School of Babel

School of Babel (2013) is a French feature documentary directed by Julie Bertuccelli. The documentary follows a reception class of immigrant students at the Granges-aux-Belles secondary school in Paris’ 10th arrondissement as they learn to speak French and adjust to life in a new country.

CURRICULUM LINKS

School of Babel is suitable for secondary students in Years 7–10 undertaking subjects within the learning areas of English, Languages: French and The Arts: Media Arts, and is relevant to the General Capabilities: Intercultural Understanding. The film is a suitable text for study in VCE English, French, Media and Sociology.

The School of Babel student guide:
• invites students to share their responses to the stories told by the film;
• asks students questions about the documentary as a film text.

In completing the tasks, students will have demonstrated the ability to:
• analyse the construction of a film and comment on the ways it represents an interpretation of ideas and experiences;
• respond to a film both personally and in detached and critical ways;
• discuss the social, cultural and historical values embodied in a film;
• draw on appropriate metalanguage to discuss the structures and features of a film;
• use their own written and spoken texts to explore concepts and ideas and to clarify their own and others’ understanding.

Teachers are advised to direct students to complete activities that are subject-relevant and age-appropriate. Teachers of French may direct students to complete responses in French rather than English.

KEY CONCEPTS

In School of Babel, director Julie Bertuccelli provides a candid portrait of the migrant experience. The documentary provides students with an opportunity to consider the challenges that children face when they move to a new country. In telling the stories of individual children, Bertuccelli establishes the many and varied reasons for immigration and explores the ways that the immigration experience is shaping each child’s sense of identity and belonging. In telling
the story of the reception class, Bertuccelli identifies the difficulties of integration and the resilience of the children who are negotiating these difficulties. School of Babel also highlights the significance of peer relationships in helping children cope with change; despite their differences, the students depend on one another as they make the transition from their old lives to their new. Bertuccelli also asks her audience to consider the role that adults – parents, guardians and teachers – play in the lives of the children. In addition, School of Babel promotes students to consider the way education creates opportunities and provides individuals with choices, and to reflect on the academic and pastoral value of schooling. The documentary can also be used to discuss Bertuccelli’s use of the documentary format.

SYNOPSIS

The school of La Grange aux Belles in Paris’ 10th arrondissement has a program for newly arrived immigrant children that provides intense language lessons in French alongside the core curriculum, so that the children can make the transition to mainstream classes.

School of Babel follows the story of the reception class of 2013, children ranging from eleven to fifteen years of age, as they come to terms with a new language and a new life. Hailing from countries across the globe including Ireland, Brazil, China, Ukraine, Tunisia, Venezuela, Guinea and Libya, the students in the reception class find the transition challenging as they juggle learning French, along with homesickness, familial responsibilities and memories of hardships in their home countries. Very few of the students have lived trouble-free existences. Many are asylum seekers, while others are escaping social and economic disadvantages in their home countries or have experienced family separations and breakdowns.

Their teacher, Brigitte Cervoni, demonstrates extraordinary patience, skill and care in teaching and counselling the students, and in her interactions with their parents and guardians. She guides them through a rigorous school year and prepares them for the transition to mainstream classes. In addition, she helps them to remain resilient, as they negotiate schoolyard conflict and their complicated lives outside of school. Learning French is difficult but integration is just as challenging.

While the students begin the school year struggling to find the right words, in the final term they undertake their
examination feeling nervous but also well prepared. Along the way, they master French and gain ground lost in their other subjects because of the language barrier. They also engage in invigorating and sometimes heated class debates that not only identify their differences but what they have in common. They learn how to make an award-winning film. They make friends, and they choose to share their stories of the past and their future hopes with each other.

When the end of the year inevitably arrives, it is difficult for them to say goodbye to each other and to their teacher. The students speak of each other as brothers and sisters, and of Ms Cervoni as a surrogate mother, as they sign farewell cards, embrace each other, wipe tears from their eyes and leave the schoolyard together for the last time.

BEFORE AND AFTER THE SCREENING

Before the screening

Task 1.

Watch the official trailer for School of Babel.

Suggested link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-4yHTfbYaEI.

A. What do you think the film will be about? What questions do you have about the film?

B. What does the trailer tell a potential audience about the genre, narrative, characters, themes and setting of the film?

C. What does the trailer tell a potential audience about the director of the film and the production company? What other information is included in the trailer?

D. How does the trailer begin? How does the trailer end? Was the trailer effectively edited? What words would you use to describe the pace of the trailer?

E. Does the trailer make you want to see the film?

Task 2.

A film’s promotional poster is both art and advertising. The poster exists to promote the film for a commercial purpose. The poster also has an aesthetic value.

Use Google images to locate a copy of the promotional poster for School of Babel.

Look at the promotional poster for School of Babel. What can you see? Your notes should refer to both the visual and written features of the poster.

Use the following questions to guide your notetaking:

- What is the title of the film? What is the tagline of the film? What credits are shown on the poster?
- What is the dominant image of the poster? What does this dominant image suggest?
- What is in the foreground of the poster? What is in the background of the poster?
- What are the dominant colours of the poster?
- Does the poster draw on the codes and conventions of a particular genre?
- Does the poster suggest the likely audience of the film?

Drawing on your notes, write an evaluation of the promotional poster for School of Babel.

After the screening

After the MIFF screening of School of Babel, spend time as a class discussing the students’ interest in the film and provide students with the opportunity to ask questions about the film. Ask students to review their responses to Tasks 1 and 2 and, where necessary, make adjustments that correct and/or clarify their analysis of both the trailer and poster.

Immigration

The United Nations estimates that immigrants account for approximately 3 per cent of the world population. In developed countries, one in 120 people is an immigrant. In developing countries, only one in 70 people is an immigrant.

- What is immigration?
- Why do people emigrate?
- The factors causing migration can be labeled push and
pull factors. Push factors are conditions that cause people to leave an area. Pull factors are conditions that attract people to an area.

Drawing on the stories of students featured in School of Babel, identify the push and pull factors that have prompted their move to France.

Invite students in the class to share their stories of migration.

- Use print and electronic resources to make an A4 chart that provides a snapshot of immigration to France. Your chart should provide:
  - A brief history of immigration to France.
  - Information about the source countries of immigrants.
  - A description of the immigrant population in France.
  - A list of the pull factors.
  - A summary of the current French immigration policy.

- The students in the reception class featured in School of Babel are immigrants from all around the world. Using the class roll (See: 2. The class of 2013) map the students’ journeys to France.

- ‘I hope the film will resonate in the current debate [over immigration], which is often nauseating.’
  – Julie Bertuccelli

Use the internet to determine current attitudes to immigration in France and what may have prompted Julie Bertuccelli the director of School of Babel to make this comment.

- Ms Cervoni: In your opinion. When you arrive in a new land, when you arrive in Paris, is life easy?
  Students: No!

Ms Cervoni shows the students the cover of a novel. She uses the book cover to discuss the immigrant experience and in particular to ask the students how they spent the last day in their country before leaving to come to France. Daniil tells the class, ‘I was angry, and I was very sad,’ as he recalls leaving a ‘nice apartment’ and most of his belongings. Miguel recalls feeling happy because he had the opportunity to study cello at the music conservatory.

What do the students’ recollections reveal about their migration experience? Why do you think Ms Cervoni asks the class to share their recollections? How do these recollections shape the audience’s response to the students in the reception class? What did you think and how did you feel as you listened to the students’ recollections?

2 The class of 2013

- See Inset for list of characters

The students in the reception class range in age from eleven to fifteen. During their time in the reception class they learn French and a core curriculum that will enable them to enter mainstream classes. The students’ graduation from the reception class is dependent on their acquisition of French and their grades in their other subjects.

- Invite students to share their impressions of the students featured in School of Babel.
- Write a description of the class of 2013.
- Are the students keen to learn?
- What is the purpose of the reception class? What views do the students express about the transition program? Based on your viewing of School of Babel, what are the benefits of the transition program? Are there any disadvantages?
Brigitte Cervoni is responsible for the reception class. Her experience is evident as she tackles the formidable task of teaching the students in charge. The audience sees Cervoni interacting with her students as a class and as individuals. Off screen, she can be heard, prompting, correcting, encouraging and teaching the children in her care.

What type of teacher is Brigitte Cervoni? Provide evidence to support your claims.
Identify moments that show Cervoni values each of the students in her care.
Identify moments that show Cervoni is respectful of differences.
Identify moments that show Cervoni’s commitment to the transition program.

School of Babel begins with one of the class’ first lessons together. Cervoni asks her students to write ‘bonjour’ in their own language on the board.

What does this sequence tell the audience about the reception class?
How does this sequence establish individual students?
Make a list of all the languages that are spoken by the students in your class. Learn how to say hello in each of these languages.

At the parent–teacher meetings, Cervoni discusses the progress of the children with their parents or guardians. The students are present for the parent–teacher interviews and sometimes have to act as interpreters for their parents or guardians. The parent–teacher interviews reveal details about the students’ past in their home countries and their lives in France.

Invite students to share their experiences of attending parent–teacher interviews and to discuss the importance of these interviews.
Invite students to speak about their parents’ involvement in their education. How do their parents monitor their behaviour and support their academic progress at school?

Ms Cervoni meets with Rama’s guardian. Rama’s guardian is annoyed to learn that Rama has been misbehaving in class. She asks Rama, ‘Did you come here for a laugh? Did you come to study, or to fool around?’ When Rama finally answers, ‘To study’, her guardian disputes this to be the case, suggesting that Rama is only interested in fun. Rama’s guardian speaks of the domestic violence that Rama was subject to in Senegal, reminding Rama how fortunate she is to now live in France. She wants Rama
to attend university. Rama’s guardian having berated her, turns to Ms Cervoni and promises her that she will make more of an effort to monitor Rama’s behaviour at school. Rama’s guardian cannot read or write and is dependent on her husband to check the parent–teacher contact book. She requests that Ms Cervoni telephone if there is any more ‘nonsense’.

**Felipe’s parent–teacher interview**

Ms Cervoni is worried that Felipe is not practising his French. Felipe admits that his reluctance to speak French outside of school is because he is worried that he may forget Spanish. Ms Cervoni acknowledges Felipe’s concern, telling him, ‘I agree with you. You must carry on speaking Spanish, and reading in Spanish, because you mustn’t forget your own language’. Felipe’s mother explains the reasons why the family has moved to France. While the story is a happy one, Felipe’s mother does accept that leaving Chile was difficult for her children. She is pleased with her son’s transition to life in Paris and proud of her son’s success at his new school.

**Xin’s parent–teacher interview**

Xin and her mother attend the parent-teacher interview. Ms Cervoni tells Xin’s mother that Xin is doing well at writing. Xin’s mother is pleased. Ms Cervoni is worried that Xin’s shyness means she is not developing her spoken French. Xin’s mother explains that because she is always at work, Xin is usually home alone and has no-one to talk to.

**Andromeda’s parent–teacher interview**

Andromeda is excelling at school. Ms Cervoni passes on the congratulations of the school council. Andromeda is pleased with her grades and her father is very proud. Ms Cervoni explains that Andromeda will make the transition to mainstream classes in English, Maths, Chemistry and Physics, and perhaps in Geography and History at the end of the year. Like Felipe, Andromeda has moved to France so that she has the opportunity to study.

**Djenabou’s parent–teacher interview**

Djenabou has been misbehaving. Ms Cervoni discusses Djenabou’s behaviour with her guardian. Djenabou’s guardian is surprised, claiming that at home Djenabou’s behavior is not a problem. Djenabou’s guardian explains that Djenabou is in France to study but to also avoid the restrictions of life in Guinea, ‘If she returns to Africa, she’s the one who will lose.’ In Guinea, Djenabou may be subjected to genital excision and would be expected to marry once she reached puberty. Djenabou’s parents work for the diplomatic service. Djenabou’s schooling has been one of constant interruptions and has made language acquisition difficult for her. They want their daughter to continue her schooling in France until she turns eighteen.

**Abir’s parent–teacher interview**

Abir attends parent-teacher with a family friend. Ms Cervoni is concerned that if Abir does not stay at school during the lunch break that she does not get to practise speaking French with her peers. The man explains that Abir’s mother is lonely and wants her daughter to spend time with her at home. Ms Cervoni is also worried that Abir has not told her parents about the school trip to the student film festival in Chartres and that time is running out to convince them of the benefits of the trip for their daughter.

**Luca’s parent–teacher interview**

Luca’s mother moved the family from Northern Ireland to Paris for economic reasons. She is a single mother of three boys and while life in Paris is still difficult, she is employed. Ms Cervoni is concerned about Luca’s progress in some subjects but it is likely that he will be promoted. Luca is struggling with Maths but he is a talented writer. His mother admits that Luca has been diagnosed with Asperger’s syndrome but that she did not tell the school because she does not want Luca to be singled out.

**Mihajlo’s parent–teacher interview**

Mihajlo’s mother attends parent-teacher. While her French is limited, she understands Ms Cervoni’s report. The teachers think that Mihajlo could work harder. Mihajlo explains that his time at home is spent acting as the family interpreter and writing to the Refugee Office. Mihajlo’s mother endorses that this is the case. She is proud of her son and all that he is doing to help the family secure residency in France. She believes that he has achieved a great deal in his first year in France.
What do the interviews reveal about the students’ reasons for migrating to France?
What do the interviews reveal about the students and their life in France?
What do the interviews reveal about what the parents and guardians want for their child or the child in their care?
What do the interviews reveal about the students’ expectations and hopes for their future?

Learning a new language

The class continues their French lessons. They work at the board and at their desks with the assistance of Ms Cervoni. The classroom is a collaborative one. Students correct each other’s grammar and help each other to find the right word.

Maryam: I said something in French, but not very well. Everyone laughed.
Kessa: Miss, it’s like me, they mock me ‘cause I speak French with an English accent.
Naminata, Maryam and Kessa share their experiences of being teased because they are new to speaking French.

What do the girls’ anecdotes reveal about the challenges facing immigrant students?
Put yourself in the position of the students in the reception class. How well would you cope?

The students’ limited knowledge of French makes learning in some of their other subjects difficult. The reverse is also true; many of the students in the reception class excel in subjects that are not as reliant on their ability to speak French. Students join the discussion, telling Ms Cervoni of times when they have been treated poorly by their peers in mainstream classes.

How does Ms Cervoni respond to the students’ anecdotes about being teased and mocked for not being fluent in French, as well as their claims of being marginalised? What were you thinking and feeling as the students shared these experiences with the class?
Why is the film titled School of Babel?
Can you speak another language?
Invite students to share their experiences of learning to speak another language. What are the benefits of being bilingual or multilingual?
Invite students to share their experiences of overseas travel to countries where English was not the official language. Did you learn any vocabulary or phrases before you travelled? How did you make yourself understood? What difficulties did you encounter? Did you learn to speak the language of the country that you visited during your travels?

Moon Child

The reception class makes a short documentary about what it means to be an immigrant student. The documentary is a vehicle for them to share their families’ stories of immigration and to express how their sense of identity and belonging has been shaped by their immigrant experiences.
The documentary offers a candid portrait of the reception class. It wins an award at the Ciné-Clap student film festival in Chartres and at the Paris Film Festival.

Invite students to share their impressions of Moon Child.
Working as a class, identify and discuss the benefits of the project.
Explain the significance and importance of Moon Child.
Do the students think they have a chance of winning an award at Ciné-Clap?

How do the students react when they see themselves on screen? What do the shots of the students’ parents and guardians as they watch Moon Child reveal?

School of Babel invites the audience to participate in a number of classroom discussions.

- Ms Cervoni asks the students to bring to class an object that reflects who they are. What objects do the students bring? What do their choice of objects reflect about them as individuals? How do the objects link to their immigrant experience?
- What else does the class talk about? What are the benefits of these conversations?

Exams

As the school year nears its end, the students in the reception class must sit an external examination. School of Babel tracks the students arriving at the examination centre and making their way through the building to the examination room and then their seats. After the examination, Bertuccelli shows the conversations between teacher and students as they recount their answers. Later the camera follows the class as they make their way home.

- Invite students to share their experiences of sitting examinations.
- Describe the students’ behaviour both before and after the examination.
- How do these scenes portray the relationship between Ms Cervoni and her students?

Moving on

Ms Cervoni is disappointed to learn that Maryam is leaving the class. The family has been offered a larger apartment in Verdun. The move is sudden but necessary. Everyone understands that Maryam must go but that doesn’t stop the students from feeling sad. The students are losing a classmate and a newfound friend.

- Ms Cervoni: Maryam told me that she wants to be a doctor … she must attend a reception class in Verdun. Why does Ms Cervoni telephone Maryam’s home? What does this phone call achieve?
- Why is it difficult for the students to say goodbye to Maryam?

At the end of the year, Ms Cervoni must inform the students about whether or not they are making the transition from the reception class to mainstream schooling.

- How do the students react to the information? How does Ms Cervoni help the students understand the decisions that have been made about their immediate futures?
- Ms Cervoni: The school year is over. This is the last day we’ll be together. It’s been a great joy for me working with you. All the more so since, as you know, I won’t be here next year. Next year, I’m going to be an inspector for the Education Ministry. I’ll no longer have 24 pupils but 300 teachers to look after … I wanted to say that in the life of a teacher there are key moments. The first time you take a class, when you graduate as a teacher. You never forget your first pupils, and you don’t forget your last ones.

What were you thinking and feeling as you watched Ms Cervoni farewell the reception class of 2013? Why does Ms Cervoni take the time to acknowledge the students’ future ambitions?

- Invite students to share their own experiences of leaving a school. Most students will be able to share their memories of the last day of Year 6.
- Spend time as a class discussing the students’ goodbyes to Ms Cervoni and to each other.

Making a documentary

A documentary is a non-fiction text that represents events and people from real life. The purpose of a documentary could be to provoke thought, to educate or to persuade. To be successful, a documentary also needs to engage its audience.

- Have you watched other documentaries? Share your experiences of this genre with the class. In what ways is School of Babel like other documentaries that you have watched? How does it differ? Share your responses to these questions with the class.
- School of Babel is an observational documentary. Research the conventions of this type of documentary. Does School of Babel conform to these conventions? Explain and evaluate Bertuccelli’s use of ‘fly-on-the-wall’ camerawork.
Imagine you had the opportunity to interview the film’s director, Julie Bertuccelli. Compile a list of five questions you would like to ask her about the making of School of Babel.

- What challenges do you think Bertuccelli encountered in making School of Babel?
- Unlike some documentaries, School of Babel does not rely on a narrator to tell its story. Why do you think Bertuccelli decided not to rely on a narrator? Do you think this decision is to the documentary’s advantage?
- What is achieved by showing the title of the film in some of the languages spoken by the students in the class?
- Working as a class, make a list of the film’s key scenes. What is achieved by beginning School of Babel with the students teaching each other to say hello in their own language?

Director’s statement

I discovered adaptation classes when I was chairing a school film jury, a few years ago. There was something fascinating about those classes. It was a patchwork of so many nationalities and personal paths, yet sharing a common goal: to learn French and try to fit in a place they don’t belong. ‘A place they don’t belong’: this was the idea that struck me the most. When I was their age, I had lived in the same Paris apartment since I was born and I had some pretty fixed and well-rooted landmarks.

I wanted to get closer to these children, and the idea to film them became obvious. Very early on, I realised that I had to immerse myself among them for quite a while in order to understand what their life was about. For a year then, I followed the daily routine of an adaptation class in a Parisian secondary school. I wanted to convey the turmoil that exile represents, especially at this key age, when childhood is close to an end. I wanted to know more about what they’d left behind, their culture, their beliefs, their memories, their hopes as well as disillusionments. How do they adjust to their new lives in France? What is their family situation? What is modelling their lives and imagination as teenagers? How do they feel about the integration that is expected from them, especially as they are simultaneously building an identity for themselves? Like ourselves when we were their age, what they’re going through is a pivotal time when their bodies change, when their thoughts are jostling around, when longings and desires become interwoven.

But Rama, Youssef and Oksana are not exactly like ourselves. Despite their young age, these teenagers have already gone through a lot. Their past is often fraught with tragedies. Their dreams for the future are more than mere passing whims because they are set against an obligation to succeed. As for their present, some of them are having a tough time, considering their huge responsibility towards the whole household, since they are the only ones to speak the new language.

Their future is open, they haven’t yet experienced the difficulties entailed by life in ‘tough’ neighbourhoods, or the stigmatisation of their origins and how cruel relegation in hopeless areas can be. At the stage they are now, the dream of integration is still intact. Their joy for living and discovering a new world is a palpable thing. What interests me is their enthusiasm, and this class which seems to be like a concrete utopia where, despite looming difficulties, everything remains possible. They’re aware that their lot in life is different from the French-born pupils they sometimes share classes with. And yet, they are driven by exemplary strength, hope and courage. They are heroes.

Julie Bertuccelli

Director Profile: Julie Bertuccelli > Julie Bertuccelli worked as an assistant director to several well-known filmmakers before making documentaries for television. Her debut feature, Since Otar Left (2003), won the Cannes Film Festival’s Grand Jury Prize of Critics’ Week and the Grand Golden Rail, as well as the César Award for Best First Work of Fiction among several other awards. Her next film, The Tree (2010), was nominated for several César Awards and a number of major international film festival and film institute prizes. Bertuccelli is the daughter of Ramparts of Clay director Jean-Louis Bertuccelli.
Developing an interpretation

‘School of Babel is a story of liberty, equality and fraternity.’ Discuss.

Your text response should be 500–750 words in length and should draw on specific evidence from School of Babel.

Vlogging your view

Did you enjoy School of Babel? Share your thoughts about the film with others in the class.

Your task is to make a 30 second vlog that offers a review of School of Babel. When you have finished post your vlog to the class’ YouTube account.

Just like a film trailer has to sell the film to an audience, your film review should demand the attention of your audience. The opinions expressed in your review can vary. You can express your love, hate or ambivalence for the film. You can offer one-word assessments of the film. You can introduce the plot (but don’t give away the ending). You can name your favourite scene, perhaps one that best sums up what the film is about. You can tell your audience about a character that you liked or loathed. You can evaluate the way the film uses a production element. You can share how you felt or what you thought as you watched the film. You can explain why the film is a must see or best avoided. You can suggest who’ll love it and who won’t. And finally, you can rate it. How many stars does School of Babel deserve out of five?

LINKS

Teachers are advised to preview online material to assess its suitability for use as a student resource.

For information about School of Babel visit the film’s official website at http://www.lacourdebabel.com/.

Additional Information about School of Babel can be accessed online at:

http://www.imdb.com/title/tt3552254/
https://www.facebook.com/lacourdebabel

View the official trailer for School of Babel online at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-4yHTfbYaEI and http://vimeo.com/85807450.

View scenes from School of Babel online:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RifUkD9fQMg
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dhYre9vWXS0
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yYHfCETmnvw
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sp-PkaBDVyg

Reviews of School of Babel can be read online at:

http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/review/school-babel-la-cour-de-656754

This study guide was produced by ATOM. © ATOM 2014

ISBN: 978-1-74295-463-9 editor@atom.org.au

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ISBN: 978-1-74295-463-9 editor@atom.org.au

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