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Films in French: Suggestions for Use and Selected Examples

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International Training

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FILMS IN FRENCH:
SUGGESTIONS FOR USE AND SELECTED EXAMPLES

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the Master of Arts in Teaching degree at the School for
International Training, Brattleboro, Vermont

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	PAGE
I. Introduction	1
II. Suggested Films	
Le Poulet (The Chicken)	6
Le Haricot (The String Bean)	7
Foreign Tongue: A French Vocabulary Review	8
Les 400 Coups (400 Blows)	9
Baisers Volés (Stolen Kisses)	11
Les Enfants du Paradis (Children of Paradise)	13
La Grande Illusion (Grand Illusion)	15
Les Règles du Jeu (Rules of the Game)	17
La Peau Douce (Soft Skin)	19
La Guerre est Finie (The War is Over)	21
Hiroshima Mon Amour	23
List of Film Distributors	25

This paper is not an attempt at a comprehensive report on the use of films in French classes but rather it is a record of my own experiences with film and includes some general suggestions. The bulk of the paper consists of a review of a number of films for possible classroom use.

At various times during my involvement with French teaching, as an Experiment leader and as a student teacher in the M.A.T. program, I have observed that language teachers often use films purely for entertainment value. Entertainment is certainly a valid motive but it has little value for language learning unless there is some sort of follow-up activity to provide reinforcement. The entertainment value may also be nil if students are inadequately prepared for the film, as was the case when Hiroshima Mon Amour was shown to summer outbound Experimenters in June. Many students failed to follow the "story within the story" (the French girl's love for a German soldier during World War II) because it is told in reverse narrative form. This story is essential to the understanding of one aspect of recent French history, and could have been made meaningful to students by giving them (or asking them to do the research) some background information and then following it up with a discussion.

There are a variety of levels on which a film can be discussed. For instance, with a simple film like Le Poulet, I started out by asking my second year French class easy questions of the type, "What does the little boy do in the morning?" (see "Possible Discussion Questions" in the section on Le Poulet following this introduction), and providing new vocabulary. Then I asked various students to retell the story in the

past tense, and we talked about French family life as portrayed in the film, comparing it with their own lives. With a more advanced class, the story could be retold by students without preliminary questioning, followed by a discussion of family life and the humor in the film. A film like this one, which everybody always seems to like, is a good way to get students talking at any level.

Another film which I have used with great success, both with Experimenters and public high school students, is François Truffaut's feature film, Les 400 Coups (400 Blows). With Experimenters in academic groups, the discussion was directed toward getting them to think about the French educational system of which they would soon be a part. In the third year French class I student-taught, the film was included in a unit on the theme of rebellion. Students had already read two poems by Jacques Prévert on the same theme, "Page d'écriture" and "Le cancre", and were able to place the film in this context. Another theme which was considered in the discussion was the boy's family life and how it affected his behavior. Students were given a list of study questions before seeing the film and assigned a composition on the question of their choice. In class, each student led a discussion based on his/her question.

Although it is not aimed at the use of films in the language classroom, an excellent source of ideas for eliciting discussions on films is Richard Lacey's book, Seeing With Feeling.¹ Lacey suggests starting film discussions with simple non-threatening exercises like an "image-sound skim"--asking

¹ Publisher: W. B. Saunders, 218 W. Washington Square, Philadelphia.

students to first recall images they remember, without imposing interpretations, then sounds. From that point students can begin to provide interpretations if their language ability permits. Other discussion questions can include: "What is your favorite scene?", "Why?"; "How would you rewrite the ending of this film?"; "Imagine what happens to the characters after the end of the film". Non-narrated films are also excellent for language class use, as students can be asked to write dialogues, add or change the music to obtain a different effect, etc.¹

Films should always be previewed and consideration given to whether students need preparation for some scenes. Many French films go heavy on the love and sex themes and should be shown only if the teacher is comfortable discussing them and if the students are ready for them. Of course these topics can provide some of the best discussions, if the class atmosphere is open and relaxed, and can be used as the starting point for values clarification exercises. Previewing is also important for deciding if advance explanation of the story is necessary, as in the case of Hiroshima Mon Amour, where the narrative is non-linear and difficult to follow.

Budget limitations can put tight restrictions on the use of films in class, as rental costs range from \$15 for a short film like Le Poulet to an average of \$75 for a feature film. It pays to shop around for films, as prices may differ slightly from one distributor to the next. A list of film distributors is given at the end of this paper.

¹ An excellent source of information on non-narrated films is Salvatore Parlato, Too Good for Words: A Directory of Nonnarrated 16 mm Films, New York, R. R. Bowker, 1972.

However, it may be possible to work out cost-sharing arrangements for a film with another department in the school (at the school where I student taught, the English and Foreign Language Departments jointly ordered and shared costs for films like 100 Blows). There are also some free films available, notably from various consulates, but they often must be ordered months in advance (see the list of distributors at the end of the paper). A wonderful source for feature films is the local Public Television station. In the last three years the two series, Film Odyssey and Humanities Film Forum have included numerous subtitled foreign language films (Film Odyssey showed Grand Illusion, Rules of the Game, Jules and Jim, and Beauty and the Beast and many others). Film Odyssey also made available a study guide to its films.

The films I have included in the following section are not necessarily films I would give top priority to showing, although I have evaluated them briefly in the "Background" section. They are simply some examples of films I have used, and others I have seen recently and was able to take notes on. (Several I have not seen recently but feel would be excellent are Truffaut's The Wild Child, Cocteau's Beauty and the Beast, and Rene Clément's Forbidden Games.) No documentary films were included in this list, although there are many excellent ones available. Films should be selected for showing according to the level of the class and the teacher's own interest. I have provided a brief synopsis of each film, similar to those given in the catalogs of the major distributors.

For further ideas on short and feature films, I suggest skimming through the catalogs of Janus Films, Macmillan/Audio-Brandon and Contemporary Films/McGraw Hill, which are a gold mine of information. For an indication of one excellent film critic's opinions on various feature films, refer to any of Pauline Kael's books of criticism (Going Steady, Kiss Kiss Bang Bang and I Lost It at the Movies).

TITLE: Le Poulet (The Chicken)
DATE: 1963
OTHER: Black & white, 15 minutes
Available from McGraw Hill films

BACKGROUND:

Le Poulet is a delightful little film which provides a view of a French working class family and its home life. The story is very funny and the limited dialogue makes it suitable for elementary students. I used it in a second year class with great success.

SYNOPSIS:

A French working class couple take their little boy in the family Deux Chevaux to a farm one Sunday morning to buy a chicken. The little boy falls in love with the chicken and is heartbroken when he learns it will be cooked for Sunday dinner the next week. Seeking a way to save the chicken, he finds out from his father that hens are not eaten because they lay eggs. He creeps out of bed that night, takes an egg out of the refrigerator and puts it under the chicken. The plot is uncovered by an incredulous father only when the boy puts a dozen eggs under the chicken.

POSSIBLE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Describe the family in the film. Is it a happy family?
2. What day is it at the beginning of the film? What does the family do?
3. How do they go to the farm to buy the chicken?
4. What does the little boy do with the chicken?
5. What does he ask his father?
6. What does he do to save the chicken from being eaten?
7. How does his father discover that the chicken isn't a hen?
8. How does the film end?

TITLE: Le Haricot (The String Bean)
DIRECTOR: Edmond Séchon
DATE: 1964
OTHER: Black & white and color, 17 minutes
Available from McGraw Hill films

BACKGROUND AND SYNOPSIS:

Le Haricot is another charming film which won a prize at the Cannes Film Festival. The story is simple: an old woman living alone in Paris plants a bean on her window ledge, cares for it and watches it grow. She treats it like a child, taking it out for sun on her daily walks, moving it around her room so that it gets plenty of sun. When it gets too big, she plants it in the garden where she goes every day for a walk. Eventually the gardeners notice the ungainly plant and pull it up. The old woman is sad but plants another bean and as the film ends she watches the rain fall outside her window on the newly planted bean. There is no dialogue.

The film is a favorite of the Foreign Language Office. They order it over and over again for French classes, which always seem delighted with it. The film can be used at any level and the discussion varied according to the level of the students.

POSSIBLE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (For elementary students):

1. Describe the old woman's room. Where is her building located? What floor does she live on?
2. What does she do to earn a little money?
3. What does she wear every day?
4. Where does she go every day for a walk?
5. What does she plant? Describe how she takes care of her plant.
6. Is the gardener happy to see the plant? What does he do with it?
7. At the end, what does the old woman do?

TITLE: Foreign Tongue: A French Vocabulary
DIRECTOR: Mal Sharpe
OTHER: Color, 23 minutes
Available from Pyramid Films

BACKGROUND AND SUGGESTIONS FOR USE:

This madcap surrealist film presents two hundred French nouns which are acted out in totally absurd situations. Each word is pronounced and printed as a French subtitle. Students either love it or hate it; I found it immensely funny, but my students seemed almost shocked at this sort of visual insanity. It is good as a vocabulary review, but words are flashed too quickly for it to be a good teaching method unless backed up by some sort of reinforcement. Following the film I asked students to recall as many words as they could and let them teach each other the words they remembered.

TITLE: Les 400 Coups (400 Blows)
 DIRECTOR: François Truffaut
 DATE: 1959
 OTHER: Black & white, 98 minutes
 Available from McGraw Hill films
 Starring Jean-Pierre Léaud

BACKGROUND:

400 Blows was Truffaut's first feature film and is the story of Antoine Doinel, a boy of 12. The film is a story of protest against a tyrannical adult world, as Antoine is trapped in a difficult home situation and a miserable school. Truffaut admits that the film is highly autobiographical; he himself was sent to a reform school like the one to which Antoine goes in the film. 400 Blows is the first of a trilogy of films about Antoine: in the second film, Stolen Kisses, Antoine leaves the army, enters the working world and falls in love, and in the third film, Bed and Board, he goes through some of the problems of adjusting to marriage. All three films are excellent.

I have shown 400 Blows a number of times, to Experiment academic semester groups (stressing the portrayal of the French educational system in the film, though it has changed a bit since 1959), and to the second and third year high school classes where I student taught. Students always love the film and seem to have great sympathy for Antoine.

SYNOPSIS:

Antoine is caught in the strained relationship between his parents: his mother gave birth to him out of wedlock and later married a man who was willing to adopt Antoine. The "father" bears a grudge, but tolerates Antoine as well as his wife's infidelity. Antoine hates school and there are some superb scenes of what he has to endure there, notably a dictation in class and his humiliation by the teacher for plagiarizing Balzac. When he skips school, he tells the teacher it was for his mother's funeral; when his parents show up at school looking for him, the headmaster discovers the lie and Antoine runs away from home. Antoine and a friend steal a typewriter from his father's office and are caught trying to return it. He is sent first to jail and then to a detention home. At the end, Antoine escapes and runs to freedom.

POSSIBLE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Describe the educational system in Antoine's school. What type of discipline does the teacher use? What do you think of it?

2. Is the behavior of the students in Antoine's school similar to the behavior of students of the same age in America? Find examples to illustrate your point of view.
3. Describe the relationship between Antoine's "father" and mother.
4. What do you think of Antoine's family life? Describe it. Do you think that his parents love him?
5. Do you sympathize with Antoine? Why or why not?
6. Compare the attitude of Antoine with "Le Cancre" in Jacques Prévert's poem. What happiness does Antoine choose? Does he find it?
7. What do you think will happen to Antoine after the end of the film? Is he going to be successful in finding happiness? Use your imagination.
8. Are there some scenes that you especially liked? Describe them and explain why you liked them.

TITLE: Baisers Volés (Stolen Kisses)
 DIRECTOR: François Truffaut
 DATE: 1968
 OTHER: Color, about 120 minutes
 Starring Jean-Pierre Léaud

BACKGROUND:

Stolen Kisses is Truffaut's second film about Antoine Doinel and is a delightful comedy. The class to which I showed 400 Blows was fascinated by Antoine and went to see Stolen Kisses on their own. They were delighted that Antoine had been able to pull himself out of the abyss he was in at the end of 400 Blows, fall in love with a nice girl, and (probably) live happily ever after. If other students are as enthusiastic as mine about this film, there is material for hours of discussion about the problems of life and love, as well as the comic aspects of these problems. To find out whether Antoine and Christine (his fiancée) lived happily ever after, see Bed and Board (Domicile Conjugal), the final film of the trilogy.

SYNOPSIS:

The film opens with Antoine in an army jail cell reading Balzac's "Lys dans la vallée," an allusion to his childhood passion for that author in 400 Blows. Enlisting in the army because he thought it would be exciting and romantic, Antoine confesses to have learned the fallacy of his dream and spent most of his army career AWOL or in jail. In the beginning of Stolen Kisses, he is given a dishonorable discharge. The parents of an old girlfriend, Christine, help him find a job as night watchman in a hotel. He is fired from this job and is hired by a detective agency, which assigns him to follow a homosexual magician. A second assignment finds him taking a job in a shoe store in an attempt to discover why the employees hate the owner. An infatuation with the owner's wife leaves Antoine again unemployed, but he goes to work as a TV repairman. His relationship with Christine has many ups and downs during the film, but ends happily when her parents go away for a weekend and she summons him to repair the TV. Their breakfast the next day foretells married life, with Christine explaining how to butter biscottes without breaking them and Antoine putting a makebelieve ring on her finger. The film ends with the couple walking happily in the park and, as they sit on a bench, a man who has been following Christine comes up and proclaims his undying love for her, reflecting Antoine's actual thoughts.

POSSIBLE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Describe the humor of several of the scenes in the film: when Antoine follows the woman and the magician in the street; his infatuation with the shoestore owner's wife; or a scene of your choice.
2. How does Truffaut show the humor of serious incidents in the life of Antoine, for example, his expulsion from the army, and his difficulties in finding work?
3. Describe the development of Antoine's love for Christine and vice versa.
4. Describe Christine's family. How does her family differ from Antoine's as shown in 400 Blows?
5. Imagine what happens after the end of the film. What kinds of problems do you think they will have in life?

TITLE: Les Enfants du Paradis (Children of Paradise)
 DIRECTOR: Marcel Carné; Screenplay by Jacques Prévert
 DATE: 1945
 OTHER: Black & white, 188 minutes
 Available from McGraw Hill films
 Starring: Jean-Louis Barrault
 Arletty

BACKGROUND:

Children of Paradise is a romance set in the Paris of Balzac's time. It was filmed during the Occupation when some of its makers were being hunted by the Gestapo, and many scenes were shot in garages and Maquis hideaways. I used it in an advanced high school course on French theater and students seemed to like it a great deal. It can be used for a discussion of dramatic modes, as five kinds of theatrical performances are given in the film. It is also a film poem on the nature and varieties of love: sacred and profane, selfless and possessive. The "paradis" of the title is the "peanut gallery" in a theater. Baptiste, the mime, says several times during the film that he performs only for these people.

SYNOPSIS:

The film depicts life on the Boulevard du Crime in Paris in the 1840's. Baptiste, a mime, and Frédérique, an actor, get their starts at the Théâtre des Funambules on the Boulevard du Crime. In front of the theater one day Baptiste in mime costume sees Garance, an elegant woman of the streets and falls immediately in love with her. He meets her by chance that night in a bar and leaves with her, declaring his love for her. She takes up lodgings in his rooming house, resumes an old affair with Frédérique, and becomes an actress at Les Funambules. Baptiste, who becomes a mime star and is shown in several brilliant mime scenes grows embittered by her lack of response to his burning love, and continues to ignore Natalie, who loves him passionately. Garance meets the count Edouard de Montray and refuses his advances until she is nearly arrested one day and turns to him for help. The story resumes several years later with a performance by Baptiste at Les Funambules. A mysteriously veiled woman who comes to every performance is discovered by Frédérique, now a successful actor on the legitimate stage, to be Garance. She tells him of her lonely exile from Paris with the Count and her love for Baptiste, impossible because he is now married to Natalie. Garance and Baptiste are reunited for one night, but Natalie discovers them and Garance leaves, running out into the Boulevard du Crime. The final scene shows Baptiste making his way through the crowd, hopelessly calling her name.

POSSIBLE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Describe life on the Boulevard du Crime: what kinds of activities take place there?
2. Describe the Théâtre des Funambules. What kinds of plays are performed in the theater?
3. Describe Garance's childhood (as she tells it to Baptiste). Does this help you to understand why she chose the profession she is in?
4. Analyze the love of Natalie and of Garance for Baptiste.
5. What is the role of mime in the film? Use examples from the film.
6. Compare the comic theatre with "legitimate" theater, as shown in Frédérique's performance of "Othello".
7. What is the role of Jericho (the ragman who sets people off against each other)?

TITLE: La Grande Illusion (Grand Illusion)
 DIRECTOR: Jean Renoir
 DATE: 1937
 OTHER: Black & white, 111 minutes
 Starring: Jean Gabin, Pierre Fresnay, Erich von
 Stroheim
 Available from Janus Films

BACKGROUND:

Grand Illusion is a film about war (World War I) and about the downfall of the traditions of the aristocracy in the modern world. Each of the heroes is representative of a social class: De Boeldieu is a French aristocrat, von Rauffenstein a German aristocrat, Maréchal a plebeian, and Rosenthal a rich Jew from the merchant class. The prison camp to which they are sent is a microcosm of a world in change; the two aristocrats play out their roles, but recognize that their world of privilege is doomed. The film is suspenseful and sometimes amusing, and is often included on lists of the 10 best films ever made. I recommend it for high intermediate and advanced students.

SYNOPSIS:

The film begins as three French aviators whose plane has just been shot down are brought into a German prison camp. At the start of their imprisonment they live well, feasting on delicacies sent from Paris, talking nostalgically about their lives at home, and regretting that they can't fight for the glory of France. As their imprisonment lengthens and they are frustrated in escape attempts, they grow bitter. After transfers to several other camps, they are sent to an old castle prison under the command of von Rauffenstein, who greets them graciously. There are numerous discussions between von Rauffenstein and De Boeldieu about the advance of democracy and the decline of their positions in society. Nevertheless, both keep up the pretext of their positions, e.g., De Boeldieu dresses elegantly and wears gloves. An elaborate escape plan is developed, for which De Boeldieu offers himself as the decoy to distract the captors while his friends escape. Von Rauffenstein is shocked that De Boeldieu has betrayed their gentlemen's agreement (von Rauffenstein is a gracious host and in return expected his guest to be a model prisoner), and shoots him. But when he goes to De Boeldieu's death bed, De Boeldieu admits that in his captor's place he would have done the same thing. The rest of the film recounts the arduous escape route of Maréchal and Rosenthal, showing the subtle hatreds which arise to threaten their friendship when they are exhausted and despairing. They take refuge at the farm of a German widow and her child, and Maréchal falls in love with her. But they finally decide to return to freedom and walk to Switzerland. In the last shot German troops aim at them but they are out of range, already in Switzerland.

POSSIBLE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Discuss the social class of each of the French captives. What does each say about his background which leads you to your conclusions?
2. What do you think of their eagerness to return to battle and their patriotism? How does Maréchal's attitude change after solitary confinement?
3. Describe von Rauffenstein. How did he get his physical injuries? What do you think of his treatment of his captives?
4. Analyze the conversation between von Rauffenstein and De Boeldieu about the fall of the aristocracy. How do they react to this downfall? What does De Boeldieu mean when he says, "We can't stop the march of time."
5. Discuss the conversation between Maréchal and De Boeldieu in which Marechal says, "Tobacco, gloves, everything separates us."
6. Why does von Rauffenstein ask De Boeldieu during the escape, "Have you gone insane?" What principle has he violated in helping with the escape?
7. What do you think of the discussion at De Boeldieu's death bed, in which both agree that duty is above all?
8. What is the symbolism when von Rauffenstein cuts the flower off his geranium?
9. Discuss the relationship between the two escaped prisoners.

TITLE: Les Règles du Jeu (Rules of the Game)
 DIRECTOR: Jean Renoir
 DATE: 1939
 OTHER: Black & white, 110 minutes
 Jean Renoir plays Octave
 Available from Janus Films

BACKGROUND:

Rules of the Game was made two years after Grand Illusion and depicts an aristocracy based on money and celebrity. The rules of society were clear in Grand Illusion, but in this film they are in flux. The characters talk about rules, and then proceed to violate them. When the film first came out there was a violent reaction from the aristocracy and one outraged aristocrat tried to set the theater on fire. The film is a tragi-comedy which could be used with intermediate and advanced students.

SYNOPSIS:

The film begins with the Lindbergian arrival of André Jurieux after a solo flight across the Atlantic. Jurieux ignores the crowd's cheers and expresses his anger that the woman who inspired the flight, Christine, wife of the Marquis de la Cheyniest, isn't there. Jurieux is invited to the marquis' country estate for a weekend party, where the rest of the film takes place. Octave, who had brought Christine up and is now her confidant, also attends. Jurieux continues to make overtures to Christine but she professes only friendship. Her husband's mistress is present at the party, but she accepts the fact, saying "men are like that". The guests go on a pheasant hunt, and brutally kill all wildlife in their path. That evening there is a costume ball which erupts into a mad chase scene. In between scenes of the chase, Christine first declares she loves Jurieux after he fights over her with another man. However, he proclaims that because of the "rules", he can't take the wife of a man who has invited him to his house. Shortly thereafter, she declares her love for Octave. Through a comedy of errors which turn into tragedy, Octave takes Christine to the greenhouse, leaves her there and sends André out to her. However, Jurieux is shot by the servant Schumacher who thinks he is going to meet the latter's wife. On the steps of the chateau, the Marquis makes a speech to the guests and servants to explain the unfortunate accident. An onlooker says that the Marquis' race is dying out as the film ends.

POSSIBLE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Describe the aristocracy as portrayed in the film. What do you think of these people and their way of life?

2. What are the rules of the game of this society? Does anybody know the rules?
3. What happens to Jurieux who starts out as the romantic hero? Does he remain the center of attention?
4. Discuss the role of Octave. Do you agree with his statement that he is a parasite and a failure? How do his good intentions lead to tragedy?
5. Analyze the character of Christine. What are her feelings for Jurieux and Octave?
6. Discuss the masquerade party and its degeneration into sheer madness. Which aspects are comic? Which are tragic?
7. Analyze the hunting scene and its brutality.
8. What is the role of the servants in the film. How their lives different from their master's life? How the same?

TITLE: La Peau Douce (Soft Skin)
 DIRECTOR: François Truffaut
 DATE: 1966
 OTHER: Black & white, about 120 minutes

BACKGROUND:

La Peau Douce is the story of a middle aged French writer and scholar who falls in love with a younger woman. It explores the emotional reactions of the characters to this affair and ends ironically when the professor's wife kills him in anger--just after he has broken off with the other woman. The film is an excellent starting point for discussions of relationships between men and women, and also provides interesting character portraits. For obvious reasons it should be used with older students who can be at ease with the sexual content.

SYNOPSIS:

The film opens when Pierre Lachenay dashes to the airport for a flight to Lisbon where he is to give a lecture on the subject of his latest book. On the flight he meets a stewardess named Nicole and falls in love with her during his stay in Lisbon. When he returns to Paris he tries to juggle this affair with his banal home life as husband and father. He takes Nicole with him to Rheims where he has been engaged to deliver a speech, but she is furious that he spends most of the evening with his old friends and leaves her at the hotel. To placate her, they go off to a cabin in the country for several days. When Lachenay calls his wife to explain his continued absence, she has already discovered that he left Rheims and suspects the truth. Lachenay returns to his wife who demands a separation and he moves out. He decides to buy an apartment for Nicole but she stops him, saying that she knows she is not intellectual enough for him and that he doesn't really love her. Exit Nicole. Lachenay then decides to call his wife. In a series of scenes which flash back and forth between his actions and his wife's, we see the wife discovering photos of her husband and Nicole, then leaving the house with a gun under her coat, just as her husband is trying to phone her. Suspense builds up as the change of scenes becomes more rapid, and Madame Lachenay enters the restaurant where her husband is reading a newspaper calmly in the corner. She shoots him brutally and sinks down against the wall with a half smile on her face.

POSSIBLE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Describe the family life of Pierre Lachenay. Does he love his wife? Is he a good father?

2. Why does he fall in love with Nicole? What does she represent to him? Find examples in scenes from the film. What name does he usually call her? (ma petite fille)
3. What does the scene in Rheims tell you about Lachenay? (when he "abandons" Nicole)
4. Truffaut uses lighting to emphasize moods in the film. Find examples.
5. Why does Nicole decide to break off with Lachenay?
6. Discuss the comedy and pathos of the scene in which Mme. Lachenay yells at the man trying to pick her up, "You think you're God's gift...just look in the mirror."
7. Analyze the feelings of Mme. Lachenay which lead her to kill her husband. Do you think this is a realistic ending? Write another ending.
8. Analyze the director's use of suspense at the end of the film.

TITLE: La Guerre est Finie
 DIRECTOR: Alain Resnais
 DATE: 1966
 OTHER: Black & white, 121 minutes
 Starring: Yves Montand, Ingrid Thulin
 Available from Macmillan/Audio-Brandon Films

BACKGROUND:

La Guerre est Finie is a film with several themes: exile, living on old ideals, living in the past, old versus young revolutionaries and their different interpretations of revolutionary action. The main character Diego has been a courier in the communist underground for many years and is a weary revolutionary who continues to go through the motions although he no longer believes in the effectiveness of his anti-Fascist activity. Jump cuts from the past into the future make the film a bit difficult for students who are used to linear narratives, and thus they may need to be prepared in advance by being given the outline of the story, as well as some background on the anti-Fascist movement in Spain. The film would be a good point of departure for advanced students on the above themes. It could be used to supplement other films on revolutionary activity like Z or The Battle of Algiers.

SYNOPSIS:

As the film opens, Diego crosses from Spain into France to warn another agent that a trap has been set for him if he goes into Spain. He is stopped at the border and questioned but is allowed to proceed as his passport seems to be in order. In fact he has the passport of a Monsieur Sallanches, a party member from Paris. Diego takes the train to Paris, sees his superiors (comrades) and returns the passport to Sallanches' daughter. He goes to see his mistress and nearly blows his cover when he gives an angry discourse on Spain to her colleagues. In a meeting with his superiors, he opposes their call for a general strike in Madrid, saying that it will be ineffectual. They inform him that he needs a rest and should stay in Paris; however, this order is reversed and he is told to go to Barcelona the next day. In the meantime, a subplot involving Sallanches' daughter has developed: she is a member of the Leninist Group for Revolutionary Action which feels that a suitcase full of plastic bombs (which has fallen into Diego's hands) will be a far more effective tactic than a strike. When Diego returns the suitcase to the group there is an argument over tactics and philosophy and neither side is convinced. Diego leaves for Spain but his superiors learn of a plot against him and send his mistress to Barcelona with a message.

POSSIBLE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Describe the method of operation of the couriers. What are they trying to accomplish?
2. What is the immediate goal of this underground operation?
3. How does Diego get a false French passport? Who has provided it?
4. Diego says of Roberto (who organizes the border crossings): "He hates to have reality clash with his dream." What does he mean?
5. Diego tells Marianne (his mistress) that their goal is to rebuild Spain in the image of their dreams. What do you know about the shape of this dream?
6. What do you think of the comradeship of Diego's friends in Paris? What ideals do they share? Where do they disagree?
7. What do you think of the tactics of the Leninist Group for Revolutionary Action? Do you think that their goal of wrecking tourism to Spain will succeed?
8. In the end, how do you feel about Diego? Is he a hero or a fool?

TITLE: Hiroshima Mon Amour
 DIRECTOR: Alain Resnais
 DATE: 1959
 OTHER: Black & white, 88 minutes
 Screenplay by Marguerite Duras
 Available from McGraw Hill films

BACKGROUND:

As noted in the introduction, when Hiroshima Mon Amour was shown during Experiment language training this summer, high school students responded with boredom and lack of comprehension. This suggests that it would be useful to describe the structure of the film and mention the relevance of the subplot to contemporary France beforehand. The structure is fairly complex, beginning with a number of jump-cuts from close-ups of the lovers' bodies to close-ups of bomb victims' bodies. A second difficult part is the "subplot" in which the French actress through a series of flashbacks recreates in reverse order her love affair with a German soldier in World War II. This theme of "collaboration" with the enemy recurs frequently in the current French cinema and is the subject of Louis Malle's most recent film, Lacombe Lucien. Other themes for discussion are: memory and forgetting, love and death, war and peace.

SYNOPSIS:

A French actress in Hiroshima to make a film about peace has a brief affair with a Japanese man. They talk about the bombing in a sequence punctuated by photos of bomb victims. The woman tells her feelings about the bombing from her perspective, and insists on the importance of keeping the memory of the horror alive so that such a holocaust will never happen again. She begins having flashbacks to her love affair with a German soldier during the war and the story of the affair is clarified progressively: they had met in secret for a long time, then he was shot and she was imprisoned in her parents' cellar where she nearly went mad. She tells of her recovery and secret departure to Paris to escape the shame. Even her husband doesn't know this story. The rest of the film shows the woman's distraught wandering through Hiroshima at night, leaving the Japanese man, then seeing him again, then parting.

POSSIBLE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What was the meaning of Hiroshima in France and the West?

2. Why does the woman say that it's necessary to fight with all their strength against forgetting the Hiroshima bomb?
3. Describe what happened to the woman in Nevers during the war.
4. Do you think the jump-cuts from present to past are effective? What is the director trying to accomplish or communicate by his use of this technique?
5. Toward the end she tells the Japanese man: "Of course I'll stay in Hiroshima." Does she mean this literally?
6. Do any parts of this film seem boring? If so, why? What is the director trying to show by his use of long sequences?
7. What is the woman thinking while she is wandering? Why is she wandering?

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