

# Vive les différences in cinema of France

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When I lived in Paris in the early '90s, I was told that France was a country that ignored national origins. If you were a French citizen, you were French, period. No one was a hyphenated citizen; there were no Italian-French, no Algerian-French, just French people living on French soil.

To a Canadian accustomed to mixed identities – anglo-Montrealer, English Quebecer, Canadian of European descent – this seemed patently absurd. Why ignore people's roots? Why whitewash people's differences? Surely not everyone in France was the same?

I'm always reminded of this around this time of year. For today the French, including tens of thousands of French citizens living in Quebec, celebrate *le Quatorze juillet*, otherwise known as Bastille Day.

The national holiday marks the birth of the republic by revolution, after the storming of the Bastille Prison in Paris in 1789, when that very French notion of equality (along with liberty and fraternity) really took off.



The festivities have a different tone today, though. France has a new conservative president, elected in May. Nicolas Sarkozy has promised quick reforms to shake the country's image as "the sick man of Europe," and immigration is at the top of his agenda – namely, how to best integrate France's five million Muslims into the secular state, and how to deal with those living in France illegally.

Meanwhile, millions of other *étrangers* – tourists, in other words – continue to come en masse to l'Hexagone, which, despite its difficulties, remains Europe's third most popular summer travel destination after Spain and Italy, according to European Union statistics. Unlike some in French society, tourists at least are welcome to parade their diversity.

Here are some films on DVD that focus on foreigners in France. Spies and conquerors, artists and writers, labourers and cops, Russians and Jews and Arabs – some play by the rules of the French way of life, others try to subvert it with their foreign ways, and most manage to do a little of both.

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**The Scarlet Pimpernel** (*Britain, 1934*) "They seek him here, they seek him there, those Frenchies seek him everywhere ..." There have been many tellings in books and film of Baroness Orczy's tale of French Revolution intrigue and derring-do, but none equals this vintage talkie. Leslie Howard stars as Sir Percy Blakeney, a foppish British nobleman who goes undercover to save French aristocrats from the guillotine. The Madacy DVD is cheap in every sense of the word, but it's the only one on the market – so enjoy the film, if not the transfer.

**An American in Paris** (U.S., 1951) Only the exteriors of this Gene Kelly dance classic were filmed in Paris; all the rest was done at MGM's studios in California. So what? 'S'wonderful all the same. Vincente Minnelli directed, the Gershwin brothers scored (*I Got Rhythm*, *Our Love Is Here to Stay*, *Nice Work if You Can Get It*, *I'll Build a Stairway to Paradise*), and Kelly and Leslie Caron are a happy match. The 25-minute ballet at the end is great, too. If this doesn't give you a taste for visiting Paris, nothing will. On DVD in a snap-case from Warner.

**Les vacances de monsieur Hulot** (*France, 1953*) Jacques Tati was a genius of understated comedy, and this is his priceless send-up of that August perennial, the French beach vacation. A disparate group of sun-seekers (foreigners include a slick-haired Spaniard and a fun-loving British spinster) converge on a resort on the Loire-Atlantique coast. Almost free of dialogue but full of sound effects and sight gags, the film is a masterpiece of comic timing. On the Criterion DVD, there's a funny extra: a Tati short about boxing called *Soigne ton gauche*.



**Last Tango in Paris** (*Italy/France, 1972*) Marlon Brando plays a grieving American widower in Paris who turns a chance meeting in an abandoned apartment with an attractive young woman (Maria Schneider) into a sexual marathon that leaves nothing to the imagination – including what to do with a stick of butter. Bernardo Bertolucci wrote and directed this originally X-rated movie, and he and Brando were nominated for Oscars. On DVD from MGM in a crisp, anamorphic transfer that's also in the film's original aspect ratio.



**Swimming Pool** (*France/Britain, 2003*) More sex, this time under the Provençal sun. François Ozon's superb contemporary thriller stars Charlotte Rampling as a British mystery novelist who holes up alone in a Luberon villa one summer to work on her next book. Her inspiration gets a boost by the unexpected

arrival of the landlord's hell-raising daughter (Ludivine Sagnier), who gets everyone into trouble. A delightfully nasty clash of cultures and generations. The Seville DVD includes deleted scenes and interviews with the director and his actresses.

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*And 15 more on the same foreign theme:*

**Mata Hari** (U.S., 1931) Greta Garbo incarnates the famous Dutch seductress who spied for Germany in 1917 Paris.

**Ninotchka** (U.S., 1939) Garbo is back as a dour Russian communist who comes to Paris and ends up learning to laugh.

**À bout de souffle** (France, 1960) A nouvelle-vague classic (also known as *Breathless*) from Jean-Luc Godard. Jean Seberg stars as a newspaper-peddling young American in Paris who befriends a cop killer (Jean-Paul Belmondo).

**Jules et Jim** (France, 1962) Oscar Werner is the moody Austrian friend, Jules, in another iconic New Wave picture, this time from François Truffaut, about three lovers in early-20th-century France.

**The Day of the Jackal** (Britain/ France, 1973) Edward Fox plays a British hit-man recruited by the OAS to assassinate President Charles de Gaulle on Bastille Day. A Fred Zinnemann thriller.

**The French Connection II** (U.S., 1975) Gene Hackman, a.k.a. Detective Popeye Doyle, goes to Marseilles to bust a drug baron.



**Diva** (France, 1981) An American opera diva on tour in Paris is befriended by a young postman, who secretly tapes her voice.

**Henry V** (Britain, 1989) Kenneth Branagh's version of Shakespeare's play about the English king who conquered France in the 15th century.

**Henry and June** (U.S., 1990) Novelist Henry Miller and his wife, June, are Americans in Paris in the early 1930s who get entangled with Anaïs Nin.



**Va savoir** (*France/Italy/Germany, 2001*) A Franco-Italian theatre troupe stages a Pirandello farce in modern-day Paris.

**Monsieur Ibrahim et les fleurs du Coran** (*France, 2003*) Omar Sharif is an old Turkish shopkeeper in early-1960s Paris who mentors an adolescent Jewish boy.



**Vénus et Fleur** (*France, 2004*) A gorgeous young Russian *bon vivant* holidays with a frumpy young French introvert at a summer house in Marseilles.

**La petite Jérusalem** (*France, 2005*) Two sisters, both Tunisian Jews, look for love among the religions of their Paris suburb.

**Caché** (*France/Austria/Germany/Italy, 2005*) A secret threatens to destroy the marriage of a well-to-do Paris couple (Daniel Auteuil and Juliette Binoche).

**Indigènes** (*Algeria/France/ Morocco/Belgium, 2006*) Four enlisted North African soldiers rid France of the Nazis. Oscar-nominated; also known as Days of Glory.