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Written by Maureen Younger

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Cinéma Française

It's La Fete Du Cinema (or the French Film Festival UK, if you'd rather), which is a great excuse for *Maureen Younger* to tell Standard Issue about her favourite Gallic flicks.

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Thanks to the popularity of Scandi drama, us Brits may finally have overcome our antipathy towards watching anything with subtitles. Here's an eclectic choice of some French movies that might tickle your fancy.



**Le Bossu – On Guard (1997 Philippe de Broca)**

One of my favourite films, a French swashbuckler (think Errol Flynn but set in France at the turn of the 18th century). Being French of course, there's some nudity and a rather dodgy love story, which it gets away with in that way only the French can.

Without giving too much away, the Duke of Nevers (played beautifully by Vincent Perez as a likeable if slightly buffoonish coxcomb) is fiendishly betrayed by his cousin, Gonzague (Fabrice Luchini). Lagardère (Daniel Auteuil) manages, however, to rescue the betrayed Duke's daughter and hide her from Gonzague's evil clutches – promising to exact revenge and restore the daughter to her rightful place in society.

The film has all the essential ingredients required for a swash to buckle: a likeable hero, an insidious villain, a spunky heroine, lots of great sword fighting sequences, adventure, disguises, injustice put right and – most importantly of all – the little man (Auteuil) fighting on against the odds. As for the dodgy love story, well, that would be telling....



### **La Reine Margot – Queen Margot (1994 Patrice Chéreau)**

Features many of the then leading lights of French cinema, *La Reine Margot* has Isabelle Adjani in the title role, Daniel Auteuil as King Henri of Navarre, Jean-Hugues Anglade as Charles IX and Vincent Perez as Margot's protestant lover, de la Môle.

Set in 1572, France, like most of Europe, is being torn apart by religious wars between Catholics and Protestants. In an attempt to bring the two together, the Queen Mother, Catherine de Medici arranges for her daughter Margot to marry the protestant King of Navarre, Henri. The story unfolds on the eve of the wedding and the St Bartholomew's Massacre, which saw the death of thousands of French Protestants. The film depicts the power play between various members of the French royal family and how religion is used as a construct to gain and retain power.

If you'd like a snapshot of French history; Vincent Perez and Isabelle Adjani in their prime; period drama and intrigue; obligatory sword-fighting and a family that could give the Borgias a run for their money, I highly recommend this movie.

### **Danton (1983 – Andrzej Wajda)**

Set in 1794, we're two years into the new French Republic and the Reign of Terror is in full flow. Fear, conspiracy and death permeate every level of society. Even Robespierre fears a coup d'état by his fellow revolutionary, Danton.

Our eponymous hero is played by Gérard Depardieu. It's a bravura performance and a perfect reminder of what a great actor he can be. A tragic hero in the Shakespearian vein, Danton is a great man brought down by circumstance and a tragic flaw – hubris. A revolutionary, loved by the people, he believes that though Robespierre may plot against him, the people love him too much to allow him to be sent to the guillotine.

*Danton* is a great movie, giving a kind of behind the scenes look into the machinations behind political show trials and the danger of being a slave to abstract ideals while forgetting that most vital of qualities – humanity. Some 30 years on the film is still relevant. It raises intriguing questions about due process, the rule of law and the inherent danger that when you unleash terror in the name of democracy, it has a habit of biting the hand that feeds it.





Tirez sur le Pianiste - Shoot the Piano Player (1960 François Truffaut)

*Tirez sur le Pianiste* is a pastiche of those great Hollywood genres – gangster movies and film noir. It opens with a scene that could have come from any film noir, a man being chased by assailants unknown. That this is not your run-of-the-mill film noir is made clear when he runs smack into a lamppost, is helped by a passer-by and they engage in a very French conversation about marriage. As for the gangsters, they look like they've stepped out of a Tintin movie. Two behatted, pipe-smoking buffoons, their presence adds a lot to the many comic moments of the film.

The star of the film, however, is not the man being chased but his brother Charlie, played wonderfully by Charles Aznavour. Charlie is a man with a past. A child virtuoso from a family of thieves, he was a hugely successful concert pianist, but is now hiding from life, his emotions and himself by playing piano in a down-at-heel, Parisian bar.

*Tirez sur le Pianiste* is a great introduction to the French New Wave and the story is charming. The humour interwoven through the film doesn't prepare you for the tragic ending, but that makes it all the more heartfelt and truer to life.

### **Au Revoir Les Enfants (1987 Louis Malle)**

Set in 1944, three new students arrive at a French Catholic Boarding School. Their arrival sets off a chain of events with fatal consequences. In the process the film explores the themes of childhood, friendship, betrayal and the loss of innocence.

It excels in its portrayal of the children's relationships with each other and with the adults, as well as the nature of friendship itself. It's just as adept when dissecting the nature of evil. The film makes clear it's not as black and white as the stories our child heroes, Julien and Jean, so love to read. In the real world there are also several shades of grey, where heroes don't necessarily win out and great evil can be caused by the simple settling of petty scores.

It's a haunting film, perhaps more so because it is based on events from the director's past. In a voiceover at the end, the older Julien says: *"More than 40 years have passed, but I shall remember every second of that January morning until the day I die."* I defy anyone not to have a tear in their eye by the end, and the face of Julien as he says goodbye to the innocence of his childhood.



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