

10 French Movies That Can Transport You to Paris

With trans-Atlantic travel all but suspended, the closest you can get to Paris may be onscreen. These movies will take you there.

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While your travel plans may be on hold, you can pretend you're somewhere new for the night. Around the World at Home invites you to channel the spirit of a new place each week with recommendations on how to explore the culture, all from the comfort of your home.

“America is my country, and Paris is my hometown,” wrote Gertrude Stein. Me, too; or, well, almost. For the last few years I was shuttling between New York and the French capital, where my now-husband worked, and in that time Paris came to feel like a city where I had history, whose streets I could navigate by muscle memory. Now that trans-Atlantic travel is all but suspended, the closest I can get to Paris is onscreen — but, luckily, the view is fantastic.

Paris was the site of the first movie screening, back in 1895 (though the Lumière Brothers shot those first pictures in Lyon). It remains the home of Europe's largest, most vibrant film industry — France exports more movies than any country, bar the United States.

Here I've picked 10 movies that transport me back to Paris, from the early days of sound cinema to the age of streaming. I've omitted many Paris movies made in English, some shot on soundstages (“An American in Paris,” “Moulin Rouge!”) and others on location (“Funny Face,” “Midnight in Paris”). Instead I've selected the French films I rely on when I want to escape America for Paris ... which, these days, is quite often.

Girlhood (2014)

Paris today is so much more than its touristic, tree-lined core; it's continental Europe's most diverse city, where French mingles with Arabic and Wolof and you're more likely to hear Afro trap than Édith Piaf. This assured coming-of-age film by Céline Sciamma follows a young Black teenager as she shuttles across the racial, economic and cultural divides between Paris proper (or "Paname," in the girls' slang) and its suburban housing estates, whose architecture the director films with rare style and sympathy. Aubervilliers, Bondy, Mantes-la-Jolie, Aulnay-sous-Bois: these nodes of Greater Paris, birthplace of singers and stylists and the world's greatest soccer players, deserve the spotlight too.

Amazon, YouTube, Google Play, iTunes

35 Shots of Rum (2008)

The most intimate and most Parisian film of Claire Denis, very probably France's greatest living director, follows a widowed father, who is a train driver, and his only daughter, a student, as they hesitantly step away from each other and into new lives. The cast (including Mati Diop, who's since become an acclaimed director herself) is almost entirely of African or Caribbean origin, yet this is the rare film that takes Paris's diversity as a given, and its portraits of Parisians in the working-to-middle-class north of the capital have a fullness and benevolence that remain too rare in the French cinema. Just as beautiful as its scenes of family life are Ms. Denis's frequent, lingering shots of the RER, Paris's suburban commuter railway, which appears here as a bridge between worlds.

Amazon

Love Songs (2007)

The near entirety of this gray-steeped musical — directed by Christophe Honoré and with a dozen tunes written by the singer-songwriter Alex Beaupain — takes place in the gentrifying but still scruffy 10th Arrondissement, where I put back a few too many drinks in my 20s. As its young lovers sing on some of Paris's least photogenic streets, on their Ikea couches or in their overlit offices, the capital

turns into something even more alluring than the City of Light of foreign fantasies. This is the film to watch if you miss everyday life in contemporary Paris, where even the overcast days merit a song.

Hulu, Amazon

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Full Moon in Paris (1984)

Paris had a *very* good 80s: think Louvre Pyramid, think Concorde, think Christian Lacroix. Éric Rohmer's tale of an independent young woman, keen to hang onto both her boyfriend and her apartment, offers the most chic dissection of Parisian youth — big-haired models dancing in Second Empire ballrooms, and lovers philosophizing at cafe tables and one another's beds. There's a killer '80s score by the electropop duo Elli et Jacno, but what makes its beauty so bittersweet is its sublime star Pascale Ogier, who died shortly after the film's completion, age 25.

Amazon, YouTube, iTunes

C'était un rendez-vous (1976)

It's just eight minutes long, it has no dialogue, but this is the wildest movie ever made in Paris; it's a miracle that no one died. Early one morning, the director Claude Lelouch got in his Mercedes, fastened a camera to the bumper, and just floored it: down the broad Avenue Foch (where he clocks 125 miles an hour), through the Louvre, past the Opéra, through red lights and around blind corners

and even onto the sidewalks, to the heights of Sacré-Cœur. Every time I watch it I end up covering my eyes and then laughing at the insanity of it all: cinéma vérité at top speed.

YouTube

Cléo from 5 to 7 (1962)

It's 5 p.m. on June 21, the longest day of the year, and the pop singer Cléo has gone to a fortune teller to find out: is she dying? And for the rest of Agnès Varda's incomparable slice of life we follow her in real time — one minute onscreen equals one minute in the narrative — across the capital's left bank. She walks past the cafes of Montparnasse, down the wide Haussmannian boulevards and into the Parc Montsouris, where she meets a soldier on leave from the front in Algeria: another young Parisian uncertain if he'll live another year. As Cléo puts her superstitions aside, the streets of Varda's Paris serve as the accelerant for a woman's self-confidence.

HBO Max, Criterion Channel

Breathless (1960)

Jean-Luc Godard's first feature is so celebrated for its innovative jump-cuts and careering narrative that we forget: this is, hands down, the greatest film ever made about an American in Paris. As the exchange student hawking the New York Herald Tribune on the Champs-Élysées, Jean Seberg invests the movie with a breezy expatriate glamour, feigning French insouciance but hanging onto American wonder. And if her language skills are iffy — my French husband imitates Seberg's Franglais when he wants to mock my accent — she embodies the dream of becoming someone new in Paris, even if you fall for the wrong guy.

HBO Max, Criterion Channel, YouTube, iTunes

Bob le flambeur (1956)

The suavest of all Paris gangster films — and my go-to movie for days sick in bed — orbits around the handsome narrow streets of hillside Montmartre and, just south, the seedy nightclubs and gambling dens of Pigalle. Bob, the elegant, white-haired “high roller” of the title, is a retired bank robber after one last big score, but Paris’s old underground, and its old codes of loyalty, are fading away. The cast is undeniably B-list, and genre conventions cling to their roles like barnacles: the world-weary but wise cafe proprietress, the hooker with a heart of gold. But watch as Melville’s hand-held camera trails Bob in his trench coat and fedora, or follows a garbage truck around the Place Pigalle like a ball in a roulette wheel. Paris looks like a jackpot.

Amazon, YouTube, iTunes

Casque d’or (1952)

We’re in Paris’s working-class northeast in this aching period drama of the belle époque, directed by Jacques Becker and starring Simone Signoret as the titular golden-haired prostitute caught between two lovers. It’s based on a true story of a courtesan and the gang murders she inspired — but Mr. Becker paints the scene like a dream of the 19th-century capital, of cobblestoned alleyways, smoke-choked bistros and horse-drawn paddy wagons.

Criterion Channel

Boudu Saved From Drowning (1931)

Jean Renoir’s early satire stars Michel Simon as a prodigiously bearded tramp who, one fine morning, walks halfway across the Pont des Arts and jumps into the Seine. Saved by a kindly bookseller, Boudu moves into his apartment and promptly turns his family’s life upside down. The movie’s skewering of middle-

class values has not lost its bite, but its outdoor shots of the Latin Quarter, a university neighborhood not yet overrun by tourist-trap cafes, have become a poignant time capsule.

Criterion Channel, Kanopy

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