

DIABOLO MENTHE / PEPPERMINT SODA

One film which has been somewhat overlooked, but which lends itself well to classroom viewing, is Diane Kurys' *Diabolo Menthe*. Released in 1977, and winner of the *Prix Louis Delluc* as France's best film of the year, *Diabolo Menthe* (English title *Peppermint Soda*) follows the lives of teenage sisters Anne and Frédérique Weber through an entire school year, from *la rentrée* in 1962 to the beginning of *les vacances* in 1963. Although nothing particularly tragic or earth-shattering happens to them during this period, the appeal of the film lies precisely in director Kurys' ability to show the drama of everyday life as the sisters struggle with the problems of school, family, friends, and boys as well as their own physical and emotional changes.

The parents of Anne and Frédérique are separated, in the process of divorcing, and the girls vacation with their father, who lives in Deauville. The rest of the year is spent in Paris with their mother, a very energetic and attractive woman, who has both a boyfriend and a job. Fifteen-year-old Frédérique is in *quatrième* and attends the *Lycée Jules-Ferry* where Anne, 13, will be a student for the first time. These were the days before the *collège* became the rule, when pupils went directly from elementary to high school, when *sixième* marked the first year of *lycée*, when education was not yet universally *mixte*.

In spite of this ordinary-sounding plot, *Diabolo Menthe* is anything but simplistic. Perhaps because she herself was 13 in 1962, and also attended the *Lycée Jules-Ferry*, Kurys as both writer and director has been able to infuse her film with insight and sensitivity, which definitely bring credibility to this semi-autobiographical story set almost four decades ago. Even the fashions seem to have stood the test of time, and the overriding themes of divorce, sibling rivalry, and the challenges of the teen years have given Kurys' work an aura of timelessness, making it quite relevant to the lives of young people today.

Nevertheless, it is very important that we as teachers make sure that our students realize that the school structure as depicted in *Diabolo Menthe* is in no way an accurate picture of the French educational system of today. Since the upheaval of the events of *mai 68*—strikes by university students which spread to the general working populace throughout France and which lasted several weeks—there have been many social reforms in an attempt to allow for more individual freedoms and more freedom of expression. The public educational system was not the least of those institutions affected by *mai 68*. Over the last thirty years public (and to a lesser

extent private) education in France has undergone many changes, and this evolutionary trend continues even today. The most current move has been toward the standardization of education throughout Europe, a move which reflects the growing sense of a common European identity and the efforts to further unify the members of the European Community.

It is for this reason that I have included two bibliographies at the end of this article. The first (Reference Bibliography) contains the sources which I used in creating classroom materials to accompany *Diabolo Menthe*, materials which I will discuss shortly. Since I developed my materials in 1997, a number of the books which I used for reference have come out in later editions, and some are out of print, although the latter should be available through interlibrary loan. The second (Updated Bibliography/Suggested Reading) provides more current sources. The updated list is far from being complete, but at least it should provide some background information for us as teachers—and for more advanced students—who would like to delve more deeply into the changes which have taken place in the French educational system over the past three decades, and who would like to learn more about Diane Kurys and her work.

Therefore, once students understand that there are no longer separate schools for girls and boys, that French public education has changed greatly over the years, and that Kurys' film represents a picture of schooling as she herself perceived it nearly forty years ago, I feel that her film lends itself well to today's classroom. *Diabolo Menthe* seems to be an especially good choice for viewing in intermediate to advanced classes, for the situations faced by Anne and Frédérique—divorce, puberty, sibling rivalry, problems at home and at school—are easily identifiable and seem to encourage discussion among students. Even so, with appropriate guided activities and worksheets, the film should be suitable for all levels. Shot on location in Paris (with a few scenes of Deauville and the French countryside), it provides a great look at the workings of the *Lycée Jules-Ferry* which still exists today, although in coed form. The director has in fact used the school as a unifying element for the action. The ringing bells and the images of the *lycéennes* rushing up and down the staircase so as not to be late to class are repeated over and over again, constantly bringing the viewer—and Anne and Frédérique—back to reality. School is an important part of their lives. Their friends are there, and their performance there is a

direct reflection of what is going on in their private lives.

I showed *Diabolo Menthe* to third semester college-level students with very good results, and thus I would like to share some of the activities which I used to supplement the viewing of this film. As time is restricted by my course syllabus (three days' total for a feature film and only one film each semester), I like to give my classes several pages of handouts in advance. It is very difficult to find a feature film which one can show in two fifty-minute class periods, thus leaving the third day free for class discussion. With a running time of just 97 minutes, *Diabolo Menthe* fits well into this restricted time format. On the first page of the handouts I create for any feature film, I always include a review of the film, and in this case I added a biographical sketch of Diane Kurys, since her work is perhaps less well-known. *The Movie Guide* is a good source for reviews, which are usually not detailed enough to destroy the suspense or the ending of a film but which help students familiarize themselves in advance with the characters and the plot. Reviews can be shortened to fit the needs of a class, and it is certainly possible to write one's own brief sketch of a film. (Here I would like to add that for *Diabolo Menthe*, I created a total of five pages of handouts, although this figure is arbitrary. I create handouts in order to acquaint my students with facts and details which I would never have time to mention in class. In addition, question sheets provide grammar and vocabulary support, which in turn stimulate and guide discussion, making film-viewing a more active experience.)

On the second page of my handouts, I always have a list of characters and the names of the actors and actresses who played these roles. Below, there is another list, grouping secondary characters according to their function in the film: i.e., *les amis de Frédérique*, *les amis d'Anne*, *d'autres personnages*. These lists serve to eliminate confusion and the misspelling of names in compositions. Although in *Diabolo Menthe* the identity of the sisters and their parents is obvious, that of some of the important secondary characters may be less so. To save time, I provide a brief description of each person on the list, but it is also possible to create a class or group activity by giving students the names and having them come up with their own identifications. This activity would be quite suitable for classes who are just learning family relationships and physical descriptions. At the bottom of this page, the heading *Lieux* identifies the various locations where scenes take place in the film.

In the case of *Diabolo Menthe*, the third and fourth pages of my handouts are devoted to questions which will form the basis for our class discussion, and Kurys' film seems to lend itself to four major divisions: *la famille*, *le lycée*, *les amis*, and *questions générales*. These groupings are merely suggestions, for there are so many underlying themes that each person who views the film will probably come up with his or her own ideas. There is in fact so much to discuss that I limited myself to five questions for each section.

I. La famille: *Que pensez-vous d'Anne? Est-ce qu'elle est sympathique? Trouvez quelques adjectifs pour la décrire.* 2) *Et Frédérique? Comment est-elle?* 3) *Pensez-vous que Mme Weber est une bonne mère? Quels sont ses rapports [her relationship] avec ses filles? Est-elle sévère avec ses enfants?* 4) *Après avoir demandé à Frédérique de déchirer les lettres de Marc, pourquoi est-ce que Mme Weber la laisse partir avec lui pendant les vacances de Pâques?* 5) *Quels sont les rapports entre Frédérique et Anne et leur père? Elles ont l'air d'être heureuses quand elles sont en vacances avec lui à Deauville et à l'Alpe d'Huez. Pourquoi donc est-ce qu'elles se sentent gênées [awkward, uncomfortable] en présence de leur père quand il les emmène au restaurant à Paris?*

My goal here is to summarize the family dynamic. Anne is decidedly likable, but she is also a little sneak, and at times a boldfaced liar. In truth, she is troubled over her parents' divorce. Although she detests Philippe, her mother's boyfriend, she tries to impress her friends by showing them a photo of him with her mother and pretending that they are her parents, preferring the more dashing Philippe to her older, balding father—at least in picture form. Anne's grades are poor, and she suffers from her slowness in maturing physically as well as from her mother's refusal to let her wear panty hose or take the bus to school—things older girls do. Frédérique appears more stable, but she has begun to discover boys—and politics—and her mother's somewhat mercurial behavior works at times in her favor, at times not. Mme Weber offers yet another interesting study, as she seems to care genuinely about her daughters but is often not at home. Then there is the phenomenon of big sister versus little sister, even though, in times of crisis, the bonds between the two are very strong. Finally, the relationship with their father is rather curious, and Anne knows how to use this situation to her advantage.

II. Le lycée: 1) *Qu'est-ce que vous*

pensez du lycée? Des cours? Des profs? Des élèves? Est-ce qu'elles sont indisciplinées/difficiles? 2) *Qu'est-ce que vous pensez de la qualité de l'enseignement au Lycée Jules-Ferry?* 3) *Pourquoi est-ce que la politique est interdite au lycée?* 4) *Quelles différences avez-vous notées entre votre lycée et le Lycée Jules-Ferry?* 5) *Est-ce que l'enseignement non-mixte [non-coed] est une bonne chose? Quels sont les avantages/les inconvénients de ce système?*

In spite of its serious themes, the film has many humorous moments, and the scenes shot at the *lycée* are some of the most amusing. The viewer sees the girls in class, in the halls, at lunch, in the school yard during *récréation*. For this reason, as mentioned above, *Diabolo Menthe* could be used to teach students about the French school system—the way it used to be. Much has changed since 1962, but the division of classes, the grading system, and the administrative hierarchy still bear traces of the older systems. One idea is to present factual information first, from sources such as *Le Nouveau Guide France* (or from other sources such as those listed in my Updated Bibliography/Suggested Reading section). Among these is the very helpful *Tableaux culturels de la France*. This book has some very thought-provoking questions about the way French education has evolved over the years—and continues to evolve not only structurally but also with regard to the manner in which a student's emotional and psychological development is viewed, and valued. The *Teacher's Guide* designed to accompany *Tableaux* has several interesting ideas for activities which could be used in conjunction with showing *Diabolo Menthe*—ideas such as inviting a French person to come and speak to a class about his or her school experience. Another idea is to have students compare their own schooling to that of a young French person of comparable age. I realize that having a French visitor might not always be feasible, for a number of reasons, but I do believe that the enthusiasm with which my students received this film was due, at least in part, to their being able to identify with the fact of, quite simply, being in school. The high school experience is very fresh in the minds of students, even those of college age, and *Diabolo Menthe's* sometimes "unusual" teachers and overexuberant girls seem to encourage students to comment on a subject about which they obviously have opinions, and firsthand knowledge.

III. Les amis: 1) *Comment sont les amies d'Anne, Sylvie et Martine?* 2) *Frédérique et Perrine sont amies depuis longtemps. Pourquoi est-ce qu'elles se sont fâchées?* 3) *Pourquoi est-ce que*

Frédérique et Pascale deviennent amies? Est-ce que vous avez laissé tomber [dropped] des amis quand vous étiez au lycée? Pourquoi? 4) *Pourquoi Muriel a-t-elle fait une fugue? Décrivez sa situation familiale.* 5) *Pourquoi Muriel a-t-elle fait une scène dans la cour du lycée?*

As might be expected, each sister has her own set of friends, and Kurys has cleverly used these groupings to show the pleasant and the painful side of friendship. Anne's friends provide comic relief, from Martine who dances on top of a desk during class—one of the funniest scenes in the film—to little blonde, braided Sylvie who expounds with great authority on everything, especially boys and sex, about which she is humorously misinformed. By contrast, Frédérique goes through a crisis, losing the friendship of Perrine, to whom she had long been close (since grade school perhaps). They fight over Frédérique's new-found passion for politics, which is of no interest whatsoever to Perrine. Frédérique also loses Muriel, a new girl who comes from a single-parent household. Obviously troubled by her mother's suicide the year before, Muriel runs away with her boyfriend during spring break. Her return to *Jules-Ferry* is short-lived, and the very amusing scene which leads to her expulsion underlines once again Kurys' skill as a filmmaker, showing both the comic and the serious side of life. Muriel was not happy at school, but the total insensitivity of the headmistress makes it easy for her to make the choice of getting herself expelled. These losses, however, cause Frédérique to become closer to Anne. Previously, Anne had been excluded from her sister's circle of friends. "*Va-t'en, ce n'est pas de ton âge!*" had been a familiar refrain, but now we see the older girl sitting and talking with Anne, Martine, and Sylvie during *récréation*. And, ironically, it is politics which brings together Frédérique and Pascale, who become new best friends. In a history class, Pascale recounts having been an eye-witness to *Charonne*, a 1962 protest against the war in Algeria which turned to bloodshed. This long scene, perhaps the most touching in the film, can be used to acquaint students, if only briefly, with the Algerian War, an episode in French history which is still on people's minds today.

IV. Questions générales: 1) *Pourquoi est-ce que M. Cazau a embrassé Frédérique?* 2) *Frédérique a réussi le rôle de Trissotin dans *Les Femmes savantes* de Molière, mais elle est triste après. Pourquoi?* 3) *Pourquoi est-ce que M. Weber est vite parti à la fin de la pièce, sans*

rien dire à Frédérique, sans la féliciter?
 4) On ne voit jamais M. et Mme Weber ensemble. Pourquoi? À votre avis, est-ce que la situation de Frédérique et sa sœur est typique des enfants dont les parents sont divorcés? Pourquoi? Pourquoi pas?
 5) Faites une critique du film. L'avez-vous aimé? Est-ce que vous pensez que le film ait vécu [is not dated]? Est-ce que vous pensez qu'aujourd'hui les jeunes de 13 à 15 ans aient les mêmes types de soucis [worries] et les mêmes intérêts qu'Anne et Frédérique?

This final section is designed to cover the end of the film, wrap up any loose ends and give students a chance to start thinking about the 250-word composition which will complete the work on *Diabolo Menthe*. These multiple-part questions may seem long, but they are geared to provide vocabulary support, hopefully making them easier to answer. Also, they may suggest ideas which can be explored in the composition. Advanced students should have no difficulty with the discussion, but for lower levels, the class can be divided up and the answers prepared by groups. If time is limited, questions can certainly be skipped, or each group can work on a particular set of questions and share their answers with the rest of the class. Another idea is to have each group use the questions in a section to prepare a summary of the section. For instance, from *La famille* one could create a portrait of the Weber family, their relationships and their problems. The main idea is to get the students thinking and talking about the film.

To facilitate the discussion and any writing the students do in and outside of class, I always give them a final page with *Vocabulaire utile* and *Notes culturelles*. The vocabulary list, with English definitions, is related specifically to the film—words such as *le bulletin scolaire*, (*Madame*) *le censeur*, *la colle*, *se faire renvoyer* for *Diabolo Menthe*. As my students have a text with long lists of general vocabulary, I try to give them words which they cannot find in their text or in a dictionary, including slang expressions and words which have a particular cultural use within the context of the film. A good example of the latter would be *Madame le censeur*—a new word as well as an expression which uses the feminine form of address with a noun which is always masculine. I try to limit the *Vocabulaire utile* to ten words, but, once again, this figure is arbitrary. This list is designed to be exactly what it says it is—useful. If a particular film merits a longer list, it should definitely have one. (The idea of a *Vocabulaire utile* was given to me by a colleague who found that longer lists often discouraged students from learning the new words. Another colleague

has students, either individually or in groups, create their own short vocabulary lists which are then shared with the whole class.)

The *Notes culturelles* are brief definitions of people, places, or events mentioned in the film—things I would like my students to know, or at least recognize later on, but which I may not have time to mention in class. In this instance, among other things, I listed Molière and *Les Femmes savantes*, since this was the play presented at the end-of-the-school-year fête, and in which Frédérique and Pascale both had starring roles. Finally, I found a detailed Paris street map which showed the *Lycée Jules-Ferry* still located on the corner of the *boulevard de Clichy* and the *rue de Douai*, not far from the *Moulin Rouge* and the *place Pigalle*, names which students recognize. I made enlarged copies of this section of the city and gave a map to each student.

The composition itself can be a movie review or a commentary on some aspect of the film. It was these compositions which made me realize how well my students related to *Diabolo Menthe*. Many wrote about growing up with divorced parents, about vacations spent with one parent or another, about a mother or a father being absent a lot because of work, about the inability to accept the person a parent was dating, and one student commented that her home life was so similar to that of Anne and Frédérique that she could still hear her older sister saying: "*Va-t'en, ce n'est pas de ton âge!*" A number enjoyed comparing *Jules-Ferry* to their own high school and found that they had been better off than they thought—at least their teachers were more *sympa!*

When I first watched *Diabolo Menthe* with the idea of showing it to my class, I was a bit bothered by the rather episodic nature, for scenes can be short and the action subtle (which did not bother my more media-oriented students at all). However, something drew me back, and some twenty viewings later, I am still charmed by this film. The above questions and ideas represent just one approach, and for lower level classes, one can certainly create more simple activities—true-false, matching, cloze passages, for instance. Also, the theme song at the end, written and sung by Yves Simon, could be used for a class activity, as the words are easy to transcribe and sum up nicely the year spent with Anne, her friends and family. She may have matured physically, but she still hasn't found a boyfriend—who exists only in her dreams—and Anne never gets to taste the *diabolo menthe* she orders in a *café*, a drink she associates with growing up.

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DIABOLO MENTHE DISTRIBUTORS

FACSEA, 972 Fifth Avenue, New York, New York 10021, Tel: 1-800-W-FRENCH/ (212) 439-1439; Fax: (212) 439-1455; Web site: [http://www.facsea.org]; E-mail: [order@facsea.org] (Web site and E-mail orders for account holders only).

VEDETTE VISUALS, 4520 58th Avenue West, Tacoma, Washington 98466, Tel: (253) 564-4960; Fax: (253) 565-7644; Web site: [http://www.vedettevisuals.com]; E-mail: [info@vedettevisuals.com] (Phone orders accepted).

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Charlotte Kelsey
University of Illinois
Champaign-Urbana