Jean-Pierre Melville
An American in Paris

Ginette Vincendeau

JEAN-PIERRE MELVILLE

JEAN-PIERRE MELVILLE

'An American in Paris'

Ginette Vincendeau

palgrave macmillan

A BFI book published by Palgrave Macmillan

First published in 2003 by the British Film Institute
21 Stephen Street, London W1T 1LN

Reprinted 2006, 2009

The British Film Institute promotes greater understanding of,
and access to, film and moving image culture in the UK.

Copyright © Ginette Vincendeau 2003

Cover design by Barefoot
Cover images: (front) Jean-Pierre Melville in the 1960s; (back) *Le Doulos* (1963); *Le Samouraï* (1967); *Léon Morin, prêtre* (1961); *Le Deuxième souffle* (1966)

Set by Fakenham Photosetting Limited, Fakenham, Norfolk NR21 8NN

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 0–85170–949–4/978–0–85170–949–9 (pbk)
ISBN 0–85170–950–8/978–0–85170–950–5 (hbk)
eISBN 978–1–83871–653–0
ePDF 978–1–83871–654–7

Contents

Acknowledgments vi

Introduction: Jean-Pierre Melville, 'An American in Paris' 1
1 From Film Lover to Film-maker: The Life and Career of Jean-Pierre Melville 6
2 Stylistic Exercises: *24 heures de la vie d'un clown*, *Les Enfants terribles*, *Quand tu liras cette lettre* 27
3 Melville's War: *Le Silence de la mer*, *Léon Morin, prêtre*, *L'Armée des ombres* 49
4 Between the New Wave and America: *Bob le flambeur*, *Deux hommes dans Manhattan*, *L'Ainé des Ferchaux* 99
5 Série Noire – films noirs: *Le Doulos*, *Le Deuxième souffle* 140
6 The Delon Trilogy: *Le Samouraï*, *Le Cercle rouge*, *Un flic* 175
Conclusion: Neither American nor French, but Melvillian 217

Filmography 222
Bibliography 253
Appendix 1: Melville's Films at the French Box Office 260
Appendix 2: Melville's Films as Actor 261
Appendix 3: Melville's Pantheon of Sixty-four Pre-war American Directors 262
Index 265

Acknowledgments

I want to thank first of all people who in different ways shared their views on Melville with me: Olivier Bohler, who let me read his impressive thesis (which I hope will soon be published); Colin McArthur, whose early work on Melville and more recently on *Le Samouraï* was an inspiration; and Rick Menello, with whom I had a lively internet exchange. I am also endebted to several groups of students at the University of Warwick; as well as bringing their own insights, they often helped me clarify my thoughts.

I am very grateful to Monsieur Jacques Nataf, who talked to me about his time with Melville in the Free French army, and to Véronique and Michel Bourdis-Gispalou and Monsieur Michel Bourdis, who helped me track him down.

Jean-Louis Vincendeau, Peter Graham and Geneviève Sellier, as usual, were a precious source of essential video recordings. For their help in providing video and other material, thanks also to Dudley Andrew, Anne Boston, Annette Caulkin, Klaus Davidowicz, Renée and Jonathan Fenby, Susan Hayward, David Horrocks, Simon Horrocks, Carol Jenks, Sylvie Lindeperg, Laurent Marie, Michel Marie, Silke Panse and Ulrike Sieglohr.

The writing of this book was supported by a term of leave from the University of Warwick and a term from the AHRB. Charlotte Brunsdon and Ed Gallafent were supportive heads of department, enabling me to obtain study leave and benefit from research assistance. Other colleagues deserve thanks, in particular José Arroyo, Jon Burrows, Erica Carter, Richard Dyer and V. F. Perkins. Special thanks to Tracey Bale and Richard Perkins, who were extremely patient and helpful with my endless requests for more videos and books.

For research assistance, many thanks go to Theodora Hadjiandreou, Min Lee, Barbara Lehin, Valerie Orpen, Nick Potamitis and Leila Wimmer. In Paris, Pierre Chaintreuil and Thérèse Duhin kindly let me consult the censorship files on Melville's films at the Centre National de la Cinématographie, and Régis Robert and the staff at the Bibliothèque du Film (BIFI) archives were also helpful in providing access to Melville's scripts.

Jim Cook, Alastair Phillips and Tom Brown read parts of the manuscript of this book and gave invaluable feedback. Part of the work now in Chapter 6 was developed for a chapter in Alex Hughes and James Williams' book *Gender and French Cinema* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2001), and discussed at Phil Powrie's conference on masculinity (University of Newcastle, July 2001), as well as at research seminars at the University of Kent, East Anglia and Essex.

At the BFI, sincere thanks to Andrew Lockett for being such a supportive and patient editor, and to Sophia Contento for her diligent work with illustrations. For their support

and interest in Melville, thanks to Geoff Andrew, Philip Kemp and Hilary Smith at the NFT, London, and Geraldine d'Amico, Julien Plante and Vincent Mellili at the Institut Français, London.

Finally, none of this would have been possible without Simon Caulkin's editorial, intellectual, emotional, technological and gastronomic support.

NOTE TO THE READER

References throughout the book are as complete as possible. However, a number of daily and weekly press references do not indicate a page number. This is because they were obtained from the database at BIFI (Bibliothèque du Film) in which the scanning of articles has deleted page numbers. Readers wishing to consult the full articles are directed to the BIFI Library (100, rue du Fg Saint-Antoine, 75012 Paris) which offers fast and convenient on-line access to the material. The Bibliothèque Nationale de France holds full issues of the papers but is more difficult to access.

All translations from the French are mine, unless reference is given to a published English version.

Brief accounts of film plots can be found within the chapters at the beginning of each film analysis. A more detailed version of plot summaries is available in the filmography at the end of the book.

Introduction: Jean-Pierre Melville, 'An American in Paris'

Jean-Pierre Melville (1917–73) made thirteen feature films between 1947 and 1972, most of them ranking among the best in post-war French cinema. As a young man, he directed a poetic adaptation of Cocteau's classic *Les Enfants terribles* (1950). His thrillers *Bob le flambeur* (1956), *Le Doulos* (1963) and *Le Samouraï* (1967) among others, with their cool noir style, are defining instances of the French *policier*. In a different mode, *Le Silence de la mer* (1947–9) and *L'Armée des ombres* (1969) are revered classics of Resistance cinema. A supreme master of style, Melville was a 'film-maker's film-maker', as this comment from *L'Express* confirms: 'Each time Jean-Pierre Melville releases a new film, all filmmakers, including those who hate him, book a seat to see "how it's done".'[1] The brilliance of Melville's work alone would be reason enough to write a book about him.

While many of his films were highly successful at the box-office, Melville's critical reputation suffered spectacular ups and downs, ranging from being credited as 'father of the New Wave' to disparagement and oblivion for decades. Yet recently, his critical currency has dramatically risen again, both in France and internationally. Prominent figures like Quentin Tarantino and John Woo have paid tribute to his influence. In 1999, Jim Jarmusch's *Ghost Dog, The Way of the Samurai* was in homage to *Le Samouraï*, and in the spring of 2003, Neil Jordan brought out a remake of *Bob le flambeur* (*The Good Thief*). This roller-coaster critical fate is another reason for delving into Melville's films, and assessing the critical debates they provoked.

One positive effect of Melville's renewed reputation is that his films have become more widely seen. *Le Samouraï* was reissued in the UK in 1996, to great acclaim. After decades of patchy availability, all Melville's films can now be viewed on video, some on film and, increasingly, on DVD (as a final piece in the puzzle, the internet delivered to me Melville's rare 1946 short *24 heures de la vie d'un clown*). This easier availability makes an exhaustive study possible.

This book is a critical study of Melville's films, the first in the English language. A filmmaker with an exceptional degree of control over his work (he owned his own studio), Melville is a clear case of an auteur who created a unique film universe. The sub-title of this book, 'An American in Paris', is an ironic comment on Melville's well-known Americanophilia and the deployment of the Hollywood gangster iconography in his movies. While I refute the cliché that Melville 'copied' American cinema, my project is to place his films within a transnational film culture.

A LOOK, A NAME, AN ATTITUDE

The photograph which illustrates the cover of this book concentrates the complex and fascinating identities of Jean-Pierre Melville the man and Jean-Pierre Melville the authorial voice, as well as the themes that run through this book.

Melville, wearing a Stetson hat, ostensibly reads an issue of the journal *Arts*. Large letters on the cover spell out 'Melville accuses Truffaut'. What does this image tell us? That Melville liked dressing in a way which proclaimed, as if in quotation marks, an 'American-ness' derived from the Western. Many other photos and André S. Labarthe's documentary[2] show him wearing the Stetson, often with dark glasses and a trench-coat – so we are also in a film noir – while roaming the streets of Paris in a huge, open-top American car (although he owned other flashy, but less cinematic cars, such as a Rolls-Royce). Melville's 'American-ness' is the identity most frequently attached to his films, but his dress sense tells us that he could put it on and take it off as he wished.

Melville's American-ness is also, of course, displayed in his name. Jean-Pierre Grumbach adopted the name Melville as both a *nom de guerre* (he took it, he says, when he joined the Resistance) and a *nom de plume*, because of his admiration for the novelist Herman Melville. That a young, highly cultured Parisian would choose the name of an American novelist as a pseudonym in the early 1940s is not in itself surprising, given the prestige American literature held among French intellectuals. We may speculate on personal similarities with Herman Melville, by all accounts like Jean-Pierre a brilliant maverick and solitary character. But is it a coincidence that he took a name that sounds French? 'Melville' turns out to be a Norman name (derived from a village called Malville in Normandy), which emigrated to Scotland in the twelfth century, and then on to the United States.[3] Thus if Melville was canny in taking up an American name that sounds French – 'Hawthorne' or 'Faulkner' could have been awkward – there is a pleasing historical parallel between the transatlantic journey of his adopted name and the transnational identity of his cinema.

Finally, the photograph tells us that, apart from a mischievous sense of self-dramatisation, Melville was a cinephile who was involved in a critical dialogue with the New Wave, represented by its most prominent figure François Truffaut. If we turn to the inside of the magazine, we find a piece in which, under the guise of reviewing Truffaut's book on Hitchcock, Melville talks, with regret, about their split after a period of friendship. At the time of the article (December 1966), Truffaut's box-office currency was down after *Fahrenheit 451*, but Melville's very much up: a month earlier he had released his greatest hit so far, *Le Deuxième souffle*. The picture thus also concentrates Melville's dual identity on the film scene, as a successful mainstream film-maker and someone ready to enter the fray of critical debates in an arts journal.

WRITING ABOUT MELVILLE

Despite Melville's flamboyant personality, this book does not attempt a biography, partly because of the paucity of available sources and partly because Melville was someone whose life was largely subsumed by his films.

A cinephile, Melville occasionally wrote critical pieces on his own and others' film-making. He was also interviewed at length. In fact the only book about him previously

available in English is the series of interviews – on the Hitchcock/Truffaut model – by critic Rui Nogueira, first published in 1971, and a precious source of information. Also of note is Colin McArthur's very useful chapter on Melville in his seminal book *Underworld USA* (1972) and more recent work on *Le Samouraï* (2000). Unsurprisingly there have been a few more books on Melville in French. Jean Wagner wrote a pioneering study, though one limited by its admiring tone and time-scale, as it was published in 1963. Twenty years later came Jacques Zimmer and Chantal de Béchade's *Jean-Pierre Melville*, a useful journalistic précis rather than an in-depth analysis, and later still Denitza Bantcheva's more original account, *Jean-Pierre Melville: de l'oeuvre à l'homme* (1996). Bantcheva's study contains interesting insights though she tends to refrain from detailed textual analysis and, like Wagner, is reluctant to take a critical view. More recently, Olivier Bohler generously allowed me to read his outstanding PhD thesis, the most detailed and insightful study so far. I have read all these with great interest and I hope I do them justice in the course of this book (more references are contained in the bibliography). There have also been numerous interviews with, and articles about, Melville and his films (most of these in French), in publications ranging from *Cahiers du cinéma* and other specialist film journals, to the French daily and weekly press. A pleasing, though poignant by-product of this research was to renew acquaintance with the exceptionally high quality of film reviews in the 1950s and 60s press, remarkable in itself and remarkably better than what often passes for film reviewing today.

In adding my voice to those who have been fascinated by Melville's work, and to Melville's own comments, I cannot claim total originality. I do however bring my own perspective, as outlined below and, while hugely admiring Melville's work, try to break from the reverential tone of much writing on him.

The book is divided into six chapters. Chapter 1 is an account of Melville's life, career and overall critical trajectory. Chapters 2 to 6 carve out his films in blocks of two or three, an approach which made more sense than a strict film-by-film chronology, though we start at the beginning and end on the last thriller. Chapter 2 looks at Melville's short *24 heures de la vie d'un clown*, his adaptation of Cocteau's *Les Enfants terribles* and the melodrama *Quand tu liras cette lettre* (1953). I argue that these films are '*exercices de style*' with which Melville explores various forms in order to find his stylistic bearings. Chapter 3, 'Melville's War', looks at his three films about the Resistance: *Le Silence de la mer*, *Léon Morin, prêtre* (1961) and *L'Armée des ombres*. Bringing these films – made across the whole of Melville's career – together allows for an overview of Melville's evolving style as well as changing attitude to World War II. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 look at the great body of Melville's thrillers. Chapter 4 explores three films that I see as located 'between the New Wave and America': *Bob le flambeur*, *Deux hommes dans Manhattan* (1959) and *L'Ainé des Ferchaux* (1963). Chapter 5 examines Melville's two films which are actual adaptations of the Série Noire, *Le Doulos* and *Le Deuxième souffle* (1966). Chapter 6 is about the 'Delon Trilogy': *Le Samouraï*, *Le Cercle rouge* (1970) and *Un flic* (1971). The Conclusion attempts a synthesising view of the Melvillian style.

Cutting across Melville's body of work are four approaches which reverberate through the book in ever-increasing concentric circles: film style, popular French cinema, national/transnational film-making, identity/gender.

Film style

My first level of concern is to provide a close and detailed account of Melville's style. Framing, camera movements, lighting, the use of location shooting and of studio sets, and other aspects of *mise en scène* are scrutinised, in an attempt to pin down Melville's original 'style', its evolution across time and its relationship to contemporary films, where relevant comparisons can be made. This textual approach is not a simple formalist exercise; I aim to articulate it with a contextual approach, within the areas defined below.

Popular French cinema

As evinced by his box-office record (which I indicate in an appendix and comment on at various points in the book), Melville, for a significant part of his career, mastered the codes of popular French cinema. At the same time, the startling originality of his *mise en scène* and prevailing pessimism placed him apart from the mainstream. This duality, which could be rephrased as that of classicism vs modernism, classicism vs 'mannerism', constitutes a crucial aspect of his work. In order to gauge Melville's specificity in this respect, throughout the book I place his work in relation to other French films of the period. Here I consider two important aspects which embed Melville further in popular French film culture. First is the literature on which many of his films are based, both high (Vercors, Cocteau) and popular (Simenon, the Série Noire). Second are film stars. From *Léon Morin, prêtre* in 1961, Melville worked with stars of the calibre of Jean-Paul Belmondo, Lino Ventura, Charles Vanel, Yves Montand and Alain Delon – stars who, beyond their box-office appeal, had a significant impact on the meaning of the films.

National/transnational identity

A view of Melville's films cannot remain solely within the French film industry, but must consider his place within a wider French culture, and an international context. Melville's French-ness was deeply marked by World War II, both as a soldier, and as someone who lived and worked in post-war France, and I trace this legacy especially in Chapter 3 but also throughout all his work. Melville was also an international figure, deeply marked by America in his cultural references and practice. His thrillers (like his person) celebrated the cars, guns and attire of the American gangster, even though he was at pains to point out, tongue in cheek: 'My cinema is specifically French. When I read the opposite, I am amazed. I look in my films for what is American about them and I cannot find anything.'[4] Rather than a crude division of 'French' and 'American' (or other cultural references), I try to see how, at different moments of his career, Melville engaged with the transnational culture of his time, in which, nevertheless, a (largely imaginary and definitely cinematic) 'America' looms large.

Identity/gender

It would be hard to miss the masculine – not to say masculinist – focus of Melville's work, especially the post-*Léon Morin, prêtre* films. But this obviousness has somehow inhibited analysis. Throughout the book I consider masculinity in Melville's films, and more generally bring a gender perspective to all aspects of his films, for example, his portrayal of his war films' heroines. Here my approach, I hope, usefully bridges a gap between Anglo-American and French studies of Melville. In the Anglo-American context, writers such as Steve Neale and Stella Bruzzi have considered aspects of Melville's films (notably *Le Samouraï*) in gender terms. Their important insights, however, have been limited by their restricted focus. In the French context, writers have ignored gender or denied its importance in the name of a 'defence' of Melville (as if analysing gender in the films boiled down to accusing Melville of misogyny[5]).

Writing this book, watching Melville's films again and again, each time brought renewed pleasure, discoveries and comfort, especially after seeing some particularly nasty, needlessly sexual or just ugly contemporary film. However bleak, Melville's work is always beautiful, stylish and profound, in a surprisingly modern way. I hope this journey through his films will bring some light to those familiar with his work, and inspire those who are not to discover this brilliant and wonderful film-maker.

NOTES

1. *L'Express*, 15 September 1969.
2. André S. Labarthe, *Jean-Pierre Melville: Portrait en 9 poses* (1970).
3. 'Melville', in Patrick Hanks and Flavia Hodges (eds), *A Dictionary of First Names* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).
4. In François Guérif, 'Jean-Pierre Melville', *Les Cahiers de la cinémathèque*, no. 25, Spring–Summer 1978, p. 96.
5. See Jacques Zimmer and Chantal de Béchade, *Jean-Pierre Melville* (Paris: Edilig, 1983), p. 33 and Denitza Bantcheva, *Jean-Pierre Melville: de l'oeuvre à l'homme* (Troyes: Librairie Bleue, 1996), p. 51. This issue is discussed further in Chapter 1.

1

From Film Lover to Film-maker: The Life and Career of Jean-Pierre Melville

The details of Jean-Pierre Melville's life are sketchy and ambiguous – he deliberately cultivated mystery, and the meagre sources that exist are mostly interviews, with all the possibilities for biases, exaggeration and contradiction that such encounters contain. Since this book is a study of Melville's films, not a biography, this may not matter. It is also the case that to a remarkable degree, Melville was someone whose life *was* his work. The man who hated holidays, about whom Volker Schloendorff (his assistant on *Léon Morin, prêtre* and *Le Doulos*) reflected, 'He had an almost religious passion for the cinema. Everything related to it,'[1] this man coined the word 'opocentric' – 'opo' from opus – about himself and confirmed, 'Nothing matters except my profession and therefore my work.'[2] Indeed when, on 2 August 1973, at the age of fifty-five, Melville collapsed from a heart attack in the PLM St-Jacques restaurant in Paris in the arms of writer and film-maker Philippe Labro, he was discussing difficulties with his latest script (Labro subsequently wrote a moving tribute to Melville).[3]

Yet film-makers are not just concepts: they are also human beings whose background, personal life and choices inflect their work. This is why, despite the reservations expressed above, I begin with a brief account of Melville's life and career before moving on to his films. The task is not easy. The Melville archives at the Bibliothèque du Film (BIFI) in Paris contain mostly scripts – including the unpublished *Un flic* (unrelated to the 1972 film of the same name) – and I was able to glean a few facts in the censorship files kept at the Centre National de la Cinématographie (CNC) as well as from meeting a wartime army colleague. Reputedly, other archives perished when his studio burnt down in 1967. The gaps in documentation leave plenty of room for speculation about all kinds of matters, from his part in the Resistance to his personal relationships. My task is not to elucidate these, but to present the information as clearly as possible insofar as it helps throw light on the films.

RÉSISTANT, CINEPHILE, 'OPOCENTRIC'

Melville was born Jean-Pierre Grumbach on 20 October 1917 (as already mentioned, he adopted the name Melville in honour of the American novelist). His ancestors were Eastern European Jews who had settled in Belfort, in Alsace, in the 1840s. Several generations of Grumbachs were butchers in the old part of the city. They were a close-knit, extended family: Melville's parents were first cousins. His father, a businessman, moved

to Paris where Jean-Pierre was born. He grew up in rue d'Antin in the ninth *arrondissement* in central Paris, in a cultured, bourgeois-Bohemian environment, and a family with socialist leanings. Although he would later move to the right, Melville declared that he was 'a Communist from the age of 16, in 1933, until 25 August 1939. After that I stopped being a Communist. I am not religious either.'[4] Melville's family was sufficiently unconventional to give young Jean-Pierre a Pathé Baby camera in 1924 for his seventh birthday, and soon after a projector which delighted him even more since it enabled him to view recent releases on 9.5mm. According to Jean Wagner, starting in February 1925 he shot a number of films during his youth; by 1939 he had totalled the equivalent of thirty features in various non-theatrical formats.[5] Melville had one sister, Janine, and an older brother Jacques, a high-ranking civil servant who was killed during the war (Jacques' son Rémy Grumbach is a television director; the film-maker Michel Drach was also a cousin).[6]

Although Melville's centre of gravity was Paris, he retained links with the extended family in Belfort. A formative experience was seeing his first film there, in a brasserie.[7] Much later he called the production company formed to produce *Deux hommes dans Manhattan* 'Belfort Films'. Belfort repaid the compliment. On 26 November 1987, a street in the city centre was renamed 'Rue Jean-Pierre Melville' by Jean-Pierre Chevènement, Belfort's mayor and then (socialist) government minister. On the day of the inauguration Chevènement joked that a grim and forlorn suburban street might have been more in keeping with the setting of Melville's films, but that the city wanted to honour him with a major artery.

Melville went to school at the Lycée Condorcet near Gare St Lazare in central Paris, a well-regarded *lycée* for middle-class children. He reports not being particularly academic and being more interested in the youthful shenanigans of the 'Gare Saint-Lazare gang', 'a real gang of hooligans'[8] made up of pupils from Condorcet, a gang perhaps not unlike that seen at the beginning of *Les Enfants terribles*. Melville dates from this period a taste for slang and low-life characters – however, if some testimonies speak of his acquaintance with real gangsters, others have disputed his knowledge of the underworld.[9]

In any case, a bigger adventure was around the corner. Melville started his military service in the 'Spahis' (colonial cavalry) at the age of twenty in 1937.[10] He was still a conscript when the war began. In September 1940, his regiment got caught in Belgium. He was evacuated to England via Dunkirk and repatriated to France. On his return he moved to Castres in the South, where his family had relocated, and spent the period to 1942 there, joining the Resistance networks 'Libération' and 'Combat' under the name Cartier, and later Melville.[11] After the Allied landing in North Africa in November 1942, 'Cartier-Melville' tried to reach London via Algiers. His ship was stopped and he was jailed in Spain for two months (his brother Jacques died tragically while attempting to get to Spain). At some point in 1942–3 Melville spent some time in London, where he says he worked as a sub-agent for the BCRA.[12] He reached Tunisia in autumn 1943, where he joined the First Regiment of Colonial Artillery of the Free French. At first assigned as a colonel's chauffeur, he took part in the Italian

and French liberation campaigns. On 11 March 1944 he was crossing the Garigliano below Mount Cassino. On 15 August of the same year he landed in Provence and in September he was in Lyon. His regiment was awarded the Croix de la Libération on 24 September 1945.[13]

These are the facts, as far as they can be ascertained, of Melville's war and his involvement with the Resistance. While he unarguably belonged to the First Regiment of Colonial Artillery, as confirmed to me by one of his former co-soldiers, it has proved more difficult to trace his London activities. Dates are hazy and testimonies contradictory. This does not signify that the claims he makes are false or incorrect, since by definition records of underground movements are scanty. Two things in any case are certain. On the one hand, there is no doubting Melville's bravery in joining the Free French, however modest his part and however much he played it down, claiming that 'being in the Resistance if you're a Jew is infinitely less heroic than if you're not'.[14] The second, and to us today particularly important, certainty is the deep impact the experience left on his work. Melville acknowledged the trauma the war and German occupation left on his generation. After seeing Marcel Ophuls' documentary *Le Chagrin et la pitié* (1969–71), he recalled: 'The first feeling we experienced was *shame*. [. . .] Grief, of course. But above all, shame.'[15] But he was also able to rework this trauma creatively through his films. 'Melville' after all was the name he took as a *Résistant*. A number of his later film collaborators, such as Jean-Marie Robain, Nicole Stéphane and Pierre Grasset were wartime contacts. It was while in the Resistance that he read both Vercors' *Le Silence de la mer*[16] and Joseph Kessel's *L'Armée des ombres* – books which he adapted respectively in 1947–9 and 1969, and which have stood the test of time as two great French classics.

After being demobilised between October and November 1945, Melville returned to Paris. There he encountered a young woman called Florence, whom he had met briefly in 1939. They remained together from that moment until the end of his life. They married in 1952 and Florence was to act variously throughout Melville's career as adviser, production manager and studio administrator. Although her name appears only occasionally on the credits, she was an important, if discreet, presence. Melville set about doing various jobs such as, allegedly, travelling salesman,[17] while planning his first film, *24 heures de la vie d'un clown*. This short, amateurish film completed in 1946 is about a famous clown, Béby. As such it is a tribute to one of Melville's passions, the circus. It is also an indication of his pressing desire to become a film-maker – on his own terms – without serving an apprenticeship, the usual way to get into the profession at the time.

Apart from his interest in cinema and the circus, as well as the music hall (to which an uncle took him regularly),[18] Melville was passionate about more 'legitimate' culture. As an adolescent he had discovered French and American literature, in particular three writers who 'left their mark on my adolescence: Poe, London, and of course Melville' [. . .] I discovered Melville, long before Jean Giono's translation of *Moby Dick*, by reading in English *Pierre: or the Ambiguities*, a book which left its mark on me for ever.'[19] Melville thus spoke English at an early stage; he certainly became fluent, as we can hear in *Deux hommes dans Manhattan* in which he plays the lead, and, for instance, in a 1961

radio interview with Gideon Bachmann.[20] Melville moved in the fashionable milieu of post-war left-bank Paris, and was familiar with such figures as Jean Cocteau and Juliette Gréco. The latter, whom he would cast in *Quand tu liras cette lettre* in 1954, was

> a good friend from the Saint-Germain days of '47, '48 and '49. At that time, I remember, I often went to the Club Saint-Germain where they had a band with fabulous musicians. It was there I had some marvellous times with Django Reinhardt. [. . .] Saint-Germain became something else after 1950, but before then . . . it was marvellous.[21]

Cocteau, American literature, St-Germain-des-Prés chanteuses and jazz – all these ingredients place Melville within the intellectual and cultural milieu which would some years later produce the New Wave. His 'schooling' in the Parisian left-bank culture also clearly left a mark on his beliefs: 'I'm wary of any political credo, and I have no religious beliefs whatsoever. So what I have left is morality and . . . conscience,'[22] an 'existentialist philosophy' that can, as we will see, be traced in many of his films.

But clearly the crucial intellectual influence on Melville was the cinema, and especially American cinema. In the 1920s, thanks to his Pathé Baby projector, 'every week I was able to see four or five new films, either two, three or four-reelers. It was *l'amour fou*, completely. The basis of my cinematographic culture.' Then, with the coming of sound, 'the mania had really begun: my days began at 9 a.m. in a cinema (the Paramount), and ended the same way at 3 a.m. the next morning. The pull was stronger than anything else.'[23] Melville's film education, in its voracity and Americanophilia, also anticipated that of the future New Wave critics – one reason why he was such a model for Godard, Truffaut and Chabrol. Consumed by his love for the cinema, he would learn 'even the credits by heart'.[24] Jacques Nataf, Melville's friend in the Free French army, reports that already then he talked of nothing but the cinema.[25] At the Liberation, his cinephilia and familiarity with the film milieu would lead him to make his own film but also to appear in a few others.

While he was making *Le Silence de la mer* and *Les Enfants terribles* (in which he can be seen in a brief cameo), Melville appeared in two films by the now forgotten journalist-turned-director Jacques Loew. Melville appears in the short *Les Drames du bois de Boulogne* (1948), jokingly titled to evoke Bresson's *Les Dames du bois de Boulogne* (1945). It is a comic fantasy with voiceover commentary by Gérard Philipe and a cast of well-known actors (Blanchette Brunoy, Maurice Baquet), and Melville as 'guest star'.[26] Melville also appeared in Loew's only feature made in 1951 but never released in Paris and thus usually not referenced, including in his own filmography. The film was variously titled *Quatre sans millions!*, *Cri du coeur* or *Si ça vous chante*. Part set in the Cannes Film Festival, it features Melville 'perorating among an assembly of cinephiles'; for Beylie and d'Hugues the film 'looks a bit like a "New Wave" comedy *avant la lettre*'.[27]

Once awakened, Melville's love of films never waned. He watched them everywhere: characteristically he met Volker Schloendorff 'at the Ciné-Club du Lycée Montaigne. Bertrand Tavernier had dragged me there to see that monstrosity called *Johnny Guitar.*'[28] Later he always made sure he had his own viewing facilities. In 1957 while his studio

was hired out, he missed having his own projection room so much that he built a new one: 'I rented [it] out to other people but could use it myself in the evenings to run through any films I wanted to see.'[29] Apart from having very strong likes and dislikes, Melville also indulged in that great cinephile passion, making lists. In October 1961 *Cahiers du cinéma* published his list of 'sixty-three' (actually sixty-four) pre-war American film-makers (see Appendix 3). The list is Melville's tribute to 'a kind of film-making that inspired my vocation'.[30] Long, inclusive and eclectic – directors of women's films and comedies are cheek-by-jowl with those of Westerns and gangster films – rather than representing a trend or genre, the list pays tribute to the era and mode of film-making that he worshipped, classical Hollywood cinema of the 1930s. Melville's declaration in the same issue of *Cahiers* that one day he hoped to sell his studio and go to the USA to shoot not just American films 'but pre-war American films'[31] gives away the nostalgic dimension of his cinephilia. So did his signature Ray-Bans and hats: Trilbys and from 1963 Stetsons (many have pointed out that the hats also conveniently concealed his baldness). In 1949, writing his 'manifesto' in *L'Écran français*,[32] he identified Frank Lloyd's *Cavalcade* (1933) as the epitome of classical Hollywood cinema. Since the film is based on a Noel Coward play and features mostly British actors, this would seem an odd choice were it not for the film's dynamic, unstagy, 'American' camerawork and editing (with hindsight too, the film's topic of loss, grief and the impact of war must have chimed with his own concerns). Even when Melville moved on to post-war Hollywood films, such as favourites like John Huston's *The Asphalt Jungle* (1950) and Robert Wise's *Odds Against Tomorrow* (1959), these remained in the classical mould. Although Melville anticipated *Cahiers*' *mise en scène* criticism by about ten years, he did not share the *Cahiers* critics' taste for baroque melodrama, such as *Johnny Guitar*.

MELVILLE'S BRILLIANT CAREER

After his short (which found a distributor and made a modest amount of money), Melville started his career proper with a bang. Not only by making a strikingly original and successful feature, *Le Silence de la mer*, but doing so against the wishes of the book's author and outside the film industry. Barred by the communist-backed Film Technicians' Union from obtaining the essential professional card in 1945, he was 'forced to become a producer to give myself the task of making my film'.[33] Not that this was very advantageous in the immediate post-war since he 'had no right to coupons for film stock'.[34] Problems did not stop there. Melville was fined FF 50,000 by the CNC;[35] it was also rumoured that he had made a film 'with Rothschild money' because star and co-backer Nicole Stéphane was a Rothschild.[36] His perseverance and independent stance would, however, remain a model for later generations. He produced or co-produced his own films for the rest of his career.

The success of *Le Silence de la mer* established Melville's name even though at the time it was overshadowed by that of the author, Vercors. The *succès d'estime* of his next film, *Les Enfants terribles* (based on Cocteau and also a relatively small-scale production), confirmed Melville's reputation as an innovative and distinctive film-maker, although here again he was outshone by a famous author. His dream, however, was to attain total

Melville at the premiere of *Le Silence de la mer* (1949). (left to right) Nicole Stéphane, Melville, Jean-Marie Robain, Howard Vernon

independence and this he achieved by the unusual step of setting up his own studio, made possible by the FF 2 million he earned from directing his next film, the more 'commercial' *Quand tu liras cette lettre*.[37] Built in a disused factory at 25bis rue Jenner, in what was then a semi-industrial thirteenth *arrondissement* in south-east Paris, Melville's studio was in a street whose bleakness would not have been out of place in *Le Doulos* or *Le Samouraï*. As Schloendorff reports, 'The studio wasn't especially large [. . .] but it was large enough nonetheless to house two sound stages, one small wardrobe room, two cutting rooms, and a screening room.'[38] Labro adds a description of Melville's office above the studio, which can also be glimpsed in André S. Labarthe's documentary *Portrait en 9 poses* – an office 'bigger than the salon of a transatlantic ship, with his books, records, a samurai sword, a few weapons, two armchairs, souvenirs and, on his immense desk, photographs, newspapers, magazines, telephones'.[39] Above was Melville's flat where he lived with his wife and cats (commemorated in a small and apparently typically troublesome role in *Le Cercle rouge*).

The rue Jenner studio made Melville, like Méliès and Pagnol before him, an exceptionally independent figure in French cinema, even though financially it was 'the worst deal I ever did, a folly',[40] as many testimonies confirm. Daniel Cauchy, one of the leading actors in *Bob le flambeur*, Melville's next film and the first properly shot in the rue Jenner studio, recalls how lack of money made the shoot long and hazardous. Melville supported himself by letting the studio to television,[41] and he allowed friends to use it (it is there that Jacques Becker 'entirely re-shot *Le Trou*').[42] As proudly announced on the credits, the interiors of *Bob le flambeur*, *Deux hommes dans Manhattan*, *L'Aîné des Fer-*

chaux, Le Doulos and *Le Deuxième souffle*, and part of *Le Samouraï* were shot there. Sadly, the studio burnt down in 1967 half-way through shooting the latter film – a blow to Melville's spirit and a financial one too, as Florence had failed to renew the insurance policy.[43] Melville had plans to reconstruct the studio but although he was able to rebuild some editing facilities, they came to nothing. Nor did Melville become a producer of other people's films, after a couple of inconclusive attempts.[44]

Accounts of Melville's career usually split it in two: a first phase, from *Le Silence de la mer* to *Deux hommes dans Manhattan*, of small-scale, critically acclaimed but sparsely watched auteur works, and a second phase, starting with *Léon Morin, prêtre*, of big-budget genre films, popular at the box office but which gradually caused him to fall out of favour with critics. In fact, in terms of both box-office and critical reception, the reality is more complicated. Repeated assertions about the commercial failure of his early films are contradicted by the figures. Both *Le Silence de la mer* and *Quand tu liras cette lettre* achieved ticket sales of more than a million, an excellent score in the French context (500,000 is considered a significant threshold by the compilers of CNC box-office statistics).[45] *Les Enfants terribles* and *Bob le flambeur* reached the smaller but still respectable score of 719,844 and 716,920 tickets; more significantly, because of their small budget, they were profitable. Only *Deux hommes dans Manhattan* with 308,000 tickets can be called a flop. Its failure prompted him to move on to films made on larger budgets and with stars. From *Léon Morin, prêtre*, Melville's films would repeatedly achieve high box-office takings, even a so-called 'failure' like *L'Armée des ombres* (as I discuss in Chapter 3). Thus, though chequered, even the first half of Melville's career was not exactly that of a marginal film-maker. Yet it is this image which has endured. This misapprehension is partly based on Melville's own declarations. No doubt the figure of the *auteur maudit*, of the embattled – and occasionally impecunious – film-maker possesses a romantic aura. But it also fits with Melville's obstinate, not to say plain difficult, nature, a fact that he had the grace to recognise:

> I often say – which isn't true – that I have always been rejected by the profession. Actually, it is I who have always rejected the profession. I have always had offers to make films which I have always refused. I have never been forced into unemployment. I was impossible to deal with, there's no doubt about that, and quarrelled with all the producers.[46]

Actually he quarrelled with just about everyone.

Obstinate, proud and authoritarian in person, Melville frequently argued and fell out with his collaborators, beginning with writers such as Vercors, Cocteau and José Giovanni.[47] Relationships with stars could also be stormy, in particular with Jean-Paul Belmondo, Charles Vanel and Lino Ventura. According to one of Ventura's biographers, 'it was war between them during the shoot [of *L'Armée des ombres*]. Lino swore he would never again have anything to do with Melville!'[48] Of his major stars, apparently only Alain Delon did not fall out with the director, until, that is, the release of *Un flic*, their last collaboration and Melville's last film.[49] Melville was also involved in several highly public 'settlings of scores' – for instance with Truffaut (through the journal *Arts*, as discussed

in the introduction), and with Claude Lelouch on television.[50] Labro reports that in the 1960s Melville was good value on television and therefore was often invited to appear. At the same time, Melville's all-absorbing love of film, his 'opocentrism' and demanding attitude to his work made him tyrannical to the point of eccentricity and unfairness on set. He would summon cast and crew in the middle of the night; as editor Françoise Bonnot said, 'You were not supposed to have a private life. You had to work at night and at the weekend!'[51] Melville was fanatical about the smallest detail, down to the width of the brim of a hat,[52] suffered no contradiction and disapproved of affairs on set because they were a distraction.[53] Cauchy reports receiving a lawyer's writ for supposed lateness, immediately followed by an apology – not an unusual occurrence, as in most cases the fights ended in reconciliation. Melville may have been tyrannical and difficult, but he was also immensely cultured and witty, not to mention talented, an influential and imposing figure with the aura of a 'master' or *padrino*, as Labro puts it.[54] He could be very generous with his friends and collaborators and in return elicited fierce loyalties. He formed particularly strong bonds with young male colleagues, such as Labro and Schloendorff, whom he treated like symbolic sons. The latter said, 'During filming [of *Le Doulos*] Melville did not have to shout. He behaved like a benevolent though extremely authoritarian boss. [...] In any case it was love between us. We all loved him so much, just as he was.'[55] As Yves Montand summed it up on Melville's death: 'He was not an easy man but you had to respect him.'[56]

Melville's perfectionism and obstinately independent stance came at a price which is directly reflected in his filmography: 'just' thirteen features in twenty-four years. His career was punctuated by drawn-out shoots, false starts and periods of inactivity. Two years elapsed between the making and release of *Le Silence de la mer*, four years passed between *Enfants* and *Lettre*. The shooting of *Bob* took eighteen months, and there was a three-year gap between *Bob* and *Deux hommes dans Manhattan*. Melville's rhythm speeded up in the early 1960s, with three films in two years (*Léon Morin, prêtre*, *Le Doulos* and *L'Ainé des Ferchaux*), although there was another three-year pause between *Le Doulos* and *Le Deuxième souffle* because of setbacks in the making of the latter film ('1964 to 1966 were years in the wilderness for me').[57] In 1967–8, following *Le Samouraï* and the destruction of his studio, Melville was involved in a feud with the Hakim brothers who failed to honour his contract to make *La Chienne*: 'They made me lose a whole year immediately following the fire at my studios, which was a terrible blow in a lot of ways.'[58] Similarly, Melville's career is littered with unrealised or cancelled projects, a fate no doubt shared by many film-makers, although he seems to have had more than the usual share. The list below does not claim to be exhaustive, but apart from its anecdotal value, it gives a fascinating glimpse of the different directions Melville's work might have taken.

1946: an adaptation of Proust's *Swann's Way*[59]

1949: *Un brin de bruyère* (with Howard Vernon)[60]

Late 1940s: *Le Journal d'un curé de campagne* (Melville wanted to do it after *Le Silence de la mer*, but was delayed by *Enfants* – he abandoned the project when he found Bresson was doing it)[61]

- 1952: *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme*, *La Flêche et le flambeau*[62]
- 1954: *Du rififi chez les hommes*[63]
- 1957: a spy story with Pierre Grasset[64]
- 1958: a thriller set in Cannes during the film festival, for which Melville had begun building a set[65]
- 1958: *L'A.F.P. nous communique*, a story about a French politician who dies of a coronary in his mistress's flat – the story evolved, significantly modified, into *Deux hommes dans Manhattan*[66]
- Early 1960s: *Trois chambres à Manhattan*, a Georges Simenon novel which Melville wanted to shoot with Jeanne Moreau; it was eventually filmed by Marcel Carné with Annie Girardot.[67]
- 1962: *Les Dons Juan*, for Georges de Beauregard, based on a Mérimée story, *Les Âmes du purgatoire*, with Belmondo and Anthony Perkins. The project fell through because Belmondo demanded too much money.
- Other scripts by such writers as Monique Lange, Michel Mardore and France Roche were reportedly burnt with Melville's studio in 1967[68]
- 1968: *La Chienne* (see above)
- 1969: *Papillon*, with 'no stars'[69]
- 1973: *Contre-enquête*, a thriller starring Yves Montand which was about to be shot when Melville died

Although there were mishaps and obstacles along the way, Melville's general trajectory was a rising curve. After his beleaguered beginnings his star rose steadily. At the release of *L'Armée des ombres* in 1969 he agreed with radio interviewer Jacques Chancel that 'his name on the poster was sufficient to attract an audience'.[70] During the last years of his career, Melville achieved massive popular success with *Le Cercle rouge*, a film singled out by Pathé News for an item on a typical 'major French film production', and which broke his own box-office record, with more than four million spectators. Melville had become a member of the French film establishment, teaching at the IDHEC film school and sitting on the Censorship Commission.[71] His last film *Un flic* (1972) had a mixed reception and was perceived, including by Melville, as a 'failure'. Yet it sold 2.8 million tickets, which can only be a disappointment in relation to the stratospheric success of the preceding film. Objectively speaking, Melville's career was thus a success story. By contrast, critical reception of his work during his lifetime took a dramatically different path.

Briefly, the reception of Melville's films while he was alive can be divided into three phases (more details for each film will be found in the relevant chapters). The first phase, from *Le Silence de la mer* to *Quand tu liras cette lettre*, sees Melville somewhat overshadowed by three well-known writers (Vercors, Cocteau and Deval), although immediately singled out by perceptive critics. André Bazin, for instance, praised *Le Silence de la mer* for the novelty and authenticity of Melville's adaptation,[72] while a survey by *Cahiers du cinéma* in 1957 viewed Melville as one of the white hopes of French cinema.[73] During the second phase, from *Bob* to *Le Doulos*, the reception of Melville's films is coloured by their relation to the New Wave and the director's recognition as an auteur.

Originality, independence, small budgets, the use of location shooting and the innovative photography of Henri Decae are all adduced to designate Melville as one of the fathers of the New Wave, a distinction he enthusiastically claims. As he said to *Combat* in 1961, 'The new cinema is: natural location, non-synchronised shooting, fast film stock, small crew and . . . Henri Decae.'[74] He even traced his innovation further back: 'What the new filmmakers are doing, I wanted to do it in 1937. Alas, I could only do it in 1947, with *Le Silence de la mer*.'[75] Reviews in the late 1950s and early 1960s routinely make reference to Melville as 'a particularly original *auteur* within French cinema'.[76] A number of substantial interviews, from the same period, appear in a range of publications, by writers who emerge as Melville's champions: in particular Jean Wagner, Henry Chapier, Bertrand Tavernier and Claude Beylie (the latter two in *Cahiers du cinéma*), who consolidate his auteur status. During that period, Melville's closeness to the New Wave and especially the *Cahiers* group (*Positif* was less enthusiastic) translated for a while into professional and personal friendships with Chabrol, Truffaut and especially Godard.[77] Melville was one of the founder members, with Truffaut and Godard, of the Association des Créateurs Indépendants du Cinéma Français (ACI), an ephemeral association of independent film-makers created in 1959. Then Godard, as is well known, cast Melville as 'Parvulesco', a comically pretentious writer modelled on Nabokov according to Melville, though it later emerged that both Godard and Melville were friendly with an extreme right-wing Romanian writer called Parvulesco, whom Melville apparently resembled, who had emigrated to Spain.[78] Chabrol also cast Melville in a brief cameo in *Landru* (1963). In that film Melville plays Mandel, secretary to statesman Clémenceau, whose character is played by the writer Raymond Queneau (according to the New Wave tradition of casting 'real people' which Melville had himself practised: casting not only himself but Cocteau in cameos in *Les Enfants terribles*, and the director of the Deauville casino in his own role in *Bob le flambeur*, as well as taking the lead in *Deux hommes dans Manhattan*). *Landru*'s colour photography gives us a rare glimpse of Melville's pale blue eyes.

The closeness with the New Wave was short-lived, however – on both sides. *Léon Morin, prêtre*, which signalled Melville's move to mainstream cinema and the use of stars, also heralded the third phase of Melville's critical reception during his lifetime. Even though most reviews of *Léon Morin, prêtre* were excellent, this film in retrospect initiated the deep split that would characterise this third phase. On the one hand, his films received abundant and largely enthusiastic reviews in the mainstream press, generating lively debate – *Léon Morin, prêtre*, *L'Ainé des Ferchaux* and *L'Armée des ombres* for their contents; *Le Doulos*, *Le Deuxième souffle*, *Le Samouraï* and *Le Cercle rouge* for their use of the gangster genre and their extreme foregrounding of a minimalist style. Even when doubts were raised about the 'emptiness' of his increasingly bleak universe from *Le Doulos* onwards, Melville was always saluted as a supreme artist and true auteur whose rigorous style expressed a coherent vision (the generally abusive reception of *Un flic*, discussed in Chapter 6, is in a category of its own). By contrast, during this third phase, he was the subject of vitriolic attacks from the cinephile press (*Cahiers du cinéma*, *Positif* and *Jeune cinéma*) – attacks he had in part provoked with declarations such as, 'That's it. Now I am going to make commercial films.'[79] The estrangement was gradual,

especially while Beylie, a Melville fan, was still writing for *Cahiers du cinéma*. However, from the mid-1960s and *Le Deuxième souffle* on, full-blown hostility prevailed, culminating in a famous *Cahiers* article by Jean-Louis Comolli and Jean Narboni, published in October 1969, entitled 'Cinema/Ideology/Criticism'. There, Melville is placed, along with Gérard Oury and Claude Lelouch (two film-makers he would never previously have been bracketed with), in category (a): 'The first and largest category comprises those films which are imbued through and through with the dominant ideology in pure and unadulterated form, and give no indication that their makers were even aware of the fact.'[80]

Such hostility came about as the result of dramatically divergent agendas in the highly politicised climate which followed the events of May 1968. Melville's Resistance epic *L'Armée des ombres*, released just before the above article, was instantly (and wrongly) perceived as a 'Gaullist film'. Meanwhile *Cahiers* was in its most fiercely political phase. The politics of Melville's films were also confused with his own – he would candidly say: 'I am an extreme individualist, and to tell you the truth I don't wish to be either Right or Left. But I certainly live as a man of the Right. I'm a Right-wing anarchist.'[81] He was nevertheless a friend of left-wing icons such as Simone Signoret and Yves Montand. But the divergence between Melville and *Cahiers* went deeper. In this political phase, *Cahiers* was rejecting aesthetic approaches, cinephilia, almost the cinema itself[82] – in other words everything Melville held dearest as he was making his most stylish, even *mannerist*, thrillers, veritable odes to film-making. The flaunting of *mise en scène* which had made him a pioneer in the 1950s now made him *passé*. Melville's frequent pronouncements against the *avance sur recettes*, the lifeline of small-budget auteur films – he thought film-makers should fend for themselves – also did not endear him to cinephiles. At the same time, his strongly individual artist stance fell foul of *Cahiers*' anti-auteurist position at that time. Hence his relegation to the critical purgatory of 'commercial cinema' which made the normally perceptive critic Serge Daney say, of Melville's masterpiece *Le Samouraï*, that Melville might as well make commercials about 'a style in raincoats'.[83] When he died in 1973, Melville was hailed in the mainstream press with a flurry of obituaries celebrating him as a stylish and original director. Typical was Henry Chapier, who spoke of his 'highly recognisable style, his Asiatically slow pace, the elegance of his framings, the perfectionism of his mise-en-scène and the constant though restrained nostalgia of his images'.[84] But there were no major celebrations or retrospectives in the specialist press.

The 1970s were posthumous wilderness years for Melville, although he continued to elicit a minor though passionate cult, now partly fuelled by the difficulties in seeing his work, both in France and abroad. Rui Nogueira's book of interviews had appeared in 1971 and Colin McArthur's *Underworld USA*, which contains a chapter on Melville, in 1972; there were a few isolated cinematic tributes like Walter Hill's *The Driver* (1978). Melville's neglect after 1973, however, was less noticeable in a cinematic climate dominated by politics and sex, themes he had turned his back on (and the ubiquity of which he deplored while a member of the Censorship Commission). His return to critical favour began, modestly enough, in the 1980s. The National Film Theatre (NFT) in

London staged a retrospective in March 1983 and the same year Zimmer and de Béchade's book was published. But the comeback proper only gathered full momentum in the late 1980s and especially the 90s. The studio-based, controlled aesthetics of the *cinéma du look* could be seen within the Melville legacy. Internationally, the rise of 'cool' gangster and neo-noir films – the stylised violence of Tarantino and John Woo – suddenly highlighted Melville's pioneer status. One may venture also that his thrillers fitted the increased masculinisation of late-twentieth-century popular culture. Melville's revival was also spurred by shifts in French film criticism. Political theorising gave way to a triumphant return to aesthetic, even formalist approaches, and the rebirth of the auteur. There was a retrospective in Florence in 1994, and Delon paid tribute to Melville at the 1995 César ceremony. A retrospective at the Cinémathèque Française and a belated special issue of *Cahiers du cinéma*, both in November 1996, put the final seal of approval on a director whose work was now fully recognised as supremely aesthetic and coherent, in short an auteur.

REWRITING THE SELF: MELVILLE AS AUTEUR

It is not hard to make a case for Melville as an auteur in terms of decision-making, since he controlled his work to an unusual degree. Even as a young unknown working with famous and strong-willed writers such as Vercors and Cocteau, he fought tooth and nail to keep control of adaptation and film-making. As the multiple presence of his name on credits attests, he was implicated in many different capacities (studio head, producer, scriptwriter, dialogue, director, actor and sometimes editor and set designer). He declared, 'I am used to supervising everything in my films; I would like to do everything myself: I deal with sets, I dream of writing the music myself,'[85] believing that 'a director must be an artisan. He must be capable of doing everything.'[86] This was not just bragging. His technical expertise, learnt 'on the job', and highly professional standards were widely respected in the industry. Among others François Périer (the Inspector of *Le Samouraï*) testified that Melville was always highly prepared and economical, knew exactly what he wanted and shot few takes.[87] This is why, despite his difficult character and obsessive need to control every aspect of film-making, Melville also enjoyed long partnerships with many actors and crew, creating something of a 'troupe' and, at any rate, a sense of continuity: Grasset, Stéphane, Belmondo, Delon, Ventura, and non-professional actors such as his secretary Monique Hennessy (who appears in *Deux hommes dans Manhattan*, *Léon Morin, prêtre* and *Le Doulos*), and jazz conductor Jerry Mengo in *Deux hommes dans Manhattan* and *L'Ainé des Ferchaux*; all appeared in several roles. Melville was also faithful to key technicians, such as editor Monique Bonnot (on six films), but most prominently director of photography Henri Decae. Discovered by Melville in *Le Silence de la mer* and employed on six other films, Decae said, 'we began together, so to speak, we understood each other very well from the beginning, and we adapted to each other'.[88]

As for thematic and stylistic consistencies, Melville believed that 'the essential thing is that there must be an intrinsic resemblance between the first film and the last'.[89] In order to avoid preconceived homogeneity, the danger of any auteur study, my film

Melville on the set of *Un flic* (1972)

analyses attempt to explore not only 'resemblances' but also discontinuities. I am keen in this book also to consider the contribution of Melville's collaborators, whether writers, cinematographers or stars. Can the main themes in Melville's work be traced back to the man without unduly 'psychologising' him or reverting to an 'intentionalist' mode? Melville was ambivalent about such an enterprise. On the one hand he vehemently told Nogueira: 'You're on the wrong track again. You musn't try to interweave what I do in my films with what I am in life.'[90] On the other hand, when Nogueira suggested that 'The line from the Book of Bushido with which you open [*Le Samouraï*] – "There is no greater solitude than that of the Samurai, unless perhaps it be that of the tiger in the jungle" – might apply equally well to your situation as an independent film-maker outside the industry. . .,' Melville replied enthusiastically: 'Absolutely!'[91] – unsurprisingly perhaps, since this so-called quote from the Book of Bushido was his own invention. Melville's work and life, however, offer some obvious homologies which are worth teasing out before moving on to the films themselves in the rest of the book.

Melville's experience of the war, Resistance and German occupation provided the backbone for his work. His first film, *Le Silence de la mer*, and one of his last, *L'Armée des ombres*, faithfully adapt classics of Resistance literature. *Léon Morin, prêtre*, about a transgressive relationship between a communist woman and a Catholic priest, also takes its place in this thematic axis, forming part of a 'war trilogy' which I examine in Chapter 3. But the war is also a structuring absence throughout Melville's career in subtle ways. Not only does it underpin his unmade 1956 script of *Un flic* (a story of black-market crime during the German occupation) and provide the dénouement of *Deux*

hommes dans Manhattan, when the missing French diplomat in New York turns out to have been a Resistance hero: in a more diffuse but fundamental sense the war represented a break with the past for Melville, both in life and film. It engendered a nostalgia which permeates all his work: nostalgia for an idealised golden era of 'honourable' gangsterdom evoked in all the gangster films from *Bob le flambeur*, nostalgia for an equally idealised era of classical film-making throughout his career, a nostalgic fantasy of pre-war America as his 'white whale'.[92] Melville's films can be seen, over more than two decades and across genres, as harking back to this phantasmatic, and nevertheless for him very real, pre-war era (it is noticeable that concurrently he mostly ignored contemporary wars in Indo-China and Algeria).

A self-confessed loner, Melville lived a fairly eccentric life. A journalist in 1969 put it like this:

> For a long time the author of *Le Samouraï* lived in the heart of the 13th arrondissement in a strangely lonely flat on the first floor of [his] studio. But he also had a pied-à-terre in a Passy hotel. One day I was told that he was staying at the Orly Hilton to write the subject of his next film. But when I phoned, he had already moved on somewhere else. Later he gave me a number you will find in no phone book. It was that of his provincial retreat. This is how I entered Melvillian clandestinity.[93]

His widow Florence, and many friends and collaborators have confirmed how, as well as maintaining a country house in Tilly, the Melvilles moved frequently and Jean-Pierre loved plush Parisian hotels such as the Raphael and Suffren Hilton.[94] In respect of his personal image, however, Melville was Janus-faced: a loner and misanthropist who cultivated his 'secret' myth, he also flaunted a highly recognisable, not to say exhibitionist, image: the Stetson and dark glasses, the huge American cars. Part of the Melvillian idiosyncrasy was a well-documented penchant for being a 'creature of the night', as he told *Cahiers du cinéma* among others.[95] This love of solitude and the night was not just a personal quirk; it extended to his working method: 'You really create a film in the editing room, in the silence and night';[96] 'For me, paradise consists in writing the script all alone at home and then in editing it. But I hate the shoot. All this time wasted in useless talk!'[97]

From the man to the film-maker to the character, the leap is tempting; a dominant theme in Melville's films is that of the essential loneliness of his characters, from the crossed lovers of *Le Silence de la mer* to the lone hitman of *Le Samouraï*. Although it is often said that Melville's films are about loyalty and male friendship, they are more accurately about betrayal, the impossibility of bonding, loneliness. While this places Melville's work well within major preoccupations of post-war modernist culture, from existentialist literature to the Theatre of the Absurd, it would be difficult to deny the personal dimension of this concern, however cultivated or intermittent it was (others, for example, evoke a gregarious *bon vivant*). As Volker Schloendorff put it, Melville's films offer a '*mise en scène*' of his own preoccupations and personality: