwriter, editor and production designer. Beyond his own projects, Melville's work in cinema also included a number of notable acting appearances. Most famously, he was cast by Jean-Luc Godard as the writer Parvulesco in *À Bout de souffle/Breathless* (1959), in a role best described as an extended homage. He played the lead character in his own *Deux Hommes dans Manhattan*, and had cameos in other directors' films: an uncredited bit part for Cocteau in *Orphée/Orpheus* (1949), and a walk-on spot in Claude Chabrol's *Landni/Bluebeard* (1962).

Ever the iconoclast, Melville's position within film studies can also be termed problematic. In Colin Crisp's monumental study of production practice in French cinema, for example, Melville's work is used largely as the exception that proves the rule. For within the typical 1950s production patterns of France, Crisp argues, Melville evades classification, and simply does not conform to the overarching tendency. As such, Crisp labels him, 'the most dramatic instance of [the] drive for economic autonomy' (Crisp 1993: 281), but does not dwell either on the ramifications of this independence or on the possibility of Melville's actual influence within the industry. Equally, the stylistic effects or textual results of Melville's various modes of film practice do not receive any sustained attention. In an identical tactic, Volume 2 of Roy Armes's *French Cinema Since 1946* attempts to provide an historical or contextual description of Melville's career only by calling him an 'individualist (...) whose status as a film-maker is still very much in dispute' (Armes 1966: 37). As presented within such critical approaches, then, Melville is rather outside of the sweep of French film history. He is a director who cannot just be ignored, but is also a figure who does not dwell peaceably within a broader historiographical framework.

In Anglo-American film histories as well, Melville slips through the cracks. What little work that exists in the English language on Melville tends (loosely) to outline his work as straddling two cinematic traditions, French and American, but chiefly discusses

it only by way of its affiliations with *film noir*. Foster Hirsch is a case in point: his *Detours and Lost Highways: A Map of Neo-Noir* delimits Melville's career, declaring it to be 'bound to the terms set by the "other", the conventions of classic noir' (Hirsch 1999: 107). A major consequence of such a broad critical approach is that the generic complexities of Melville's films – and, moreover, any sense of their stylistic propensities – are abruptly lost. Robin Buss, too, classes *Deux Hommes dans Manhattan*, and Melville's thrillers more generally, as being what he calls extended 'tributes to American *film noir*' (Buss 1994: 54). He goes on, however, to define both the American *noir* tradition and the counter-examples of Melville's films only in terms of their moral ambiguities and overall narrative 'tone', rather than any concrete factors of *mise-en-scène*, style or structure.

Stated generally, my premise in engaging with Melville as a case study is that his overall career – as an idiosyncratic stylist on-screen, and an industrial renegade of sorts off-screen – provides us with a neglected yet vital source of material for charting both institutional and aesthetic developments in French cinema. Melville warrants closer attention on his own merits, but his legacy can also be used to cast new light on the evolution and broader tendencies of French film style more generally. Never a director intimately associated with large-scale movements within French cinema – as Carné is with Poetic Realism, say, or Godard is with the New Wave – Melville has for too long been marginalized in histories of French film. A central issue in his tenuous scholarly position arises from the nature of his projects, and their classification. For although he worked in popular genres and often enjoyed commercial success, Melville does not fit comfortably with the image of the commercial/mainstream *metteur-en-scène* – recall that his work was often praised, rather than condemned, by prickly *Cahiers du cinéma* critics such as Truffaut and Chabrol. Equally though, Melville's films have never received the critical attention (and canonical recognition) afforded to more high-profile art cinema directors such as Bresson and Godard, film-makers whose widely-noted artistic severity gave rise to films that evaded generic classification, just as they eschewed a mass-market (or lowbrow) appeal. In critical discourses, then, Melville is neither an outright pragmatist, concerned only with box-office, nor an auteurist icon, striving to reinvent the medium.

Yet Melville's career needs to be more centrally addressed in order to refine our conception of France's cinematic heritage. My approach here, while offering a number of key stylistic contexts to Melville's film-making, will primarily treat his films as a unified, developing body of work – texts with a very discernible directorial presence. To reiterate Ginette Vincendeau's extremely welcome recent work on Melville, justification for such a director-centred project can be provided by the sheer degree of control that Melville, in his various creative capacities, was able to exert over his films (see Vincendeau 2001). That Melville created some of the most compelling thrillers and dramas to emerge from France is perhaps no longer in question. The case for his cinematic craftsmanship, however, and stylistic significance, still very much needs to be established.

Despite the fact that Melville died in August 1973, mid-way through his unrealized final project, *Contre-enquête*, his contribution to the development of 1970s French film style was still very much of consequence. In order to explore Melville's work, both on its own stylistic terms and in the light of his key contemporaries, the remainder of this paper will focus largely on the director's last completed film, *Un Flic*, which was released in 1972. At least ostensibly a police thriller, *Un Flic* marked the director's third collaboration with his favoured star Alain Delon. Very much following the austere,

2 For a summary of press criticisms of *Un Flic*, see Zimmer and Béchade (1983: 117). This is one of the very few monographs on the director.

pared-down aesthetic trajectory established by two of its immediate predecessors, *Le Samourai* and *Le Cercle rouge*, *Un Flic* can be seen retrospectively as being both a summation and culmination of Melville's directorial strategies. By outlining a set of terms to analyse and also contextualize *Un Flic*, I hope to address how Melville relied on the prerogatives of both art and popular cinema. Beyond that, I will argue, we can see how Melville developed a bold new set of aesthetic parameters, a style all of his own.

As a point of departure, Jill Forbes has provided an insightful reflection on the cinematic context of Melville's late-phase police thrillers. Outlining a category that she calls the 'fetishist polar', she defines an important cycle – incorporating films by Henri Verneuil and Jacques Deray, among others – that drew on the American thriller tradition of the 1940s and 1950s, only to develop a range of new and specifically French textual elements (see Forbes 1992: 53–56). Such films, she argues, use the iconic presence of police thriller stars such as Delon, Belmondo, Lino Ventura and the later appearances of Jean Gabin, while also reflecting cynically on the cultural relationship between Europe and America. (Lucy Mazdon, too, has noted the Franco-American dialogue that informed the *polar* genre's evolution in France after the 1950s; see Mazdon 2000: 114–15.)

Above all, Forbes's emphasis in detailing the fetishist police thriller is on the restricted, almost repressive qualities of characterization in the films, which tend to reduce their nominal heroes to an opaque or outright unreadable collection of tics and mannerisms. As we will see, the notion of a pared-down aesthetic form will be an important motif within Melville's stylistic techniques overall. More centrally, though, I want to explore Melville's films as what I call a 'perceptual cinema' – a system in which more obvious, familiar or conventional film devices (of colour, sound, acting, etc.) are either downplayed or withheld entirely. Instead, Melville pursues a startlingly spare, ascetic *mise-en-scène*, one with crucial consequences for the viewer of his films, working to grasp their subtleties. While Melville may have favoured thriller narratives, he also depended on a radically muted and minimalist approach to film style.

Colour in black and white

Melville's relationship with the French critical press was occasionally rocky, but he received a particularly bemused set of reactions to *Un Flic*. Dominant in the film's reviews were adjectives such as 'sterile', 'dehumanized' and 'deep-frozen.' René Prédal, writing for *Jeune cinéma*, went so far as to call it an empty and utterly banal piece of work.² Leaving aside the pejorative slant of these comments, however, we can already begin to trace out a collective response to the subdued aesthetic of *Un Flic*. Within this visual design, of course, a principal, even dominating factor is the director's strikingly de-emphasized use of colour – and here, *Un Flic* really can be considered the extension of Melville's stylistic preoccupations.

Another helpful starting point is a telling comment that Melville himself made to Rui Nogueira in an extended interview. When challenged on the subject of his peculiar *mise-en-scène*, the director declared that, 'My dream is to make a colour film in black and white, in which there is only one tiny detail to remind us that we are watching a film in colour' (Nogueira 1971: 130). Melville's example to demonstrate this principle is the depiction of Jeff Costello's (Alain Delon) apartment in *Le Samourai*: a decrepit, curtained room, shot so as to foreground a range of deep, autumnal browns and blacks in both colouration, furniture and décor. Low lighting levels, and a dismal urban exterior accentuate the overall dinginess and gloom. Such was Melville's obsessive attention to set design, in fact, that he replaced banknotes, Costello's cigarette packet, and the label

on a bottle of mineral water with black-and-white photocopies, so as to preserve the dark, sepia colour scheme. Costello's pet, a female bullfinch in a cage, was chosen because of its dull plumage.

The opening sequence of *Un Flic* would seem to confirm Melville's interest in a severely restrained colour palette. However, whereas the *Le Samouraï* scene was shot on a studio set, with dim interior lighting and urban decay at least partially motivating the toned-down visual scheme, *Un Flic* opens with location shots of a long vista along the Saint-Jean de Monts seafront. So how to motivate a suppression of colour from this image? Most obviously, the sequence is filmed during climatic conditions that are conducive to a dull, hazy visual uniformity. As we gradually surmise that a bank robbery is about to take place, so too do we notice a storm brewing: shrouds of heavy mist hang over the shoreline, sheets of rain sweep over the criminals' car, and a dense, wet fog is glimpsed moving in from the sea – all factors which lend a dreary hue to the image. Just before the bank-raid starts, there is even one extraordinary shot that is taken from inside the getaway car, through its windshield, resulting in the screen literally dimming from a light to dirty grey as rain accumulates on the glass.

I offer this scene in detail as a quintessential motif, because here and elsewhere, Melville is a director who is particularly sensitive to the weather. Thematically, perhaps, the constant recurrence of drab or overcast settings could be worked into a reading of Melville's doomed protagonists, all of whom seem compelled to tragic or futile endeavours. But analysing Melville's style more closely, as an achievement in and of itself, we can trace out more fully the minutiae of his aesthetic decisions. Throughout many of the city scenes in *Le Samouraï*, for example, Melville depicts Delon's movements either at night, or under a dense cloud cover which often renders the same effect as in *Un Flic*, of streets darkened, filled with a greyish light. Early in *Le Cerve rouge*, similarly, the roadside confrontation between Vogel (Gian Maria Volonté), Corey (Delon) and two hoodlums is set during yet more typical Melvillian weather conditions: a damp, wintry late-afternoon, saturated with a mist that merges with low-level clouds and a drizzle that is turning to rain. In terms of timing his location shoots for daylight, throughout *Un Flic*, *Le Samouraï*, *L'Armée des ombres*, *Le Cerve rouge* and other films besides, Melville preferred staging his scenes either in the weaker light of dawn or the gathering twilight of dusk.³

In *Un Flic*'s opening heist scene, when the crooks move into the foyer of the bank, its dimmed interior amplifies this aesthetic trajectory. The level of greyish light emanating from the sea-facing facade is lowered substantially by the tinted glass in the bank's doors and windows. (As with Jeff's shuttered apartment room, a sombre and less colourful textual range is therefore at least partially diegetically motivated.) All of the bank's inhabitants wear either black or grey suits and overcoats. The desks and walls are a mottled grey, and the carpet a shade of grubby brown. In this foyer and the surrounding office vestibules, in fact, Melville limits his on-screen palette to steely greys, shades of matte brown, musty whites and black.

Returning to Melville's remark about the 'one tiny detail' that reminds us of the presence/absence of colour, however, it is crucial to note also that the sequence relies on small visual accents or highlights that juxtapose with these muted tones. During one medium close-up of Simon (Richard Crenna), for example, in which his body almost fills the frame, Melville includes an out-of-focus but still bright red clock in the background, visible over his left shoulder. Similarly, in the first long shot that establishes Simon's entrance into the bank, we glimpse a small poster in the mid-ground at extreme frame left: a purple instruction sign with pink typeface. As the scene unfolds,

3 In an interesting parallel remark made in an interview, Melville spoke with obvious approval about how dark a cityscape New York was during his 1958 shoot of *Deux Hommes dans Manhattan* (see Noguiera 1971: 74).

then, Melville carefully and systematically disrupts his desaturated scheme with these contrasted colour details. By consequence, certain key props (the crooks' cyan-blue money bags, the crimson pedal that triggers the bank's alarm system) or zones of space (the purple poster at frame left, towards which Simon will walk) come then to acquire an iconic and ocular intensity. Melville's visual style grabs our attention, while alerting us to important details in the frame.

I dwell on this conflation of set and colour design here because it seems to me that Melville's narratives are meticulously (uniquely?) attuned to overarching systems of visual texture. When Coleman drives through the night-time city streets later in *Un Flic*, the same 'cold' scheme predominates, with sallow greens, dark greys, dull whites and black shown throughout the images of the inner city. Again, however, Melville underscores key narrative moments by working in vivid colour contrasts, mainly focusing on warmer hues of red. At one point, Coleman interviews an informant who wears bright, cherry-coloured lipstick. Moments later, more bizarrely, another low-life colleague leans in towards his car from under a streetlight, and we see that he is dressed in a scarlet Santa Claus costume.

Silence and the sea

Film viewers also listen, and another vital aspect of Melville's austere style emerges from his use of sound – or, once again, its pared-down nature or absence. Melville provided another provocative commentary in this regard. For as he recalls quite gleefully in the Nogueira interview, Alain Delon was apparently convinced to take the central role in *Le Samouraï* only after an aborted read-through, during which the actor interrupted Melville with, 'You've been reading the script for seven and a half minutes now and there hasn't been a word of dialogue. That's good enough for me. I'll do the film' (Nogueira 1971: 129). Even taking this anecdote somewhat lightly, it is nonetheless a fact that Melville's films are at times breathtakingly devoid of spoken lines.

There are no words said in the first nine minutes of *Le Samouraï* and the first eight-and-a-half of *Un Flic*. Instead of conversation, then, the favoured device in Melville's openings is to show a portentous quotation to foreshadow, or dramatically heighten, what is at stake in the ensuing non-verbal action. Fade-up in *Le Doulos* is accompanied by a rubric from Céline, stating that: 'One must choose ... to die or to live'. The caption of *Le Samouraï* reads, 'There is no greater solitude than that of the Samurai, unless perhaps that of the tiger in the jungle'. (A quotation apparently lifted from the Book of Bushido that Melville later admitted to fabricating – a whimsical decision indicative of the playfulness underlying these opening stylistic exercises.) In *Un Flic*, the caption asserts that: 'The only feelings that men have ever been able to inspire in a policeman are ambiguity and derision' – a line that Delon eventually mutters to himself later in the film.

But overall, though, in the absence of Melvillian dialogue, background sound and pure 'noise' come to proliferate. And alongside his use of colour, staging and set design, Melville is meticulously concerned with the texture and timbre of the interwoven strands on the soundtrack. Let us return briefly to the opening of *Un Flic* here. I outlined earlier how Melville's use of landscape and weather configures the toning-down of the film's colour scheme, but it is revealing how these elements also structure the soundtrack within this sequence. So while the dominant trope of the image-track becomes the damp greys of the rain, sky and road, the corresponding aural counterpart comes from the dull crash of the breaking waves on the beach, as well as the swirling noise of the windswept rain. A mid-range greyish visual hue is thereby counterpoised

with the ambient aural textures of the rainstorm. For a final strategy, just as with the bank sequence, an extra strand or highlight is then added in order to hone our perceptual interest: the strident shriek of a hovering seagull, which Melville edits into the seafront sequence as a contrasting, higher-pitched soundtrack counterpoint.

At times, Melville's control of these disparate soundtrack aspects is so acute that a kind of aural narrative results. A good example of this occurs during the murder of Marc (Jean Desailly) in the hospital by Cathy (Catherine Deneuve). Having been critically wounded during the bank robbery skirmish, Marc's location has now been deduced by the police. They close in to arrest him, and the remaining three crooks, along with Cathy, Simon's duplicitous girlfriend, attempt to dispose of him before he can talk. The men's attempt to reach Marc fails, but Cathy, disguised as a nurse, is able to penetrate his hospital room. Once inside, she injects his drip with a lethal poison. Again, there is no dialogue in this scene, so instead the unfolding plot is largely represented through sound: a low, metallic hum from the machine at his bedside, the rasping gasps of Marc's laboured breathing, and the shrill, tinny beeps of his heart monitor. As in the opening sequence, the three aural elements – two mid-range/bass and a counterpointed high treble – are interwoven on the soundtrack. And as Cathy carries out the murder, Melville represents the moment of death *not* by cutting to Marc's stricken face, but instead showing us the monitor screen, then abruptly removing the high pitched beeps from the soundtrack – so we hear that Marc's heart has now stopped beating.

Essentially, then, the unfolding drama of the plot is underpinned by sound. And here, a fruitful connection could be made with Jacques Tati – another director whose critical reputation is often uneasily poised between popular and art-house traditions. Compare *Un Flic*'s use of ambient aural soundscapes with that of the beach scenes in *Les Vacances de Monsieur Hulot/Monsieur Hulot's Holiday* (1952), or, more tellingly, within the urban context of 'Tatville' in the notoriously stylized *Play Time* (1967). During both of Tati's films, an amazingly skilful use of foley work and/or sound effects underscores the rhythms and rituals of the characters' actions. Melville's style, too, relies on a viewer closely attending to the soundtrack. Consider, for example, the ending of *Un Flic*. I will return to this scene later, but for now we should note the fact that Coleman/Delon's climactic emotional trauma is conveyed to us solely through sound. Just before the end credits, as he drives off in medium close-up, Delon's face remains completely impassive, and instead it is the insistent beeping of his (ignored) car phone that hints at his inability now to function normally. Shortly afterwards, Melville resorts to a more conventional soundtrack (a brooding burst of music), but at many crucial moments in his films, details of diegetic sound alone convey the narrative.

Acting tough

A perennial debate around Melville's work is a (generally unfavourable) comparison with the film-making of Robert Bresson. In the interview with Nogueira, indeed, Melville occasionally becomes quite hostile towards his colleague – or at least to the prevailing notion that Melville's techniques were inspired by Bressonian art. When discussing *Le Silence de la mer*, for example, Melville opines that:

I'm sorry, but it's Bresson who has always been Melvillian. Take a look at *Les Anges du Péché* [*Angels of the Streets*, 1943] and *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne* [*The Ladies of the Bois de Boulogne*, 1945] and you will see that they aren't yet Bressonian. Take a

4 See Reader (2000: 3-5) for a concise discussion of Bressonian (non-) acting.

5 The argument could also be made, perhaps, that Bresson sometimes took the reduced emotionality of his *modèles* to self-parodic extremes: witness the bloodshed, gore and emotional turmoil that is at all times treated with dispassionate ambivalence in *Lancelot du lac/Lancelot of the Lake* (1974).

6 See Naremore (1988) for general conceptions of actorly style in film.

look at *Le Journal d'un Curé de Campagne*, on the other hand, and you'll see that it's Melville. *Le Journal d'un curé de campagne* [Diary of a Country Priest, 1951] is *Le Silence de la Mer!* Some of the shots are identical. (Nogueira 1971: 27)

The stylistic dialogue between Melville and Bresson, I would argue, continued into the 1970s, especially through the two directors' adoption and development of a third aspect of cinematic laconicism – performance.

Notoriously, Bresson rejected the word 'actor' when conceiving of performance in cinema. Instead he favoured the term *modèle* (model) and disavowed the creative role that such contributors brought to his film-making practice. As Keith Reader reports, the *modèles* were usually obliged by Bresson to speak their lines over and over again – often up to fifty times in rehearsal – thereby to eschew any latent emotionality in their eventual delivery before the camera.⁴ In his film-making after *Le Journal d'un curé de campagne*, moreover, Bresson refused to use any professional actors again, preferring instead to cast unknowns, and often people without any film experience, as his leads. It was only by taking such radical steps, Bresson believed, that a truly authentic rendering of scripted lines and actions could become possible. (Tati, incidentally, also held with a strategic use of non-professionals; he actually gave the pivotal role of Barbara, Hulot's ostensible love interest in *Play Time*, to his neighbour's *au pair*.)

We can rapidly trace out some similarities between Bressonian and Melvillian performance modes. Most obvious initially is the fact that even at times of acute emotional malaise – and physical or mental suffering is common in the narratives of both these directors – the actors' enunciation of their lines remains at all times calm, deadpan, even flat. Gestures are minimal and restrained, and are almost never used to inflect or inflate the dramatic context of the scene-at-hand. By the later stages of their careers – a comparison of *Un Flic* and *Le Diable, probablement/The Devil Probably* (1977) is quite instructive – both Melville and Bresson had taken this form of acting to an almost-neutral extreme. Overall though, seen retrospectively, the effect remains startling, and is, I would claim, a major reason as to why, when compared with more forceful or stylized contemporaneous actors (Marlon Brando, for example, along with many other Method performers) these films have tended to date so well.⁵

While Bresson rejected the professional actor as being anathema to his methodology, however, Melville wholeheartedly endorsed the use of French 'stars'. 'Stars are important', he asserted in the 1966 documentary *Jean-Pierre Melville: Portrait en neuf poses* (Labarthe, 1966), and confirmed with some vehemence that they 'make my films more effective'. Bresson's approach, then, was to take a non-actor and to craft the raw material embodied therein into rigorously controlled, narratively contained moments of *modèle*-projection. Melville, on the other hand, used freely the most flamboyant or well-known of stars, but carefully imposed limits on the expressive range of their performances. Commonly, his tactics were to minimize their lines, remove or dilute their idiosyncratic traits, and restrict their customary expressive techniques and style, or personal actorly ideolects, overall.⁶

Take the case of Jean-Paul Belmondo. Throughout the delirium of Godard's *À Bout de souffle* and even more overtly in the follow-up *Pierrot le fou/Pierrot Goes Wild* (1965), we see Belmondo (whose charismatic face seems made for cinema) at his broadest and most unrestrained acting extremes; he mugs, does imitations of Humphrey Bogart, sings and dances, broods, capers, and generally lets rip. Equally, in the Gabin star vehicle *Un Singe en hiver/It's Hot in Hell* (1962), the narrative is built around two set-pieces that present Belmondo's roguish character through exaggerated acting; he performs a

drunken flamenco on a tavern table-top, then stages a mock bullfight with traffic on a busy road. All of which provides great entertainment, but not of the sort yielded by his central role in *Léon Morin, Prêtre*/*The Forgiven Sinner* (1961). As directed by Melville, it is a sober, quirk-free and relatively inexpressive, even neutral, Belmondo that emerges. So restrained is the acting, in fact, that when Belmondo is allowed to deviate even minutely from the de-emphasized mode, the resulting scene can acquire a surprisingly strong emotional charge. Thus, at the film's conclusion, after the priest's final meeting with Barny (Emmanuelle Riva), instead of the normal, ritualized pattern of her departure – Morin/Belmondo walks her to the door, she descends, he goes back inside – Belmondo pauses for three seconds at the entrance before returning to his apartment. Blocked and staged so precisely, this slight pausing of movement comes to resonate with the character's repressed feelings of sadness and regret.

In *Léon Morin, Prêtre*, and throughout Melville's films more generally, we can discern an emphasis on the actor's input as a series of actions rather than as an expressive means to represent character interiority. Moreover, by casting Belmondo, or other such screen icons, all of whom already had striking star personae, Melville essentially avoided the need to establish much character motivation or personal traits. Movement itself, instead, and the concomitant depiction of physical activities, are what became more important. In this light, Colin McArthur has argued for Melville as a practitioner of what he calls a 'cinema of process' in which the 'real-time' on-screen portrayal of actions is paramount (McArthur 2000: 191). McArthur points to the impact of Jacques Becker's *Le Trou*/*The Hole* (1960) and Jules Dassin's *Du Rififi chez les hommes*/*Rififi* (1954) on Melville's style here – a group to which I would also add Verneuil's *Mélodie en sous-sol*/*Any Number Can Win* (1963) as a third parallel example. Across this set of films – crime thrillers all – a dramatic highlight or generic motif emerges from the use of an extended action sequence as a formal centrepiece: in *Le Trou*, a prison inmate tunnelling through a rock cell floor; in *Rififi*, a jewellery-shop burglary carried out in silence; in *Mélodie en sous-sol*, the protracted robbery of a Cannes casino. Melville's particularity in the context of this shared tendency, I would argue, derives from his brilliant use of extended takes. Melville's crime set-pieces are long, but his takes are even longer – and the emphasis, for him, is less on outright spectacle than on the recording of isolated actions, uninterrupted. Most bravura of all is the helicopter-to-train heist in *Un Flic*, a film which once again shows Melville pushing himself to a new level of stylistic flair. Thus, in a narrative segment that already runs for just over twenty minutes,⁷ Melville features an unedited three-minute-long take of Richard Crenna meticulously changing clothes and grooming himself so as to pass unnoticed on the train.

Returning to *Un Flic* also presents us with the case of Alain Delon, another of Melville's favoured star-collaborators. Delon's presence is clearly crucial to the film overall – it could even be argued that the film is as much a study of its star as of Delon's actual (quite desultory) character of police commissioner. Of course, Melville had considerably less work to do in 'containing' Delon's typical acting style than with Belmondo. Indeed, Vincendeau's central observation in comparing the two stars is that 'one smiles, the other doesn't' (Vincendeau 2000: 158). Even in this frame of reference, though, we can see that *Un Flic* takes extraordinary care to highlight textually the almost catatonic nature of Delon-as-Coleman's behaviour and interactions with others.

The first time we see Delon, he is riding in a police 'cruiser' through Paris at dusk. In a three-line voice-over, we hear him musing that, 'But not until Paris slept could I achieve anything ... I'm Coleman'. At least initially, then, this voice-over grants us

7 This in a film whose running time is itself only 96 minutes.

character interiority and privileged access to Coleman's thoughts and mood. We are also led to expect a narrative trajectory that will retain Coleman as *Un Flic's* central subjective viewpoint. However, not only does the film never again afford him another voice-over, but it actually goes on to foreground, even flaunt the extent to which Delon/Coleman remains closed, distant, mysteriously opaque to us. At the film's point of resolution, after Coleman has gunned down his unarmed friend Simon, Melville returns us to an image of Delon in his car at night. He is now shown in close-up, but rather than this yielding us clues to his mental condition, we instead see the end credits begin to roll up alongside his impassive features. Although some generic trumpet music serves to create a generally lugubrious mood, the specific or intimate details of an easily legible performance are denied us. The final shot, of Delon blinking and scanning the road as he drives down the Champs-Élysées, is a study in inexpressivity.

More overtly still, *Un Flic* foregrounds the extent to which Delon's acting style is minimized, even negated. Just after his opening voice-over, we see Coleman arriving at a run-down apartment building. A woman has been murdered inside, and he has been called in for a preliminary walk-through of the crime scene. Upstairs, Coleman scrutinizes the face of the victim. Her face is frozen in a death mask of staring, wide-open eyes and an anguished, gaping expression. Here, Melville first tracks into a medium close-up of the dead woman's profile, then echoes the shot with a side-on view of Delon's face in medium-shot. Next, we see her a second time but now in a frontal close-up; and then again there is a paralleled straight-on shot of Delon filmed from an identical set-up. A nice irony: the film explicitly links the death-like repose of Delon's performance with the features of a corpse.

Even during scenes that pair Delon with Catherine Deneuve in potentially romantic moments, any sense of emotionality is again pared down or stripped away entirely. The first time the two appear on screen together, Delon is playing the piano in Simon's almost-deserted nightclub. He smokes a cigarette, and for once the actor's features convey a measure of feeling: his head is lent back slightly, and his brow is furrowed in deep concentration, almost a wince. Cathy emerges from a door to his left, and coolly regards him. The actors only exchange glances, however, after Coleman has been called away abruptly by his colleague. Throughout *Un Flic*, moreover, as both a performer and romantic partner, Deneuve's acting style is also reduced to the point of becoming unreadable – Vincendeau calls her turn in Melville's film an 'act(s) of symbolic presence rather than (a) lead(s)' (Vincendeau 2000: 196). And although the relationship between this couple is vital to *Un Flic's* narrative – she continues to play Simon and Coleman against each other, inducing an eventual confrontation – we are kept distanced from their interactions, unclear as to the extent of their involvement. In the piano scene, for example, they do not speak to one another at all; and when they finally do kiss, later, Melville films the embrace in a strange, off-kilter low-angle shot that frames them in a distorted ceiling mirror. After they exchange a few desultory lines of conversation, we then immediately cut away to a noisy shot of a speeding train. Melville abruptly dispels the intimate mood, undermining any sense of a romance.

To conclude this essay, I return to my conception of Melville's cinema and perceptual style. As we have seen, his films, through an especially rigorous, virtuoso use of cinematic form, drew upon, yet ultimately evaded, the conventions of mainstream film-making in both France and America. Working within the formats of popular genres, Melville was nonetheless able to craft a series of heavily stylized, powerful yet substantially pared-down narratives of austerity. These are texts which simply force us as film viewers to work much harder; and at this intense level of spectatorial commitment,

certainly, we are not so far removed from the high art of Bresson or Godard, directors whose acclaim has so far been much in excess of Melville's. A textual iconoclast in many ways, we can begin to see how Melville remains an under-appreciated part of the stylistic heritage of French cinema, both in the 1970s and elsewhere.

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