

# Class 11: French Taste, French Grit

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## A. Haute Cuisine

### 1. Class title 1 (Chanel/Godard)

Once again, a class seems to be taking a different form from the one I originally planned. My idea, in setting two mid-century figures—couturier Coco Chanel and *nouvelle vague* film director Jean-Luc Godard—against one another was that I would divide the class more or less equally between the rarefied and the realistic. But it doesn't quite work that way. Many of the *nouvelle vague* films of the early sixties were down-to-earth, it is true, but there was a rarefied side to French cinema also that ties in quite closely to the topics I am going to discuss in the first hour: *haute cuisine* and *haute couture*.

### 2. Section title A (stills from entire class)

### 3. — still from the above

I have two other problems. First, while I know a fair amount about French cinema—I wrote a twice-weekly film review column all the way through college, when these movies were coming out—I have not been able to afford to develop my earlier interest in *cuisine*, and *haute couture* is virtually a closed book. Second, these are not things I can bring into class in the way I can with art or music. So I have to rely on photos and videos for food and fashion, and even the movies can be shown only in brief clips.

### 4. The six featured artists

But I can talk a little about people. There are six of them here: the chefs **Marie-Antoine Carême** (1783–1833) and **Auguste Escoffier** (1846–1935), who between them laid down the foundations of French *cuisine*; **Charles Frederick Worth** (1825–95), who founded the first great French fashion house, and **Coco Chanel** (1883–1971) whose own label created a revolution of its own; and **Alain Resnais** (1922–2014) and **Jean-Luc Godard** (1930–2022) two of the leading directors of the *nouvelle vague*. I'm sure I'll be mentioning others along the way. The arrangement, as you see, is roughly chronological.

### 5. Antonin Carême

So here is **Antonin Carême**, “The King of Chefs and Chef of Kings,” a phrase you will hear attached to a number of cooks. Let's start with a video—but first a warning. Almost all the culinary history videos I found had either bad narration (often by people with no idea how to speak French), dreadful visuals, or both. This one on Carême is well narrated and well produced, but the images have been chosen without any awareness of history. For example, the Eiffel Tower was still a century in the future at the time he is talking about, and quite a few of the images of food presentation are the products of the *nouvelle cuisine* movement of the 1960s and 1970s, thus almost two centuries premature.

## 6. Carême bio

## 7. *Pièces montées*

Let me elaborate on three of those points: ***pièces montées***, **mother sauces**, and **organization**. As the video remarked, Carême began as an apprentice *patissier*, and later became famous for his elaborate *pièces montées* placed in the center of a table or the head of a room. This is a French tradition that we do not have so much over here. Here are three of Carême’s creations together with a modern centerpiece for a wedding. Ironically, the word *carême* means “Lent” in French, the one season of the year when you couldn’t have such confections! *Pâtisserie* of course requires great culinary skill and a fine sense of taste, but it is also the area where the chef comes closest to the visual arts.

## 8. Mother sauces

One thing that comes up whenever you look at the French tradition is the amount of **organization** required behind it. It was not a matter of thinking up new dishes each day, popping into the kitchen, and cooking them. It required the kind of organized thinking where complex dishes could be built on basic stocks and sauces, and new methods were approached as variations on practised techniques. Hence the emphasis on the **five mother sauces**. When I cook, I generally do a sauce like this from scratch, but a big kitchen would make them in large quantities and have them available for further enhancement. Here is the beginning of a video in which a modern chef introduces the basic five.

## 9. Making the mother sauces

## 10. Carême’s kitchen in the Royal Pavillion, Brighton

This is Carême’s kitchen in the **Royal Pavillion, Brighton**, when he was working for **King George IV** of England. When you are cooking for a large royal banquet, you need a large kitchen, with different areas laid out for different purposes—separating cooking from plating, for instance—and a trained team of people (the French call it a ***brigade***) each of whom understands his particular function. [I say “his,” because women did not begin to take on responsible roles in professional kitchens until after the Second World War.] I am sure that Carême must have employed such organization, because his career would have been impossible without it, but the credit for inventing the *brigade* system generally goes to my second featured chef, **Auguste Escoffier**. Let’s see his system in action in a modern context. The presenter is the French-British chef, **Michel Roux**.

## 11. Michel Roux on the *brigade* system

## 12. Escoffier at the Ritz

Relatively early in his career, Escoffier teamed up with the Swiss hotelier **César Ritz** (1850–1918), organizing the kitchens at his hotels in **Monte Carlo** and **Lucerne**. In 1890, he and Ritz accepted an invitation from **Richard D’Oyly Carte**, the impresario who brought together **Gilbert and Sullivan**, to run the **Savoy Hotel in London**—a job that both left under a cloud, being accused of skimming profits. Nothing daunted, the two went on to create the **Ritz in Paris** and the **Carlton in London**. In another video, Michel Roux visits the Ritz in London and talks to chef **John Williams** about the legacy of Escoffier and his personal debt to his great predecessor.

### 13. Michel Roux at the Ritz

### 14. Julia Child

The subject of this course is **French Connections**, and the best-known connection between French *cuisine* and the American kitchen is the much more down-to-earth figure of **Julia Child** (1912–2004). A graduate of Smith College, she wanted to be a writer, but World War Two intervened and she signed up with the OSS (Office of Strategic Services). At the time, she had no foodie experience, but in the OSS she met and married a fellow officer, **Paul Cushing Child**.

### 15. La Couronne in Rouen

After the war, Child was posted to France. Shortly after arrival, he took her to the old restaurant **La Couronne in Rouen**. She described the meal of oysters, *sole meunière*, and fine wine as "an opening up of the soul and spirit for me." Soon after, she enrolled at the **Cordon Bleu** cooking school in Paris, and studied privately with various chefs after that. Fast forward to the book *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* in 1961, which she wrote with two French women she met in Paris, and her television show, *The French Chef*, that she began in 1962 to promote the book.

### 16. Julia Child makes onion soup

## B. Haute Couture

### 17. Section title B (ending of *Coco avant Chanel*)

That was part of the final scene of the 2009 film *Coco Before Chanel*, starring Audrey Tatou. Although most of the movie deals with the early years of **Coco Chanel** (1883–1971), it ends in an imaginative leap forward as we switch from Chanel who is hemming a dress in her first workshop to her watching a show in the 21st century at the *couture* house she founded almost a century before.

### 18. Charles Frederick Worth still (made as a video)

To start the story of French *haute couture*, however, I have to go back to this man, **Charles Frederick Worth** (1825–95), not a Frenchman but an Englishman, and a provincial Englishman at that. This slide is actually the opening frame of a 10-minute video that I'll put on the website. But it is what I was referring to when I said that the narration on these videos was often appalling. What could be more pedestrian than this?

### 19. *Cultured Elegance* video, opening

### 20. Worth, from Bourne to Piccadilly

I can't subject you to more of that, so I'll do the narration myself. Worth was born in the market town of **Bourne** in Lincolnshire, son of a solicitor who deserted his mother, leaving the family penniless. Worth went to London at the age of 12 to work as an apprentice at **Swan and Edgar's**, one of the great

department stores, still going strong in my time, but now closed. In 1826, at the age of 21, he moved to Paris, with only £5 in his pocket, and speaking no French. All the same, he had the experience by now to get a job at a specialist store called **Gagelin**, that operated both as a wholesaler and a retailer, importing silk fabrics which they sold to court dressmakers, and producing their own line of shawls. Worth began sewing dresses for rich clients to complement the shawls, and his fame spread.

### 21. Worth, Metternich, Eugénie

In 1858, when Worth was in his early thirties, he and his Parisian wife managed to drum up enough funding to open their own establishment on the fashionable **Rue de Paix**. Their breakthrough came two years later, when Worth made a dress for the society beauty **Princess Metternich**; the **Empress Eugénie** (whom we heard about two weeks ago) admired it, and sent for Worth the next day. Within a short time, he had secured the position of her exclusive dressmaker.

### 22. Empress Eugénie as Marie Antoinette

Empress Eugénie enjoyed her role as a fashion icon. Among other things, she loved to dress up in modern versions of historical styles; here is Worth helping her to channel her unfortunate predecessor, **Marie Antoinette**. And of course, where the Empress led, other ladies of fashion would follow. The dresses in this painting of the Empress with her ladies-in-waiting actually precede Worth's appointment; I show it only as an example of the viral spread of fashion, first in the court, then in society at large.

### 23. Winterhalter: *Empress Eugénie with her Ladies-in-Waiting* (1855) 24. Worth's innovations

Other than taste, exquisite craftsmanship, and clearly the ability to speak with confidence to the very wealthy, what did Charles Worth bring to fashion that would establish the tradition of *haute couture*? He was a professional man catering to multiple clients, as opposed to one-on-one relationships between individual women and their dressmakers. Over time, he moved from giving women what they wanted to instructing them on what they ought to want. He managed fashion as a business; at the start, the House of Worth employed 50 people; at its heyday, this number had grown to 1,200. He broke the habit of dressmakers going to their clients for fittings; with the exception of the Empress, his clients came to him, which in turn made his *salon* a society meeting-place. He started to employ live models to show his clothes, thus originating the now-ubiquitous runway. And he was skilled in the use of advertising, whether by sending clothes to international exhibitions, or by publishing his designs in national and then international magazines.

### 25. Charles Worth dresses in the Metropolitan Museum

And that is the **French Connection** here. Wealthy American women of the Gilded Age began to hear of Worth, and made the pilgrimage to Paris to obtain his dresses. Many of these have ended up in the Metropolitan Museum, such as these two here. The one on the left, for example, was made for **Clara Singer**, the daughter of the sewing-machine magnate, for her wedding in 1880.

## 26. Chanel vs. Worth

Both the video on Charles Worth I showed and the one on **Coco Chanel** (1883–1971) that I am about to show, begin with three-panel images. Let's compare them. It's clear that the Chanel look is more modern, but she is the one who brought modernity into fashion. She was dressing women who did more than dance at balls; these were women who went out and did things, who were athletic, who were as much at home on the beach as in a ballroom. Let's look at a short video from Biography.com.

## 27. Coco Chanel (Biography.com)

## 28. Some Chanel innovations

Picking up on some points from that, here are some of **Chanel's innovations**; almost all have to do with using ordinary qualities as materials for high style. As we discussed, she designed for active women, not wallflowers; clothes had to move with them as they jumped onto the deck of a yacht—or climbed the stairs of a bus. She added common materials like jersey or tweed to the *haute-couture* repertoire. She showed that women could be glamorous in costume jewelry, and leave the real thing in the safe until evening. Though she still designed for individual clients, much of her business came from retail (but still high-end) versions of her signature designs. To these she added accessories like handbags and shoes. And she was the first *couturier* to develop her own line of perfume. [When I was a young man, I had a couple of **Jacques Fath** ties and wore **Christian Dior** cologne—both extravagances, but I could never have afforded a suit, or probably even a shirt, from either.]

## 29. Princess Diana and Kate Middleton

Chanel's influence continues to this day. Here are a couple of family snaps: **Princess Diana** in a Chanel dress on the right, and the woman who would have been her daughter-in-law, **Kate Middleton**, on the left. I am not sure if Middleton's outfit actually is Chanel, but the fisherman's shirt and sailor pants were certainly introduced by her. Before she opened a clothing shop in Paris (she already had a millinery business there), Chanel was already catering to the upper crust in the resorts of **Deauville** (1913) and **Biarritz** (1915). This combines two contradictory aspects of Chanel's career: her series of romantic liaisons with aristocrats, and her use of vernacular styles and materials.

## 30. Coco Chanel's lovers: "Boy" Capel and the Duke of Westminster

There is another French Connection here of a kind. Chanel had romantic associations with at least two members of the English aristocracy: the polo-player **"Boy" Capel**, who financed her early ventures, and after his death in a car accident in 1919, moving even higher up the social scale to the **Duke of Westminster**. Through them, she had access to high social circles in England, including Winston Churchill and the Prince of Wales.

## 31. Four Chanel sailor outfits

But we are here to talk about Chanel as a designer rather than a lover. Her sailor outfits have never grown old; here are four from the modern Chanel line, spanning the range from everyday casual to evening ensemble.

### 32. Chanel's costumes for *Le train bleu* (Ballets Russes, 1924)

By the early 1920s, Chanel already had enough money to become a financial supporter of the *Ballets Russes* of **Serge Diaghilev**; she also had a brief *affaire* with **Igor Stravinsky**. Her sailor line and presence in the most fashionable seaside resorts made her a natural to design the costumes for the **Cocteau**-devised ballet *Le train bleu*, the overnight train to the Riviera. Here is a brief excerpt: the music is by **Darius Milhaud** (1892–1974) and the choreography by **Bronislava Nijinska** (1891–1972).

### 33. Nijinska: *Le train bleu*, excerpt

### 34. Marie Laurencin: *Mlle Chanel* (1923, Paris, Orangerie)

At about the same time, Coco commissioned the painter **Marie Laurencin** (1883–1956), who was also working as a designer for the *Ballets Russes*, to paint her portrait. Here it is. What do you think of it? And what did she? Personally, I like it a good deal, but she refused to accept it—I can only guess because she found it too conventionally feminine, and contrary to the image she was working so hard to project.

### 35. Chanel icons: Little Black Dress, flap purse, and Chanel N° 5

I couldn't leave Chanel without mentioning her most iconic creations: the **Little Black Dress**, the flap purse, and her perfume *Chanel N° 5*. I'll end the hour with a couple of clips about the latter: part of a documentary that takes us to her perfumery in **Grasse**, and one of many filmed ads for the fragrance.

### 36. *Chanel N° 5* documentary

### 37. *Chanel N° 5* film, *The Night Train*

### 38. Class title 2

## C. Haute Cinéma

### 39. Section title C (*Marienbad* park)

That is a still from *Last Year at Marienbad*, the 1961 film by **Alain Resnais** (1922–2014). The line through “*haute*” refers to the fact that, as I explained before, I originally meant to contrast examples of French high culture in the first hour—*cuisine*, *couture*, and *parfumerie*—with low culture in the second: the gritty contemporary products of the *nouvelle vague* around 1960. But I also have to admit that the same revolution in French film also produced a number of works that are as *haute-culture* as you could possibly wish. One of these is *L'année dernière à Marienbad*, which is the product of an *avant-garde* novelist, **Alain Robbe-Grillet** (1922–2008) and a director (Resnais) who was happy to move in the same circles. Do you see anything odd about this picture? The figures all cast shadows; the bushes do not. It is as artificial as you could get. The whole film is artificial and deliberately enigmatic. It begins with a narrator speaking over the end of the credits, and continuing as the camera shows long tracking shots of the interior of this grand hotel.

### 40. *Marienbad*, opening narration

Alain Robbe-Grillet was one of the stars of the *nouveau roman*, which entered the French intellectual scene at around the same time. It was a short-lived movement, characterized by complete disregard of conventional Cartesian time, space, or logic, coupled with an obsessive attention to detail that might normally be thought insignificant. You got both here: the repeated text of the narrator (which goes on for at least two minutes longer), and the obsessive probing of the camera. The engraving on which I stopped is similar to the hotel gardens you have already seen, and is another recurrent *Leitmotif*.

#### 41. Still from *Marienbad*, with summary

So what is the story? The summary on the screen is just about all that Wikipedia tells us, for until the very end, when the woman does leave with the man, the circle of memory and denial merely repeats again and again. I was interested, though, to find that the trailer—no doubt hoping to attract a more general audience—makes it look almost like a regular romance, with overtones of a thriller.

#### 42. *Marienbad*, trailer

#### 43. The game of Nim

The trailer makes it look as though there are only the two maybe-lovers in the film (**Delphine Seyrig** and **Giorgio Albertazzi**), but in fact there is also the second man, the spookily cadaverous **Sacha Pitoëff**, who repeatedly defeats the other man in the game of **Nim**, which as a result became very popular among my college circles. The rules are simple: players take turns to remove any number of matches from any one row; the person who is left with the last match loses. [Mathematically, it depends upon maintaining parity in terms of the sum of matches in each row expressed as a binary (base 2) number. It takes a bit of practice to do this quickly in one's head.] Here is one such game in the film, with the next few minutes just after. Although there are only three actual characters in the film, there are lots of extras. Resnais derives a lot of power by showing these either frozen or in slow motion.

#### 44. *Marienbad*, Nim game and following scene

#### 45. Pauline Kael

*Last Year at Marienbad* sharply divided the press. There were those who hailed it as a great achievement from the beginning; their number has only increased over time. But critics like **Pauline Kael** of the *New Yorker* were not so easily seduced!

## D. ...and again, French Grit

#### 46. Section title D

This is not really a separate section, but it enables me to repeat my trick of having a scene from *Breathless* (1960) break in upon *Marienbad*. Nothing could more clearly show the difference between the two works, both products of the same **New Wave**.



#### 47. Some *nouvelle vague* films

Here are some of the directors of the *nouvelle vague* and their groundbreaking films. **Louis Malle** worked largely independently, but **Alain Resnais**, **Jacques Demy**, and **Agnès Varda** belonged to a loosely-constituted group centered on the **Left Bank**. But the most important were **François Truffaut** (1932–84) and **Jean-Luc Godard** (1930–2022), who made their names as writers for the dedicated film magazine ***Cahiers du Cinéma*** (Cinema Notebooks), founded in 1951; *Breathless* was a film by Godard to a screenplay by Truffaut. The *Cahiers* philosophy was a move away from the no-harm-no-foul idea of a director simply putting the requirements together to film some existing story to one that considered a forceful director as the ***auteur*** (author) of a body of work which, though relying on actors and collaborators, collectively developed his or her unique perspective and concerns. Highbrow content was not essential to the role of *auteur*; two of *Cahiers*' first heroes were **Alfred Hitchcock** and, believe it or not, **Jerry Lewis**. So *Marienbad* is absolutely an *auteur* work. But it is an exception to the general trend which is to make movies that are realistic, gritty, *noirish*, filmed in shades of grey, and featuring unexpected editing techniques. You can see all this in the opening of *A bout de souffle* (*Breathless*).

#### 48. *A bout de souffle*, opening sequence

#### 49. Jean-Paul Belmondo and Jean Seberg in *Breathless* (1960)

Did you see anything here that struck you especially? It is so like the kinds of film we see today—just about anything by **Martin Scorsese**, for instance—that it is hard to see it as especially original. And even then, it was a return to the qualities of a Hollywood B movie, but quite deliberate and exalted to the level of a working philosophy of its own. I think I have time for two more substantial clips. **Michel**, the **Jean-Paul Belmondo** figure, hooks up with a girlfriend in Paris, steals her money while she is pulling a dress over her head, then goes in search of **Patricia** (**Jean Seberg**), an American girl who sells the *New York Herald Tribune* to make a little extra. We know Michel to be promiscuous; it is perhaps a bit of a shock to find that Patricia is also. Note Godard's use of film posters, the girl selling *Cahiers du Cinéma*, and Michel's identification with **Humphrey Bogart**; this is a director who uses references to film itself as part of his significant vocabulary. I have removed a 2-minute section from the middle of this scene in which Michel seeks help from an acquaintance who works at the American Express

#### 50. *A bout de souffle*, the streets of Paris

#### 51. Jean-Paul Belmondo in *Breathless* (1960)

I'll play the last 8 minutes of the movie. Patricia comes to realize that Michel is on the run. Even though she has discovered she is pregnant, possibly by him, she does not want to come with him, and denounces him to the police—then goes back and tells him so. But he is tired of running too. One thing that may surprise you: up to now, there has been a jazz score much as you might expect. But the beginning of this is accompanied by a classical piece, the **Mozart Clarinet Concerto**, which Michel has put on the record-player. I said the *nouvelle vague* was full of surprises.

#### 52. *A bout de souffle*, ending

#### 53. Class title 3 (Jean Seberg)