

## Passive Resistance: The Deceptive Calm of *The Silence of the Sea* (*Le Silence de la mer*)

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Jean-Pierre Melville's first film, *Le silence de la mer* (1949), is available for the first time in North America in the form of a sparkling new edition from the Criterion Collection, stuffed with its customary irresistible extras. An extraordinary film made under exceptional circumstances, it should come with an advisory sticker for those only familiar with Melville's best-known works. Fans of Melville's New Wave precursor *Bob le flambeur* (1956), his gripping early-sixties neo-noirs featuring Jean-Paul Belmondo and Lina Ventura, or subsequent cops-and-robbers *policiers* starring Alain Delon might be surprised with what they find here.

*The Silence of the Sea* is not so much "Melvillian" (long takes, complex constructions, edge-of-the-seat suspense) as it is "Bressonian" (quiet, minimalist, elliptical). Of course Melville, never wanting for confidence, always insisted that it was Bresson who copied him. (Ginette Vincendeau, author of the invaluable *Jean-Pierre Melville: An American in Paris*, describes him as "obstinate, proud and authoritarian.") The point is moot, since Bresson by now holds the implicit trademark on that style—but Melville has a case. Bresson's first two features, *Les anges du Péché* (*Angels of Sin*, 1943) and *Les dames du Bois de Boulogne* (1945), are shot fairly conventionally; Bresson was not fully Bressonian until *Diary of a Country Priest* (*Journal d'un curé de champagne*, 1951), which was released two years after *Silence*, Melville's debut.

*Silence* was the first of three remarkable, disparate films Melville would make about the occupation, all adaptations of celebrated books based on the wartime experiences of their authors. The next, *Leon Morin, Priest* (*Léon Morin, prêtre*, 1961), from the 1952 novel by Beatrix Beck, is subtle, complex, and rewarding. *Army of Shadows* (*L'armée des ombres*, 1969), third in the trilogy, is based on Joseph Kessel's 1943 fictionalized account of resistance fighters, and is an incomparable masterpiece, recognized as best foreign film of the year by the New York Film Critics Circle on the occasion of its belated American release in 2006. *Army* is haunted by Melville's uni-

versally applicable, matter-of-fact observation: "Don't forget there are more people who didn't work for the resistance than people who did."

It is not surprising that Melville would return repeatedly to themes of the Nazi occupation and underground resistance. For the young Jean-Pierre Grumbach (who kept his *nom de guerre* Melville, a nod to his favorite American author, after the war) these were horrifying, thrilling, and formative years. As a French Army regular, he saw action in Belgium and Dunkirk, surviving the desperate evacuation to England; from there, he rejoined the fight with the French resistance. (His brother Jacques, the editor of an underground newspaper, was murdered at the mountainous frontier while attempting to escape to Spain.) With the Free French, Melville fought in Tunisia, Italy, and participated in the final campaign to liberate France.

Melville never doubted what he would do after the war, should he survive it—he would make films. A passionate cinephile, he told Rui Nogueira in *Melville on Melville* that he saw twenty-seven films during a one-week leave in London in 1943.<sup>1</sup> London was also where Melville read the English language version of *The Silence of the Sea*, by Vercors (the pseudonym of Jean Bruller). He said that "from the day" he was given the Vercors story, he "was absolutely determined that it would be my first film."

The Vercors novella, clandestinely published and distributed in a modest printing, would become a symbol of resistance even to those who had not read it, although by 1948 it had sold over one million copies and been translated into seventeen languages. The story—inspired by Vercors' own experiences and observations—is threadbare, and the "resistance" is passive and abstract as opposed to violent and heroic.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, a few critics, and, initially, actress Nicole Stéphane (who played the niece and would star in Melville's next film, *Les enfants terribles* [1950]), saw in the French characters too much compliance and not enough heroism.

Vercors was a thinker, not a soldier, and found his calling "not in active fighting . . . but in safeguarding clear, accurate and persistent thinking in the face of oppression." Thus in the novella, a German officer is billeted in a French home (just like the one who took up residence in the house where

Film Quarterly, Vol. 69, Number 1, pp. 90–92, ISSN 0015-1386, electronic ISSN 1533-8630.  
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**A Nazi officer (Howard Vernon) receives his assignment**



**The French uncle (Jean-Marie Roban) at home with his niece (Nicole Stéphane)**

Vercors lived with his wife). Its occupants, an uncle (Jean-Marie Roban, who reappears in *Army of Shadows*) and his niece, immediately and tacitly agree neither to alter the routine of their lives—nor to utter a word to the Nazi intruder. For Vercors, their silence represented “a wild and poetic image . . . beneath the deceptively calm surface of the sea, the ceaseless, cruel battles of the beasts of the deep.”

But the German officer (Howard Vernon) does not quite live up to expectations: cultured, humane, sensitive, and a European cosmopolitan, scarred by the first war, he nevertheless believes in the second—as a vehicle for wedding the two cultures of France and Germany and advancing European civilization. And the talk (all his) of courtship and marriage parallels his growing, unspoken affection for the niece. A trip to Paris, however, finally exposes the officer’s naiveté: he discovers that his fellow Nazis are brutal thugs keen to crush France underfoot. Devastated, he relates the horrifying truth to his silent hosts and, in a suicidal gesture, leaves to serve on the eastern front.

Vercors was extremely reluctant to allow Melville to adapt *Silence*, but the aspiring filmmaker was so relentless in his pursuit of the project that he finally received the author’s assent—and permission to shoot in Vercors’ home—but not yet the rights to the film. Rights would only be provided, Vercors insisted, as the famous story goes, if a jury of resistance fighters screened the movie and gave their approval. Otherwise the negative was to be destroyed.

Melville leapt at the gamble, which was the least of his barriers to production. The postwar French film industry was highly regulated, unwelcoming to newcomers who were expected to spend years if not decades working their way up the production ranks, its gatekeeping guilds dominated by powerful, politically infused unions. Melville shot *Silence*

in twenty-seven days scattered across several months in 1947–48, as financing permitted—without having the rights to the property, with no union card, no film (other than short ends cobbled together from varied stocks), no permits for his Paris locations, and only a skeleton crew of four regulars (a fraction of that mandated by production rules).

Melville’s most important partner was his cinematographer, Henri Decae, also working on his first film. Decae would collaborate with Melville six more times, and become, in Melville’s apt phrase, “the cameraman-in-chief to the Nouvelle Vague,” shooting the first films and many that followed by Louis Malle, Claude Chabrol, and François Truffaut. Melville described Decae as “gifted with great intelligence, and exactly sharing my tastes for all things cinema.” On *Silence*, they “did everything together: shooting, editing, dubbing and mixing.” For their troubles, they won Vercors’ approval, commercial success (over a million spectators)—and a fine from the Centre National de la Cinématographique.

Melville’s adaptation is remarkably faithful to the source material, in substance as well as in its dark, spare style and saturated black-and-white photography that was so noticeably and uncommonly dark that Melville went through two protesting cinematographers before finding a kindred spirit in Decae. The differences between book and film are modest and in accord with the author’s intentions. A disclaimer at the start (most likely to offset discomfort with the film’s portrayal of a “good German”) stresses the lingering and indelible stain of Nazi war crimes; Melville slips in an (incongruous) reference to the gas chambers of Treblinka and offers a fleeting glimpse of a “no Jews allowed” sign; a moving passage near the end allows for the famed quotation of Anatole France: “It is a noble thing for a soldier to disobey a criminal order.”

Vercors surely welcomed these additions, as there were some concerns that his book, which had been completed in October 1941 and published in 1942, might appear dated in its failure to reflect the true extent of the Nazi horrors. In addition to these tweaks, Melville added one scene and one sequence, both welcome. The scene shows the niece and the officer passing wordlessly on a snowy street: with an inventive, alienating tracking shot, a hint of slow motion, and by always showing the characters in separate frames (except for a quick long shot of their paths crossing), Melville underscores the independence and agency of the young woman as a full participant in the silent resistance that takes place in their home. The additional sequence shows, rather than tells, of the officer's catastrophic trip to Paris, a successful choice, and allows for the powerful shot of rows of Nazi hats at an officer's club—an image Melville would reprise with great effect in *Amy of Shadows* twenty years later.

In general, it is hard to imagine a more faithful adaptation; aside from the Paris interlude, the film, as the book, is almost entirely voiced by the officer's evening monologues and the uncle's (voice-over) narration; and the movie opens and closes with shots of the novella itself, first clandestinely distributed and finally as the text of the last line. But for all its fidelity, the film is not at all bookish—it is thrillingly cinematic, with its intrusively ticking clock underscoring the heavy silence, a deep-focus kitchen scene that is a tip-of-the-hat to *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941), a marvelously expressive use of darkness, especially in hallways, and, in a story of passive resistance, the unique (and very Melvillian) way in which, in the context of such stoicism, small gestures and expressions captured on film and unique to the medium can speak volumes.

The Criterion edition includes a generous helping of extras, including a snippet of a 1959 television interview with Melville, a new 20-minute interview with Vincendeau, and Pierre-Henri Gilbert's documentary about the film, *Melville Steps Out of the Shadows* (2010). Also included is the previously impossible-to-find *Twenty-Four Hours in the Life of a Clown* (*Vingt-quatre heures de la vie d'un clown*) the short film

Melville wrote, produced, and directed in 1946, an archival addition likely to be welcomed by completists though dismissed by its maker as “the error of my youth” and “something I would like to be able to forget.” If pressed, one could identify a Melvillian emphasis on the central importance of male friendship and on a universe of women divided between dutiful, homebound wives and young, free-range beauties, but the short does little to challenge its creator's tepid assessment.

The jewel in the crown of the supplementary material is Olivier Bohler's feature documentary *Code Name Melville* (*Sous le nom de Melville*, 2008), also previously unavailable. With a welcome but not exclusive emphasis on Melville's wartime experiences and their influence on his career, the documentary features interviews with Nogueira, directors Volker Schlöndorff and Bertrand Tavernier (each of whom worked as assistants for Melville early in their careers), Rémy Grumbach (Jacques' son and Melville's nephew), and Philippe Labro, the journalist, author, filmmaker, and Melville's close friend. A must-see for Melville fans, the *Silence of the Sea* is essential viewing, *Code Name Melville* an after-dinner treat.

#### LE SILENCE DE LA MER - Blu-ray & DVD Editions

1949 • 99 minutes • Black & White • Monaural • In French with English subtitles • 1.33:1 aspect ratio. (BLU-RAY EDITION): CAT. NO: CC2478BD, UPC: 7-15515-14491-9, ISBN: 978-1-60465-986-3, SRP: \$39.95. (2-DVD EDITION): CAT. NO: CC2479DDVD, UPC: 7-15515-14501-5, ISBN: 978-1-60465-987-0, SRP: \$29.95.

#### Notes

1. Rui Nogueira, ed., *Melville on Melville* (New York: Viking, 1972). All Melville quotes are from this source.
2. James W. Brown and Lawrence D. Stokes, eds., *The Silence of the Sea/Le Silence de la mer: A Novel of French Resistance during World War II* by 'Vercors' (London: Bloomsbury, 1993); see also Vercors's memoir about the book: Vercors, *The Battle of Silence*, trans. Rita Barisse (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968). All Vercors quotes are from this source.