

# **Close-up on the screenplay for *Le Silence de la Mer* by Jean-Pierre Melville, 1947**

## **The screenplay**

### **The shooting script**

#### **- The document's history and geography**

The shooting script for *Le Silence de la Mer* ("The Silence of the Sea") is 21.0 cm wide by 29.7 cm high and has 55 pages.

It is very fragile today: time has taken part of the binding, and dried and yellowed the paper, so it is very delicate to handle.

Who kept it and where, and when and how it ended up in the Cinémathèque Française's collections are a few of the unanswered questions at this point (several of this institution's administrative archives have not yet been explored).

This shooting script was probably a one-off gift. As the standard procedure in that day prescribed, it was added to the *Collection Jaune* ("the yellow collection"), which had been specifically created to that end and contained some 2,000 documents.

It is not easy to piece together the shooting script's story either. The footnote on the cover and the handwritten comments on several other pages show that this copy belonged to Vercors, the writer of the novel that was adapted into this film.

Vercors probably used this shooting script until the shooting began.

Then, other people probably used it afterwards. The most plausible assumption is that the director or one of the crewmembers brought it to Les Productions Melville.

Then, several technicians used it as a "notepad" for the sound and picture editing.

- What a shooting script is

In French, the term shooting script means both the stage during which this document is written in the film production process, and the document itself.

Producing a shooting script involves breaking down each scene of the screenplay into shooting units called “shots”.

The shots are numbered in the order in which they appear in the screenplay.

Those numbers are then used to identify each shot when the film is developed and edited in the laboratory (for practical reasons, shots are not necessarily captured in the same chronological order as they appear in the screenplay).

There are about 288 shots in the shooting script for *Le Silence de la Mer*, and the actual film has about 400.

That is mainly because a number of sequences were added later (the film prologue, the scene at the tobacconist, etc.) and because a number of scenes were cut again during the editing phase. Then shooting scripts only partly match the finished film.

Directors write shooting scripts before the shooting begins.

Then, the technical crews and actors use them during the shooting phase to follow exactly what pictures and sound they have to record for each shot. The layout of the shooting scripts give them direct visual instructions.

### - The visual components

As on any other shooting script, the information required to produce the image is listed in the left column, which takes up two-thirds of the page.

To the right of each shot number, an acronym indicates the framing that Melville wanted: PG stands for *plan general* (or long shot), PM for *plan moyen* (medium shot), PA for *plan américain* (close medium shot), PR for *plan rapproché* (medium close-up), GP for *gros plan* (close-up), TGP for *très gros plan* (big close-up) and DE for *demi-ensemble* (medium-distance shots).

The writing in the middle describes the location, the acting and the setting (camera view points and movements, possible special effects, etc.).

The many handwritten notes show that this document was used to edit the film after the shooting stage:

- A few notes provide instructions for shot editing: a crossed-out paragraph denotes a deleted shot, a line in the middle of a dialogue shows a cut, and added numbers mean new shots were inserted;

- A page of notes lists the transition effects between scenes on the first reel that were to be produced in the lab (fade out, cross-fade, wipe, etc.).

It is impossible to tell who wrote these notes. Melville had said that he had teamed up with the director of photography, Henri Decaë<sup>1</sup>, to edit the film, but there is no way of identifying who wrote what. The director, director of photography, editor (uncredited) or lab technician may have used this document during the editing stages.

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<sup>1</sup> *Le Cinéma selon Jean-Pierre Melville* / Rui Nogueira. Éditions de l'Étoile, 1996, p. 44.

## - The sound components

The sound components are listed in the column on the right hand side.

There are basically three categories: the voiceover, dialogue and music.

It also mentions a few sounds such as a door opening or shutting, a ticking clock, and a few acting instructions and notes about the character's mood ("dejectedly", "deliberately", "briskly", etc.).

Each noise is listed in the sound column matching the picture column. Each sentence, noise and background music is by the moment it occurs in the future plan. "Have a good night", for instance, is between the two actions in shot 48, and is uttered between them.

The type of sound (music, voiceover, character speaking) is noted before it, so it is easy for everyone to understand it (when an actor has to say a line, the sound engineer has to make a noise, etc.).

It also includes the sound transitions between each shot (the music fades out, the music stops, etc.). These transitions were added in an auditorium after the shooting phase, when the film was mixed.

The sounds, like the pictures, were imagined during the writing phase. But, like the pictures, they changed considerably from the first draft to the final version of the film. The shooting script listed what sounds were inserted where but lacked a lot of the information required to create them (their intensity, tone, hierarchy and layout).

- Vercors' mark

Vercors originally objected to the whole idea of turning his novel into a film. Then he took over, supervising every detail of the adaptation and making sure nothing drifted from his book's original spirit.

In Melville's own words in the newspaper *Combat* the 16<sup>th</sup> of April 1949, Vercors "wanted his novel reproduced line by line."

The novelist's handwritten notes on this document, identified by François Bruller, Vercors' son and representative heir, show that he watched over the last stage of the writing of the film, suggesting amendments to Melville's shooting script.

He annotated his copy with issues involving:

- Direction (he suggests adding or altering shots): for example, he wanted to film shot 7 from a different view point and accordingly handwrote his suggestion on the typewritten shooting script; Melville went with it, adding a second shot based on Vercors' idea, to the original shot 7;
- Dialogue: he tightened up a phrase (p. 36), and added a brief "Voix off continue le récit" (voiceover takes over here) (p. 4) in the dialogues column to indicate an extra commentary.

He probably made these suggestions before Melville started shooting in August 1947, as a number of them made it into the film.

However, he made further corrections once the shooting had started. In a draft letter dated the 21 of September 1947, now in the Bibliothèque Doucet, he listed more amendments, writing to Melville, "Please find below the list of shots associated with these comments, and please do not put them into effect before I return."

## The soundtrack

### - The soundtrack's components

The *Le Silence de la Mer* soundtrack comprises the music, voices and sounds.

The music by Edgar Bischoff runs through the entire film, except for the prologue, caveat and epilogue.

The music stops to underscore a few scenes of the officer's arrival, his rendition of *The Beauty and the Beast*, his story about his combat on the tank and his monologue when he returns from leave.

The film's music is mostly narrative. The only two exceptions are the two scenes in which it is part of the action (or source music): Werner von Ebrennac playing the harmonium (J. S. Bach's *Prelude No. 8*) and his friend playing the guitar and singing.

Voices fall into one of two categories: voiceover and dialogue.

They both draw extensively on the original novel, explaining the distinctly literary tone. The voice in the voiceover is the old uncle reminiscing a story through his memories. The dialogue is sparse. As the two hosts say practically nothing, their guest mostly delivers monologues.

The only real dialogue is between Wehrmacht officers, and in German.<sup>1</sup>

The sounds also fall into one of two categories: specific or recurring sounds (doors, footsteps, objects being handled, engines running, dogs barking, etc.) and background atmospheres enveloping scenes (battlefields, streets, etc.).

Silence, paradoxically, is also a background atmosphere. The particular way in which it intertwines with the sound makes it perceptible. The sounds and backgrounds create an atmosphere that tones with the pictures.

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<sup>1</sup> Not all currently available copies of this film are subtitled, as they seem to have been when it was first released.

- Silent shooting?

Other than the director's and a few actors' accounts, there is not much information available today about how this film's soundtrack was produced.

Watching and listening to the film leads to the conclusion that sound was only recorded live on the set when scenes were shot in the studio (the scene of that of the German officers' evening do, for example). The dialogues, background atmosphere and sounds accompanying them were therefore recorded synchronously.

All the scenes in natural settings were shot without sound. Set photographs show no sound-recording contraptions, but do show a Debrie camera<sup>1</sup>, which was purportedly too noisy for direct sound pick-up.

Melville has said that he shot the film "without capturing the sound during the shooting,"<sup>2</sup> as doing so would have entailed technical and human resources he could not afford.

This film's soundtrack was therefore produced after the shooting phase.

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<sup>1</sup> A well-known French manufacturer of filmmaking equipment.

<sup>2</sup> *Les Échos du Cinéma*, a TV show, aired 1<sup>th</sup> January 1962.

- Soundtrack production

The various components of the *Le Silence de la Mer* soundtrack were produced separately. Concerts Colonne, a French symphonic orchestra, recorded the music under Paul Bonneau's direction.

The voiceover and occasional dialogues were post-synchronised in the studio: the actors read their lines from the screen while watching the film.

Sounds, at the time, were usually recorded in an auditorium, with a sound-effects specialist producing them "live", i.e. while watching the film. Melville, however, had a tight budget and might have salvaged the sounds he needed from "trim bins" in the cutting rooms<sup>1</sup> (Bins where unused parts of shots are stored).

There is a record of this in the shooting script. Handwritten lists of sounds were added alongside the typewritten text on pages 3 to 9: "soldiers' footsteps in the snow", "glass door closing", "clock", "log fire", "horse on road", etc.

As each of the 10 lists matches a picture reel number (reels lasted approximately 10 minutes), it is plausible to assume that they were produced after the picture editing.

Once the three tracks – the speech, music and sounds – were ready, they were mixed in the Billancourt studios during the optical mixing phase.

The mixed version was then placed alongside the picture track. As Melville was making this film on a shoestring, it is hard to tell how many technicians worked on this stage, and what exactly Jacques Carrère, who was credited as sound engineer, did.

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<sup>1</sup> From a 2010 interview with Rémy Grumbach (a film director and Jean-Pierre Melville's nephew).



## Staging sound (Daniel Deshays)

- Silence, condition to listening

Philosopher Paul Ricœur argued that “the first step in saying something is not talking, but remaining silent and listening”. Words, it follows, can only materialise provided that shared expectant listening – i.e. silence – allows them to.

The notion of silence as a precondition is no doubt why Vercors uses it as the perfect way to corner the German officer into speaking. Silence was the uncle's and his niece's way of refusing to collaborate, even verbally, with the occupying forces.

Melville used silence to build his sound using counterpoints, interspersing noises, voiceover and music.

He sets up a sound scheme carved out around a discontinuous sequence of brief, surging noises (Wehrmacht cars leaving and arriving, von Ebrennac slamming the door, each actor's footsteps).

These sounds contrast with the continuous sounds (voiceovers, music, ticking clocks).

- The sound of silence and what it means

Silence may not be the best way to get film action off the ground, but it builds up sediment where successive unexpected events can take root and open up a closed room to the outside. The discontinuity that the silence creates makes a sudden event possible at any moment. Each sound denotes movement, each movement suggests the situation might suddenly change. It provides the perfect amount of tension to afford the silence an active role, and thereby allow spectators to accept it.

The fact that it lacks the continuous background atmosphere that usually envelops indoor and outdoor film scenes means that sounds announce something new every time they ring out. Suppressing the background atmosphere between each sound and each speech sharpens the silence's presence. It is not the silence sprinkled with minor background noises we hear in films today: it is silence bled empty, like the one in the theatre, and it envelops this fable in an abstract and universal rather than anecdotal and illustrative depth.

- Variations and counterpoints

Facing the unexpected, the constant clock ticking remains. Not only does it underline the reigning silence, it also signals real time passing by. Ushering it in or out, by increasing or decreasing the volume, adds a subjective component that clashes with its objective, regular metrics. It is fine-tuning its intensity that makes time heavier and silence more palpable.

Edgar Bischoff's and Bach's music plays contrasting roles. Bach's music is a cultural bond that the officer and the niece share. Bischoff's classical construction interprets relationships between the characters, but nevertheless triggers break-off points, with dynamic variations or suspense ushering in the silence. It freshens up the fable with a broad variety of themes.

The sound construction around Von Ebrennac's arrival is perhaps the most telling exponent: the music, the barely perceptible ticking clock, the knock at the front door, then music crescendo, the door opening, the music stopping, the clock ticking louder and louder, and the officer finally saying "*S'il vous plait*". So it is the overall way in which the components are arranged that the silence, built by a succession of sounds, makes the scene dramatic.

## “Le Silence...” by Melville

### Adapting “Le Silence”

#### - Vercors’ novel

Vercors’ first signed novel, *Le Silence de la Mer*, was released illegally in 1942.

Vercors was a nom de plume: the author was illustrator and engraver Jean Bruller (1902-1991). His novel was his way of refusing to surrender his principles under pressure from German occupying forces, and condemns a portion of the French population, in particular the intelligentsia, for its attitude.

Éditions de Minuit, an underground publisher set up for the occasion, released *Le Silence de la Mer* in February 1942.

It published several hundred copies, and a few reached London, where de Gaulle ordered a reprint.

As it was clandestine, only a handful of people read *Le Silence de la Mer*. Many people had heard of it, a bare few had laid hands on it, and practically nobody knew who the author really was. After the Liberation, however, the novel became a bestseller and Vercors rocketed to stardom.

Several filmmakers approached him but he invariably refused to see his book adapted into a film. His respect for “friends, Resistance soldiers, deportees” who “clearly asked him not to let a story ‘that had helped them to live’ be sold”<sup>1</sup> was the reason why he declined proposals from about a dozen directors.

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<sup>1</sup> Vercors, *Cent Ans d’Histoire de France. Vol. 3. Briand – l’Oublié: 1942-1962: Les Nouveaux jours, Esquisse d’une Europe*. Paris, Plon, 1984, p. 116.

- Stubborn young Melville

Jean-Pierre Grumbach, a 26-year-old French Resistance soldier who had made it to London as Jean-Pierre Melville, read *Put out the light*, the English translation of Vercors' novel, in 1943. He was crazy about films, very keen on becoming a director, and hell-bent on directing that novel.

After the war, Melville wanted to make films. But he had trouble breaking into the regulation-riddled filmmaking business. So he established his own company, Les Productions Melville.

His *24 heures de la vie d'un clown* (1946), a short film, was his dry run<sup>1</sup>. Then he decided to tackle his dream: adapting *Le Silence de la Mer*.

The first challenge was to convince Vercors to agree. He got in touch with him in early 1947. But, as on all previous occasions, Vercors declined. Melville tried again, and again: "five times, ten times," Vercors remembered. Melville said, "I've got this film under my skin. I'm making it anyway."<sup>2</sup>

When he saw him "hiring the actors, renting the studios and ordering the costumes," Vercors realised that Melville was serious about shooting the film with or without his consent.

Without alienating his rights, he agreed to the proposal that the young director tendered in June 1947. Once the film was ready, Melville would screen it for a panel of former Resistance fighters appointed by Vercors. If they approved, he would release it in cinemas. If they did not, Melville would burn the negative.

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<sup>1</sup> « An interview with Jean-Pierre Melville » by Claude Beylie and Bertrand Tavernier, Cahiers du Cinéma, n° 124, October 1961, p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Vercors, *Cent Ans d'Histoire de France. Vol. 3. Briand – l'Oublié: 1942-1962: Les Nouveaux jours, Esquisse d'une Europe*. Paris, Plon, 1984, p. 116.

- An “illegal” adaptation

Melville asked Vercors for advice and wrote to him, “I would not like to do a thing without your full consent.”<sup>1</sup>.

Vercors supervised the adaptation, making sure it respected his novel. But he helped out on the sidelines, surreptitiously, as he did not want to influence the panel’s future verdict. He was clear with Melville: “There are no misunderstandings here, right? I promise you nothing, I authorise you to do nothing. [...] I will not sign over the right to turn *Le Silence de la Mer* into a film unless it secures unanimous approval during the private screening.”<sup>2</sup>

In that same letter, he nonetheless added, “I am now curious about what you are going to do and will be following your work sympathetically.”

He went as far as allowing Melville to shoot in his home in Villiers-sur-Morin (Seine-et-Marne, France), where the action in the novel unfurls.

The film was also shot and produced “illegally”. Melville did not have a professional card or production approval and all plans to produce films have to secure CNC (Centre National de la Cinématographie) approval. So he was working outside the system. He nevertheless authoritatively filled several roles: adapting, producing and directing the film.

The shooting conditions were tough. Melville used an assortment of various films he had bought on the black market, and shot scenes whenever he could afford the small crew comprising the three main actors, an electrician, two assistants and a director of photography. The 27 days of shooting therefore stretched over several months.

Melville did get one – crucial – break from Laboratoire GTC. Its top manager agreed to lend him the money to develop the film, which the filmmaker edited himself with the director of photography.

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<sup>1</sup> A letter from Melville to Vercors dated 23 June 1947, printed in *Les Lettres Françaises*, n° 206, 27 April 1948.

<sup>2</sup> A letter from Vercors to Melville dated 26 June 1947, printed in *Les Lettres françaises*, n° 206, 27 April 1948.

- Release

*Le Silence de la Mer* was screened for a panel of 24 eminent Resistance fighters, handpicked by Vercors, on the 29<sup>th</sup> of November 1948. He did everything possible to keep them impartial until the end. Just before the film began, he told them, “You will only help me if you are honest and sincere when you decide whether you want to see this film in cinemas or destroyed.”<sup>1</sup>

The panel approved the film in front of a group of journalists, who had been invited by one of Melville’s friends, who was in charge of organising the event.

Vercors, who would have rather kept this screening secret, reprimanded the young director for twisting their “pact” to remain discreet. Melville argued back but probably had another agenda in mind.

He had another challenge waiting: getting the film into cinema theatres. The French technical-crew and film-production guilds resented this freelancing outsider’s attempt to break into the system and objected to the film’s release.

On the 6<sup>th</sup> of November 1948, Melville signed the agreement to distribute *Le Silence de la Mer* with Cinema du Panthéon, a company run by Pierre Braunberger<sup>2</sup> who went on to play a key role in the story.

He lent the filmmaker the money he needed to finish mixing the film, then dealt with all the red tape to secure the one official document that the film needed to make it onto the big screens: the *visa d’exploitation* (the screening licence).

The CNC (Centre National de la Cinématographie) originally refused to review the film – and only caved in under pressure from the Minister of Information, who in turn pressured the commission at Braunberger’s request. But there was still a lot of reticence.

Melville said that policemen were posted by the projection booth for the film’s gala, on the 20<sup>th</sup> of January 1949, lest the copy be seized.

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<sup>1</sup> Vercors, transcribed in « Vercors n’a pas été Trahi », Jeander, *Libération*, 30 November 1948.

<sup>2</sup> It had previously produced Melville’s short, *24 Heures dans la Vie d’un Clown*.

*Le Silence de la Mer* was released in Paris' two largest cinemas back then – the Gaumont-Palace and the Rex – on the 22 of April 1949.

The aura that enshrined the original novel and a considerable promotion campaign in the media attracted about 1,400,000 spectators<sup>3</sup>.

Melville expected more but critics appreciated his film, and commended its faithful adaptation.

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<sup>3</sup> *Ciné-Passions, 7<sup>e</sup> Art et Industrie de 1945 à 2000*, Éditions Dixit/CNC, in appendix to Ginette Vincendeau, *Jean-Pierre Melville an American in Paris*, BFI, 2003.

- Synopsis

1941. The German army occupies France and commandeers homes for its troops. An old man and his niece living in a village are required to lodge Officer Werner von Ebrennac, and tacitly decide not to speak to him.

This graceful, cultivated and wistful young soldier spends many a long winter evening reciting monologues about his love for France and its culture. He despises the war but hopes his country and theirs will unite.

Conversations with other officers during his leave in Paris teach Werner von Ebrennac that the Nazis are actually intent on subjugating France and exterminating the weak among its people.

He is devastated and requests a transfer to the Eastern Front. Only the announcement of his departure breaks his hosts' silent resistance. When bidding farewell, they express their appreciation (and the niece's budding yet stifled love) for him – for the man, not the soldier.



## Melville and the Resistance

### - An intimate story

Jean-Pierre Grumbach started his military service in October 1937 and wore his uniform until after the June 1940 Armistice. At some (unknown) point in time, he became an agent for the *Combat et Libération* network and the BCRA<sup>1</sup>. In 1942, he spent six months in a Spanish jail after crossing the Pyrenees.

He then made it to London, where he worked for the BCRA<sup>1</sup> before joining the *Forces Françaises Libres* and serving in the campaigns in Italy and France.

After the Liberation, he kept his alias Melville, which he had chosen during the war as a tribute to the man who had written *Moby Dick*.

That period also left him with a personal wound: his brother Jacques Grumbach's death. Melville admired his older brother, who was an intellectual, journalist and socialist activist, and one of Léon Blum's<sup>2</sup> most loyal aides.

Jacques was also a Resistant. He was killed, carrying money for the Resistance, in 1942, when trying to cross the border into Spain. During the war, border escorts had orders to kill anyone who seemed too exhausted and might jeopardise the group's venture. That was why the jury acquitted the border escort in an assizes hearing in 1953. Melville observed the neutrality vis-à-vis the murderer, who was also a Resistance fighter.

Melville did not judge or seek revenge, even if "the cataclysm that was World War II played a crucial role shaping the filmmaker's career."<sup>3</sup>

That is where he drew the themes that later haunted his films: "friendship, abnegation, a sense of honour, fatality, fragile existence on the outskirts, and that acrid, bitter but nevertheless sweet taste of passing time and departing youth. And how, faced with developments that their lives had not prepared them to deal with, men reacted and finally revealed their deep-seated nature."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Bureau Central de Renseignement et d'Action*, Free France's intelligence and action office.

<sup>2</sup> French writer and politician (1872-1950)

<sup>3</sup> Olivier Bohler *Vestiges de soi, vertige de l'autre: l'homme de l'après-guerre dans l'oeuvre de Jean-Pierre Melville*, Th. univ. Lettres and arts: Aix-Marseille 1. Lille: ANRT, 2000.

<sup>4</sup> Philippe Labro, "L'Armée des ombres: de tous ses films, c'est celui que Melville préférait", unidentified journal.

- Demystification and nostalgia

The action in three of Melville's thirteen films takes place during World War II.

They are not, in a classical sense, historical or war films: they portray French people's daily lives under the Occupation and a handful of people's destinies.

The four walls of an occupied house in *Le Silence de la Mer* (1947) tender passive resistance as a viable option.

*Léon Morin, Prêtre* ("The Forgiven Sinner", 1961), depicts the relationship between a cleric and Barny, and, beyond it, the French people's everyday life in an occupied town.

*L'Armée des Ombres* ("Army of Shadows", 1969), tells the story of a group of Resistance fighters and provides a demystified vision of the Resistance, at odds with the prevalent romantic and heroic aura it had donned.

These three films – and three book adaptations – strike an intimate chord for Melville: "Why do we choose books? Because there are situations and sentences that are part of us and of our lives. There is a lot about Gerbier in *L'Armée des Ombres* that is also about me, and there is no doubt in my mind that, if I had been a priest, I would have been like Léon Morin."<sup>1</sup>

The films are about a period in his life, but are "never personal stories."<sup>2</sup> They nevertheless encapsulate the "tremor of experience,"<sup>3</sup> even if Melville takes a "subjective" angle that "certainly does not match reality."<sup>4</sup> Because "wartime was abominable, horrible and... marvellous!"<sup>4</sup> for this filmmaker, who reminisces nostalgically because "it is part of [his] youth."<sup>5</sup>

His entire approach fits into the line by Courteline that introduces *L'Armée des Ombres*: "Bad memories, welcome: you are my distant youth."

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<sup>1</sup> *Le Cinéma selon Jean-Pierre Melville* / Rui Nogueira. Éditions de L'Étoile, 1996, p. 40.

<sup>2</sup> *Le Cinéma selon Jean-Pierre Melville* / Rui Nogueira. Éditions de L'Étoile, 1996, p. 141.

<sup>3</sup> Philippe Labro, "L'Armée des ombres: de tous ses films, c'est celui que Melville préférait", unidentified journal.

<sup>4</sup> *Le Cinéma selon Jean-Pierre Melville* / Rui Nogueira. Éditions de L'Étoile, 1996, p. 163.

<sup>5</sup> *Le Cinéma selon Jean-Pierre Melville* / Rui Nogueira. Éditions de L'Étoile, 1996, p. 164.

## Melville or the aesthetics of sound (by Daniel Deshays)

### - Obsessive sound

It is not fair to say that Melville's films are "built around sound" or that a wide variety of approaches to sound govern form. What runs through his work as a whole is a sort of arrangement of sound.

In an interview with *Le Figaro*, published on the 4<sup>th</sup> of December 1972, he said, "As I see it, in cinema, the sound is more important than the image. It's not the dialogue: I'm not in the slightest bit interested in that. I mean the sound itself, which I create entirely in the studio, where I can recreate auditory perspectives that respect the essential. [...] Dosing the sound is tantamount to calculating the exact amount of stimulant or corrosive product you want to inoculate the spectator-listener with."

### - A limited range

The "sound" defines an essential, lean universe put into perspective by using a small assortment of noises.

It is a vocabulary of sign-sounds that are very often reused, originally hovering between realism and symbolism, which irrigates every one of his films: there are winds, trains, ticking clocks, jazz and other sounds often isolated by silence.

Volker Schlöndorff, who served as his assistant, provides a clue: "What he liked about the gangster ethos was that there wasn't any chitchat." That is a dogma, so to speak, which guides his work: it is not the dialogue that provides the meaning in the story. There are fewer words, opening up more space for silence, sounds and music.

- Musical ingenuity

In *Quand tu Liras cette Lettre* (“When you Read this Letter”), a film he directed on commission, he seemed to be testing an all-new sound genre. The sound variety is over the top, changes non-stop and the sound is basically so rich that it undermines the film’s realism. The music and sound get tangled up, stressing the action ad-nauseam.

Melville dropped this symbolism in *L’Aîné des Ferchaux* (“The Eldest of the Ferchaux”) and *Deux Hommes dans Manhattan* (“Two Men in Manhattan”).

The music in these two films unfurls in succession : the jazz joint atmospheres in New Orleans and New York are defined and documented in a string of songs.

The composers – Georges Delerue, Martial Solal, Jacques Loussier and Eddie Barclay – had a mandate to experiment with the variety of forms. Repetitive music, themes reminiscing the wide open spaces in the Wild West, twist parties and recording sessions take over in turn. It is as if Melville had demanded contingent evocation, traits and music, rather than a soundtrack to fit and comment the action.

In these films, as indeed in the rest of his work, music is associated with the social venues that parade by. They are mainly jazz bop bands playing in the nightclubs or grand hotels where the action is momentarily unfurling, or a shindig in a working-class suburb.

In Melville’s work, where characters move about, musical phrases are enough to inhabit the temporary backdrop. There is nevertheless a difference between his first films and his last. In his early films, the music intertwining with the action spans a broad variety of forms – harpsichords, accordions, jazz instruments and organs. That was what composer Bernard Peiffer did in *Quand tu Liras cette Lettre*. In later films, Melville only uses one musical strand for the entire film.

Jazz was still associated with nightclub times and spaces, but stretched to the rest of the story, regardless of the backdrop – but it still tied in with the action. *Le Deuxième Souffle* (“Second Wind”) and *Le Samouraï* are two examples.