

# FRN310 Readings in French Language and Cultures

3rd and 4th quarters, Junior

<b>Instructor</b>	MATSUDA KAZUYUKI
<b>Style of Class</b>	Lecture, Seminar
<b>Number of Credits</b>	2
<b>Day and Period</b>	To be advised

## Course Description

Poet Jacques Prévert (1900-1977) could cram deep feelings into simple words and was able to breathe life into a mature humanism. In the confusing years after World War II, his poetry enjoyed overwhelming support from readers in all walks of life. In this course, we will conduct a close reading in French of several of the poems in his major 1946 work *Paroles* (*Words*)

Prévert's other face was that of a highly sought writer of song lyrics. Set to music by the composer Joseph Kosma, more than a few of his lyrics became famous *chansons* that have enjoyed long popularity down to the present day. In this course, we will take a close look at the lyrics of several of their famous songs, especially "Les feuilles mortes," and once we have understood them, we will learn to appreciate them in multifaceted ways, taking care to compare different versions and interpretations by different singers.

In addition, we will listen to some of the most famous *chansons* in history, including "Hymne à l'amour" performed by the "Queen of Chanson," Édith Piaf, as well as Michel Polnareff's "Tout, tout pour ma chérie" and other famous examples of French pop music. Once we have an accurate understanding of the lyrics, we will listen to these songs, compare them, and see if we can find the secret of the appeal of Prévert and Kosma's works.

Yet Prévert had still another important face, that of a screenwriter. He joined forces with the renowned director Marcel Carné to write numerous film scripts, including the script for one of the most famous films of all time, *Les enfants du paradis*. The films that these two men produced were highly praised for epitomizing poetic realism. In this course, we will view *Le Roi et l'Oiseau*, an animated film directed by Paul Grimault, for which Prévert wrote the script. We will consider the stormy creative process for this film and the ways in which it influenced the animated works of Miyazaki Hayao and Takahata Isao.

## Course Objectives

- (1) Reading the simple, every day language of Prévert's works in the original French will improve the students' ability to read and understand French and to express themselves in French
- (2) By reading poetry aloud and listening to *chansons*, French pop music, and the dialogue in an animated film, the students will become better acquainted with the oral-aural aspects of French and develop their knowledge and sense of French literature and subcultures.

## Expected Outcomes

- (1) Students will make use of the French reading ability developed through encounters with highly polished poetry and use it to read French literature in a wide variety of genres.
- (2) If possible, the instructor plans to distribute English translations of the texts. Reading and comparing the same text in two languages will allow students to polish not only their French skills but also their English skills.
- (3) By becoming familiar with French culture, thought, and religion, students will, by extension, become familiar with Western culture, thought, and religion.

## Prerequisites

French I, II, III, and IV (general education courses)

## Class Materials

- The instructor does not plan to use any specific textbook. Printed handouts will serve as reading selections.
- Reference materials, including reference books and films, will be introduced during class as needed. The recent book listed below is noteworthy as the first serious critical biography of Prévert to have been written in Japan.

- Kashiwakura Yasuo, *Omoidashite o-kure, Shiawase datta hibi wo: Hyouden Jakku Pureveeru* (Remember the Days When We Were Happy: A Critical Biography of Jacques Prévert), Sausha, 2011.
- Sources for listening to Prévert's *chansons* include the following compilation CD, which we will use in class. It is a superb project with a detailed companion booklet.
- *Watakushi wa watakushi, kono manna na no.* (I am as I am) Universal International, 2004.

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## Course Methods

The course will be essentially run as a seminar based on reading texts, but the instructor to incorporate lectures on an ad hoc basis in order to provide more in-depth understanding. The texts (printouts) to be read each time will be handed out at least one week before the class in which they are discussed, so that students have plenty of time to study them. Since the course also covers music and films, I would like to make effective use of audiovisual devices such as CDs or DVDs.

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## Evaluation/Assessment

Students will be graded on an overall basis, including base points that measure their participation and attitude, a final report (or final written exam), reaction papers, and homework handed in.

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## Grading

40%	Participation and attitude
20%	Reaction papers, homework handed in
40%	Report or written exam

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## Course Schedule

### Week 1: Orientation, etc.

I will first offer an overview of the class and the texts to be studied and explain how evaluation and grading will work. I will then provide an overview of Prévert's life and works and prepare the texts for the next sessions.

### Week 2: Introduction to Prévert, Reading "Déjeuner du matin."

"Déjeuner du matin," a poem often included in elementary French textbooks is one of the poems in *Paroles* that is written in especially plain and ordinary language, and as such, it is especially appropriate that this is the first work of Prévert's works that we read. It is about a couple breaking up, and it is written from the point of view of the woman, describing the scene in a seemingly matter-of-fact *passé composé*, so it serves as a wonderful text for learning the *passé composé*, the basic past tense of spoken French.

### Week 3: The famous *chanson* "Les feuilles mortes": Major works of Prévert and Kosma

We will do a close reading of the famous song "Les feuilles mortes" and compare it to the poem on which it is based. Paying close attention to the conditionals and conjunctions at the beginning of the lyrics, we will interpret the lyrics as thoughts expressed to a departed lover. The words of the song do not identify the gender of *je* "I" and *tu* "you," but we will be able to determine that by reading the longer poem. We will think about what this fact means as we focus on the gender of the person singing the song.

### Week 4: Different versions of "Les feuilles mortes": *Chanson* and jazz

Since "Les feuilles mortes" is one of the best-known *chansons*, a great many singers have sung it, but France is not the only country where it was well received. Not only did it become a popular song with English lyrics in the United States; it also became a jazz standard and a favorite of many jazz musicians. In this class, we will listen to and compare versions sung by Yves Montand, Édith Piaf, and Juliette Gréco, in addition to listening to the muted trumpet version by "the emperor of jazz," Miles Davis, with whom Gréco had a brief affair. Davis's rendition of "Les feuilles mortes" ("The Autumn Leaves") is featured on Cannonball Adderley's famous album *Somethin' Else*.

### Week 5: Édith Piaf and "Hymne à l'amour"

This sessions will deal with "Hymne à l'amour," which might be called the other of the two greatest *chansons* alongside "Les feuilles mortes." Thinking of the tumultuous life of Édith Piaf, "the queen of *chanson*," we will do a close reading of the lyrics of one of her major songs, "Hymne à l'amour" and listen to a recording of Piaf herself singing. These lyrics feature a lot of typical conditionals that express contrary-to-fact situations, making

this song an appropriate teaching material for this grammatical form. We will also listen to a recording of “La vie en rose,” another of Piaf’s hits, and one that she wrote and performed herself.

#### **Week 6: Bird motifs in the works of Prévert**

We will return to Prévert’s poetry collection *Paroles* to study two poems with bird motifs, “Page d’écriture” and “Pour faire le portrait d’un oiseau,” and we will spend this session and the next one reading them. We will listen to a song based on the first one and hear a reading of the second one by a famous actress. “Page d’écriture,” which takes place in an elementary school classroom, is a fine and lively work of the rebellious Prévert, in which he extols freedom, but the bold flights of fancy in the lyrics remind us that Prévert was associated with the Surrealists for a time.

#### **Week 7: Prévert and Magritte: Contact points with surrealism**

The painter René Magritte, like Prévert, was fond of using birds as a motif, and both of them were associated with the Surrealist movement at nearly the same time. After we have read “Pour faire le portrait d’un oiseau,” I will introduce some of Magritte’s paintings, which seem to give concrete form to the images of birds in that poem and in “Page d’écriture.” Although poetry and painting are different genres, we will confirm that the previously Surrealist art of both men has points in common.

#### **Week 8: A selection of French pop music**

We will listen to examples of so-called “French pop,” such as Joe Dassin’s “Les Champs-Élysées,” and Michel Polnareff’s “Tout, tout pour ma chérie,” after reading the lyrics. In Prévert’s songs and other *chansons*, there was a strong tendency to emphasize the lyrics over the melody, but in French pop, we see a tendency to emphasize the melody instead of the lyrics, although this is not always true. We will investigate the specifics of this point.

#### **Week 9: An eternal moment on a winter morning: A collection of Prévert’s short poems**

Perhaps due to his involvement in filmmaking, Prévert was a master of evoking visual images with strings of simple worlds. In this session, we will study several short poems that exemplify this skill. The poem “Le jardin,” in which a simple, everyday scene is expanded into distant space-time, embodies the essence of Prévert’s poetry. I would like you to appreciate this profound drama in eleven lines. In addition, we will read the short poem “Alicante,” which is named after a Spanish resort, and we will take the vivid image of the orange featured there and consider it in terms of a famous line from one of Paul Eluard’s poems that is often cited in inquiries about Surrealism: “*La terre est bleue comme une orange.*”

#### **Week 10: Prévert’s allegorical poem “The Song of the Snails”**

Among the poems collected in *Paroles*, we will read one that stands out as unusual: “Chanson des escargots qui vont à l’enterrement,” an allegorical poem in which Prévert takes up the legacy of LaFontaine’s fables. We must not overlook the fact that despite the humorous characters and dryly amusing flavor of the poem, it contains a *memento mori*-type lesson. In addition, we will listen to Kosma’s *chanson* as interpreted by several singers.

#### **Week 11: World War II and Prévert’s antiwar poem “Barbara”**

It is fair to say that “Barbara” is Prévert’s best-known poem after “Les feuilles mortes.” After making sure that we understand the historical background of this poem, we will do a close reading of it during this session and the next one. In the poem, the narrator calls out to a woman he happened to pass by on the street one day with the phrase, “*Rappelle-toi, Barbara,*” and that phrase is repeated in a memorable way like a refrain. This poem is useful for reviewing reflexive verbs, the imperative, and the differences in usage between *tu* and *vous*.

#### **Week 12: The three rains that fell on Brest: A close reading of “Barbara”**

Brest, the city where “Barbara” takes place, was a tragic city, like Guernica, Oradour-sur-Glane, Hiroshima, and Nagasaki, the site of horrific wartime damage. In addition, it receives more rainfall than any other city in France. Prévert’s reference to the three rains that fell on Brest are an attempt to denounce the absurdity of war. After reading the poem, we will listen to Kosma’s *chanson* based on “Barbara” as interpreted by several singers.

#### **Week 13: Prévert and war: From “Barbara” to *Le Roi et l’Oiseau***

The famous *chanson* “Barbara” has an amazing history. When it was first published, there was a brief period in which it was banned from the radio. The reason was that Brest’s total destruction was due to repeated air raids by the Allied Forces in their campaign to drive out the Nazis, which explains why broadcast of the song was forbidden. This fact gives us an in-depth understanding of Prévert’s antiwar sentiments. We will then turn our attention to the conceptually polished animated film on which Prévert collaborated with Paul Grimault at about the same time that he wrote “Barbara,” and we will look at the philosophical connections between the two works.

**Week 14: Viewing *Le Roi et l'Oiseau*: A milestone in the history of French animation**

In this session, we will view the 87-minute animated film *Le Roi et l'Oiseau*, which Grimault directed and for which Prévert wrote the script. Incidentally, Takahata Isao and Miyazaki Hayao of Studio Ghibli both praise this film in enthusiastic terms, saying that it had a decisive influence on their own work. It will be especially interesting for us to focus on the similarities between this film and such Studio Ghibli films as *Castle in the Sky*.

**Week 15: *La Bergère et le Ramoneur* and *Le Roi et l'Oiseau*: The beliefs of Prévert and Grimault**

Prévert and Grimault made an older version of the story *Le Roi et l'Oiseau*. Although it was well received worldwide, Prévert and Grimault were dissatisfied with the way the producer interfered in the final version of the film, *La Bergère et le Ramoneur*. They filed a lawsuit against the producer, got the courts to forbid its distribution, and bought up all the negatives before remaking the story in a way that fit their original concept. We will compare the last scenes of both films in order to understand what message the two collaborators intended to convey.

**Preparation and Follow-up**

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- (1) Before class (preparation): As noted above, printed handouts will be used instead of a textbook, but at the end of each session, you will be notified of the assigned reading for the next class, so students should read the assigned selections with the aid of a dictionary and make sure that they understand most of it before coming to class.
- (2) After class (follow-up): Reread the passages that were discussed in class, make sure that you understand all the grammar, and make an effort to learn the most useful phrases. It is also recommended that you organize the notes that you took during class, including the notes on the instructor's lecture and PowerPoint slides, in order to reinforce your understanding.