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A Semester Abroad discussion of the film

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What does a French and Digital Media Production double major do when they study abroad in Paris, France? Create a film, of course. A Semester Abroad follows my various travels during the Fall 2023 semester. In this discussion of my film, I break down the process from my initial research on French cinema, which focused on filmmakers during the French New Wave film movement of the late 1950s to the mid-1960s, to the process of creating this film. Inspired by the vignettes of *Dreams* directed by Akira Kurosawa, a film I first watched in my Global Cinema course, I created short films or vignettes of each excursion and did not put them all together until the very end. The result is a roughly 40-minute film composed of several vignettes with their own unique style and mood. A brief analysis of the final vignette is included near the end of this discussion to inspire you, the reader, and soon, the viewer, to start your own film discourse.

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A SEMESTER ABROAD: DISCUSSION OF THE FILM

By

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Abstract

What does a French and Digital Media Production double major do when they study abroad in Paris, France? Create a film, of course. [*A Semester Abroad*](#) follows my various travels during the Fall 2023 semester. In this discussion of my film, I break down the process from my initial research on French cinema, which focused on filmmakers during the French New Wave film movement of the late 1950s to the mid-1960s, to the process of creating this film. Inspired by the vignettes of *Dreams* directed by Akira Kurosawa, a film I first watched in my Global Cinema course, I created short films or vignettes of each excursion and did not put them all together until the very end. The result is a roughly 40-minute film composed of several vignettes with their own unique style and mood. A brief analysis of the final vignette is included near the end of this discussion to inspire you, the reader, and soon, the viewer, to start your own film discourse.

Acknowledgments

First, I would like to thank all of the French teachers I have had over the years. My film is dedicated to all of you, as you have greatly encouraged and inspired me to keep progressing with this language. Merci énormément.

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Next, I would like to thank my Study Abroad program, International Studies Abroad (ISA), for being very receptive to this project. To everyone in the program who expressed joy and excitement for my project, trusted me to film them, and assisted me while filming, I appreciate you and hope you enjoy seeing the final result.

A special shoutout to Kado Skenduli for being extremely open to being my first and main subject. I have never done anything like this before, but your belief in me helped ease my nerves even before I arrived in France. I am so glad that we got to study abroad together.

Merci à Agnès Varda, who has been a huge inspiration for my work in cinema, photography, and beyond, and merci à la Cinémathèque Française for being the most magical place on Earth for this film and French student.

Last but most importantly, to my family, who have been the subjects of my many practice films and photographs. I am forever grateful for you.

Introduction

When I was a junior in high school, I had a scheduling conflict. My first-ever film class took up two course slots overlapping with my second-hour French class. My advisor told me that I would have to choose between the two, but, like the inscription on the side of the Musée de l'Homme in Paris, France states, in my mind, “L'une n'est rien sans l'autre” (*one is nothing without the other*).

Even before becoming a French and Digital Media Production double major, these two areas of study have always been of equal importance to me. Anytime I had the opportunity in my French or film classes to discuss French culture or film theory, I would focus my research on French cinema. I have also done research outside of class and had the honor of presenting that research at Eastern Michigan University's 43rd Undergraduate Symposium in March 2023.

As much as I love learning about French cinema and cinema in general, there is a reason why I am a production major. This project allowed me to take everything that I have learned about film and put it to the test.

In this essay, I will dive into the inspiration behind my film, [*A Semester Abroad*](#), and the process of making it. It is up to you whether you screen the film first or read this first. I recommend screening the film, reading this, and then rewatching the film. As one of my wise film professors would tell us, “The more you watch a film, the more things you are able to take from it.”

Research

My research and interest in French cinema truly began in 2020 during my online Global Cinema course at Eastern. We were tasked with finding an international filmmaker who had not come to Hollywood to make films and was not one of the filmmakers we already discussed in class. We then had to pick one of their films to watch and analyze. As both a film and French student, I knew that I wanted to find a Francophone filmmaker, and by some miracle, I found Agnès Varda, a French filmmaker, photographer, artist, and feminist. I watched her third feature film, *Le Bonheur*, which left me completely speechless. Okay, so not speechless. It left me screaming at my computer screen. I had never watched a film so beautiful and so aesthetically stunning, that somehow left me with an uncomfortable and uneasy feeling. How could a film about adultery be so cheerful? The film's title even translates to "happiness" in English.

In my first analysis of this film, I looked for themes and connections between the various images. Some of the visual indications seemed very obvious, for example, having the color blue represent the main character, François' family (his wife Thérèse and their kids), and the color red represent his mistress, Émilie (*Le Bonheur*). Red often indicates danger and blue can be seen as familiar and happy, like a blue sky. Shot choices throughout the film whether it was the decision to have something out of focus or to have characters separated on screen by a visual barrier were all part of how Agnès Varda chose to tell this story (*Le Bonheur*). I would later return to this film and dive deeper into its themes and Agnès Varda's first few films for my Undergraduate Symposium research.

A few months later, I wrote a research paper on French cinema focusing on the French New Wave and its impact on film history for my French Culture and Civilization class. The French New Wave, one of the most revolutionary film movements in not just French cinema but

cinema as a whole, started in the late 1950s and continued until the mid-1960s (Vincendeau 109). It would later inspire the New Hollywood film movement in the 1970s which was made up of filmmakers, such as Martin Scorsese and Francis Ford Coppola, among others (Greene 2).

While researching the French New Wave, I came across a group of filmmakers called the “Left Bank Group.” I was not able to find much on them in the same sources that I had found most of my fundamental information about the French New Wave. The most that was mentioned was that they were often seen in opposition to the Cahiers du Cinéma, filmmakers like François Truffaut and Jean-Luc Godard, who started as film critics writing for the film magazine, *Cahiers du Cinéma* (Neupert 299). The Left Bank Group made films aligning more with the political left and had connections to other forms of art, like painting and photography (Neupert 299). The Cahiers du Cinéma made films that were revolutionary film-wise with the use of long takes, jump cuts, improvisation of dialogue, and often shot almost entirely outside (Greene 9). Although this was the complete opposite of how films were made in France at the time, one could argue that the films made by the Cahiers du Cinéma did not challenge the status quo like the Left Bank Group’s films did and continue to do (*The Left Bank Revisited: Marker, Resnais, Varda*).

I knew that I wanted to dedicate a separate research project to the Left Bank Group and a year and a half later, I got my chance. However, after further research, I was not even sure whether the Left Bank Group was really a thing or rather something created to group several filmmakers together whether they wanted to be or not (*The Left Bank Revisited: Marker, Resnais, Varda*).

I decided to focus my research on Agnès Varda and Alain Resnais as they were seen as the most prominent members of this supposed group (Neupert 299). I watched Agnès Varda’s

first three full-length films: *La Pointe Courte*, *Cléo de 5 à 7* (“Cléo from 5 to 7”), and *Le Bonheur* (“Happiness”) and Alain Resnais’ first two full-length films: *Hiroshima mon amour* (“Hiroshima, My Love”) and *L'Année dernière à Marienbad* (“Last Year at Marienbad”). I also watched and read interviews with them to get a better understanding of how they saw themselves as filmmakers and how they saw their work. My biggest takeaway was the role of the viewer. In both Agnès Varda and Alain Resnais’ eyes, it was the viewer’s job to make sense of what they were given by the filmmaker. To not ask the filmmaker for answers but to find their own and begin to make connections. They wanted people to think about their films and for their films to make people think and reflect on a variety of topics, ideas, ways of life, etc.

There is no wrong way to be a filmmaker. After completing this research project, I was extremely excited to go make something of my own.

Process

While I had never worked on a project quite like this one, it was not my first time filming or editing. Following the Undergraduate Symposium at Eastern Michigan University in March 2023, I applied for scholarships to help cover the cost of equipment. After winning a scholarship from the Honors College and another from the College of Arts and Sciences, I went on a camera equipment shopping spree. My goal was to find a lightweight camera that shot 4K (very high quality) and had a microphone jack so I could attach a microphone in order to have the best audio quality possible. It also needed to do well in low-light situations. For example, I had to ask myself, “Can I clearly see the image I am recording or do I only see grain?” when considering the lighting. Besides the camera and the microphone, I also picked out a windscreen for the microphone to again ensure the best audio quality even on windy days and a few extra batteries that could last me an entire day of shooting. I also had to consider editing when shopping for camera gear: a large SD card to record my footage onto, an external hard drive to store the footage, and a pair of quality headphones for both editing and recording. It is really important to maintain your sound levels while you are filming. Essentially, making sure nothing is too **LOUD** or too q u i e t.

This is why I love production. There is something so exciting about it. You have to make sure you have everything you need and everything you do not think you need because as another wise film professor once said, “When something goes wrong on your shoot and it will, you are going to want to be prepared.”

My biggest film inspirations going into this project were *Dont Look Back* (1967) directed by American filmmaker, D.A. Pennebaker and *Dreams* (1990) directed by Japanese filmmaker, Akira Kurosawa. *Dont Look Back* is a cinéma vérité documentary film that follows Bob Dylan

on his 1965 England Tour. Cinéma vérité is a fly-on-the-wall style of filmmaking that looks to capture things as they are as they are happening (*Cinéma vérité*).

Dreams is a narrative film made up of a series of dreams presented as short stand-alone films or vignettes connected only by a fade-to-black transition. There are similar themes but the main thing tying them together is that they are all various dreams (*Dreams*).

My goal was to record cinéma vérité of my various Study Abroad excursions¹ and edit it together to have a final piece with a similar construction as *Dreams*. Each section of the film is connected to this one experience, but each can stand on its own showcasing different styles, paces, and moods. The editing of each vignette was made to match the mood or the background behind the specific experience or excursion (*A Semester Abroad: The Film*).

I did not always have a goal or a mood set ahead of time when filming. I tried to be intentional with my shot choices and to avoid filming things I most likely would not use in my final piece. However, most of these experiences were firsts. My first time visiting the south of France, the north of France, Belgium, Africa, etc. Whenever I visit somewhere new, the first thing I do is look around. I take in everything and my camera was an extension of that. I ask myself, “How is this place different or similar to places I know like Paris, Michigan, or New York? How do people speak? Are they in a rush or do they take their time when going from place to place?”

In the end, it was always better to have more footage than to not have enough as there were no opportunities for a reshoot.

¹ Prior to filming, I created a consent form with the help of my Study Abroad program, ISA, giving people the option not to be filmed. A copy of this form is included in the appendix at the end of the paper.

I edited each section of the film separately and did not put them all together until the end. The point being that just like my editing, my filming had evolved during this project and I wanted that to be reflected. Each trip or experience featured in this film had a different feel or a different cast if you will, so it makes sense that they would not all look, feel, or even sound the same (*A Semester Abroad: The Film*).

Before I began editing some of the final vignettes, I would go through nearly every clip I shot during that trip and decide whether or not I would use it in some capacity. If so, I would put it into a new folder. This helped drastically speed up the editing process.

One of my favorite vignettes was the final one. There were so many similarities between the beginning and the end of Study Abroad. When I looked back at some of the first footage I had shot during a boat tour on the Seine River in Paris, I realized just how similar some of the shots were to my final shots on a bus tour of Paris with my family. Of course by the end of the semester, I could recognize every landmark and had some memory or story connected to each one. This became the basis of the final vignette. Unlike the others, it is composed of various shots of Paris throughout my trip intended to highlight the moments and moods that made up Study Abroad. (*A Semester Abroad: The Film*) (See Figures 1-4 on the following page).



Figure 1. Last day of class. *A Semester Abroad* (2024).



Figure 3. A cloudy Paris day. *A Semester Abroad* (2024)



Figure 2. Arriving in Aix. *A Semester Abroad* (2024).



Figure 4. The Seine on a sunny day. *A Semester Abroad* (2024).

The majority of the film is made of various trips to places outside of Paris (*A Semester Abroad: The Film*). Even the trip to Disneyland Paris with my friend, Kado felt like an entirely different world than the Paris we were just beginning to know (it was Disneyland after all).

In Paris, I had my day-to-day life. It was not mundane by any means but it was a time to live and experience things without my camera. I went to school at the Institut Catholique de Paris from Monday to Thursday. I tried different food places with friends, ate outside, people-watched, rode the métro and the bus, and walked a lot. I spoke French every day and frequented my favorite place in the city and possibly in the world, La Cinémathèque Française. I took in the city of Paris. The final vignette is a representation of these experiences that were not filmed and my study abroad experience as a whole (*A Semester Abroad: The Film*).

Conclusion

I could analyze my entire film in extensive detail, but like Agnès Varda and Alain Resnais, I do not believe it would do the viewer/reader any good. All films are intentional, even documentaries. What each person takes away from my film is based on their life experiences and their knowledge of film, French cinema, Francophone culture, and a variety of other things. There is no right or wrong interpretation.

As I move on from this project and experience and on to many new ones, I think of a quote from *Le Petit Prince*:

Et quand tu seras consolé (on se console toujours) tu seras content de m'avoir connu. Tu seras toujours mon ami. Tu auras envie de rire avec moi. Et tu ouvriras parfois ta fenêtre, comme ça, pour le plaisir... Et tes amis seront bien étonnés de te voir rire en regardant le ciel. Alors tu leur diras : "Oui, les étoiles, ça me fait toujours rire !" Et ils te croiront fou. *(And when your sorrow is comforted (time soothes all sorrows) you will be happy to have known me. You will always be my friend. You will want to laugh with me. And you will sometimes open your window, for that pleasure . . . And your friends will be properly astonished to see you laughing as you look up at the sky! Then you will say to them, 'Yes, the stars always make me laugh!' And they will think you are crazy.)* (Saint-Exupéry 92).

Whenever I want to look back on this experience or when I'm missing these people or places, I can always go back to this film. It is an everlasting representation of a specific moment in time that forever links me to the people with whom I shared this incredible experience. Therein lies the magic of cinema.

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Chronique d'un été ("Chronicle of a Summer"). Directed by Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin, 1961.

Cléo de 5 à 7 ("Cléo from 5 to 7"). Directed by Agnès Varda, 1962.

Dark Passage. Directed by Delmer Daves, 1947.

Dont Look Back. Directed by D.A. Pennebaker, 1967.

Dreams. Directed by Akira Kurosawa, 1990.

Hiroshima mon amour ("Hiroshima, My Love"). Directed by Alain Resnais, 1959.

Italian for Beginners. Directed by Lone Scherfig (Dogme 95), 2000.

L'Année dernière à Marienbad ("Last Year at Marienbad"). Directed by Alain Resnais, 1961.

La Pointe Courte. Directed by Agnès Varda, 1955.

Le Bonheur ("Happiness"). Directed by Agnès Varda, 1960.

La Nuit américaine ("Day for Night"). Directed by François Truffaut, 1973.

Lola. Directed by Jacques Demy, 1961.

The Spanish Apartment. Directed by Cédric Klapisch, 2002.

This is Not a Film. Directed by Jafar Panahi, 2011.

Appendix A: Consent Form

MEDIA RELEASE OPT-OUT FORM

Video Shoot Description: I will be filming cinéma vérité (essentially just observational cinema, observing what is happening but not interfering) during our various ISA activities and excursions throughout the semester for a film I am making for school credit for my home university, Eastern Michigan University. The final film will be published on YouTube and parts of it will be shared on Instagram and with potential employers as I try to find work in the digital media field. If you have any questions about my project, please email me at tatiannarice@gmail.com.

Only fill out this form if you do **NOT** give me permission to film, photograph, tape, or otherwise make a video reproduction of you and/or record your voice.

I do **NOT** give Tatianna Rice the permission to film, photograph, tape, or otherwise make a video reproduction of me and/or record my voice.

Full Name (please print)

Signature

Date Signed