SYNOPSIS

Marcel Marx lives as a poor shoe shine in the city of Le Havre. His everyday life is structured around a few familiar places: Yvette’s bakery, which has been granting him credit for a long time, Claire’s café, and his small home where his wife, Arletty, prepares his meals and shines his shoes! But the routine of this simple existence is going to be disrupted. Arletty is overcome by terrible pains and hides them from Marcel. At the harbor, a suspicious container is opened in front of the police and Captain Monet: Africans from Libreville traveled clandestinely in it to Gabon hoping to reach London. One of them escapes: a young lost child who will fortunately cross Marcel’s path. Marcel, understanding the difficulty the kid is in, gives him a hand. Soon enough, he takes the child to his home, in the shed, and takes him in for good. Idrissa is his name. Arletty is no longer at the house: she had to be taken to the hospital where Doctor Becker evaluates her very worrisome condition. Marcel doesn’t suspect any danger and is also unaware that his neighbor has reported Idrissa’s presence to the police. He finds out about this thanks to Captain Monet, who was concerned about warning Marcel, despite being charged with finding the child. Marcel then leaves for Calais, where he is able to find Idrissa’s grandfather detained in a refugee center. Setting off again with the child’s mother’s address in London, Marcel attempts to prepare an escape by boat. To pay for this clandestine trip, he organizes a concert by the rocker Little Bob, because he restored in him the joy of singing by helping him reconcile with his wife. But the hunt for the child continues. Monet shows up at Marcel’s house before the police and allows Idrissa to escape. Then, he saves the situation once again at the harbor by preventing a search of the boat on which the child can finally leave. Marcel can then return to the hospital where he finds Arletty miraculously healed and very happy to go back home to prepare dinner.
THE POSTER

Impressions

The visual elements chosen for the poster focus on a feeling of conflict and threat: the face-to-face between Marcel and Captain Monet befits a duel and becomes a key element. The depiction of Monet’s character with his black clothes (of a prophet of doom, of a bird of prey) is used as such without the nuances delivered by the actor, Jean-Pierre Darroussin, and his co-stars’ acting. Monet thus becomes the element of a simplified drama: the poster clearly shows tension and, therefore, possibly an effective storyline. This does not reflect the charm of the events and the story that Le Havre unfolds. In the same way, Marcel’s nonchalant attitude towards Monet does not do justice to this colorful character who leads the story with liveliness and optimism. Here, he only seems to be an ordinary man facing an upsetting representative of an authority figure one understands to be the police. It is not obvious either that Marcel is a shoe shine: his work equipment resembles that of a painter’s.

The poster, therefore, does not aim for an accurate description of the characters or the situation, but rather seeks to capture the eye, to impress by conveying a sense of danger. In the forefront, Idrissa’s character, the black child with an inquisitive and rather sad look, naturally comes off as the target of this danger: it is his destiny which the two adults do not agree upon. The poster, vis-à-vis the proximity to Kaurismäki’s esthetic choices, in fact masks what links this universe to today’s reality. The view of Le Havre’s harbor, in the background, is undated. Monet is a rather retro policeman. Even the font of the title and the director’s name, their slightly crooked placement, suggest a classic cinema out of fashion today; an accurate impression in this case.

The most curious thing is still the presence of the dog, Laïka. Even if she is indeed often with Idrissa throughout the movie, her place here gives her a different role. Laïka becomes the element of humor, charm, lightness, and quirky tone: a practical balance in contrast to the very accented dramatization. Lastly, we notice that the names of the lead actors are all in the same font, the same for the famous French actor Jean-Pierre Darroussin as well as for the young, unknown Blondin Miguel. There is also the expression of uniqueness: we are in Aki Kaurismäki’s universe; in the universe of a filmmaker who is not interested in the commercial value of the actors with whom he works, but in their talent. Such talent places them on the same level. Equality is also one of the principles of character treatment, just as one of the themes of the film.
Aki Kaurismäki
A Finn between the past and the present

Finland and the world
Aki Kaurismäki was born on April 4, 1957 in Hyvinkää, a small village that today forms part of the greater Helsinki urban area. The child was immediately moved, in his bassinet, to the city of Orimattila. He then grew up constantly moving with his family throughout the Finnish countryside, living mainly in Lahti, in Toijala. The father’s profession, a travelling salesman of ready-to-wear clothing, explains these wanderings. It was often said that these moves influenced Aki Kaurismäki’s older brother: having become a filmmaker as well, Mika Kaurismäki (born in 1955) is in fact well renowned in the road movie genre. In Aki Kaurismäki’s work, can be found many films that end with a departure, like Idrissa’s departure in Le Havre. Usually, in his universe, a profound sense of uprooting can be noticed: the characters live on very little, don’t really seem settled, and often come from somewhere else, like Marcel Marx who left Paris for Le Havre. Kaurismäki says of Marcel’s wife, Arletty, that she is Romanian, but that she doesn’t know it: a clever way of explaining her foreign accent without wondering about her origins. If Kaurismäki is the filmmaker who has best shown the reality of his country, he claims to also be open to the world, capable of projecting himself in it beyond its frontiers. Today, he shares his time between Helsinki and Portugal.

On the left, Timo Salminen, on the right Aki Kaurismäki
Le Havre unfolds a story characterized by its linearity and its voluntary simplicity, a rejection of the effects of elaboration (no flash-back) of dramatization (no sheer separation of tone) or of rhythm. This simplicity reflects on the directing of Aki Kaurismäki, who favors outline, and austerity. It also refers to the universe of the main character of the film, Marcel Marx, to his precisely simple life structured, by a just-as-simple joy. The entire film works around Marcel Marx’s routines: working, or attempting to work, walking in the city of Le Havre, returning on the way home, passing the café, going to the baker’s shop and the grocer’s, and, finally, going back home. These references given from the very beginning of the film are used all throughout the film: when Captain Monet has to proceed with the hunt, he passes by all these familiar places where Marcel carries out his routines.

With the narration style he chose, Aki Kaurismäki expresses his profound communion with the universe he describes. The style of the story serves as a praise to simplicity. When Marcel and his wife, Arletty, go back home in the last scene of the film, the return to the house itself, a flowering tree and the prospect of preparing something to eat are enough to make a joyous world in which the film may come to an end. But this joy will, however, be threatened.
An ordinary miracle

The reunion of the musician (Little Bob) and his wife are miraculous and shown as such, but in a way to force this miracle into everyday life. In the same way, the intensity of the reunion between Marcel and the miraculously-healed Arletty is toned down by the humor that Kaurismäki, again, interposes. And as for the joy of the child who recovered his freedom, no tearful lyricism is necessary: we stay in the everyday there too with Marcel inviting the Captain into his world by offering him a drink at a café. This is another way of “going home”.

The talk about the present

The distant rapport with reality goes paradoxically in hand with a remark that wants to intervene in a debate of reality. Kaurismäki was clear on this point, “My intention was to sort of talk about migrants who leave their country to take refuge in Europe.” In fact, the filmmaker also maintains a certain distance from this reality, from a stylistic point of view. As we have seen, he gives an unnatural character to the sequence of the container’s opening: the presence of the state security police force takes a more symbolic than realistic character; the directing emblemizes the confrontation (arms against unarmed people). Later on, Marcel sees this title in the headlines of a newspaper that a client is reading, “One of the container’s refugees on the run / Armed and dangerous / Vast searches are in process / Links with Al-Qaeda?” Here, a double distancing occurs: the information is written (it’s not as if Marcel would tell it himself), humor is invited like a society critic (which unquestionably assimilates a refugee to a terrorist). The same thing happens as the television in Claire’s café (which never worked before) broadcasts a report on France 3 Nord-Pas-de-Calais (credit shown at the end credits) on the dismantling of the “Jungle” of Calais, meeting place for illegal immigrants hoping to depart for Great Britain, an operation that took place in September 2009 under the authority of the Minister of Immigration, Eric Besson (whose voice is heard in the report). Marcel sees this report with Claire and Chang, who will then tell of their personal immigration experiences. But no direct comments are made about the broadcasted images. Kaurismäki guards himself here precisely from “bar talk”, of “bar-room politics”. He highlights a reality that exists, but is careful about not transforming his film to a simple debate about immigration and the “without papers” situation. While Captain Monet is called by a superior who gives him the order to work efficiently, Kaurismäki lets us hear a voice, but does not show this policeman. He introduces an abstract and blind power. The suspense that surrounds Captain Monet’s character bears power precisely on this critical representation: is Monet the servant of this faceless law, blind and, therefore, unjust? His anonymous and threatening appearance leads us to think so. But, little by little, the image of Monet evolves. Finally, one can be sure of this: beneath the sinister clothing of the captain, there is a man. And from the moment there is something human, there is hope.
Humor and feelings

Humor is invited into the dialogs in a toned-down manner, sometimes off putting. Even when Marcel is shocked that Arletty is not eating, she doesn’t say anything about the pain she suffers, but only explains, “I passed by Florence’s house at noon. There was a pot of cassoulet.” This is a lie that seems almost burlesque. Kaurismäki is not only aware of showing an embellished reality: sometimes, he even amuses himself with it, like here or then at the hospital. Humor is also used to avoid melodrama. Instead of focusing on her suffering, Arletty talks about cassoulet! Feelings are always held back here, while at the same time, being in the very center of the story: Marcel and Arletty’s love, as well as Bob’s for his wife, everyone’s affection for Idrissa. But, perhaps expressing his Nordic fiber, Kaurismäki clearly battles against sentimentalism. He holds his emotions like he holds his plans.

1) International post, n°1102, December 15, 2011.
3) Le Figaro. May 18, 2011.
EDUCATIONAL WORKSHOP

These educational activities have been created for students 14-15 years of age to prepare them for future viewing of the film in its entirety. Work can be done in their native language or in French according the students' linguistic profile.

Activity 1 : Le Havre

Looking at the map of France below, complete the boxes with the following locations:
the English Channel, the Mediterranean Sea, Paris, the Atlantic Ocean.

Havre (masculine noun)
In French, it means: Natural harbor or built pier.
This word can also be used in the expression:
« Un havre de paix »: a safe and sound refuge.

According to Le Havre’s geographic location, would you say that:

- The climate is hot. yes / no
  Explain: ________________________________

- It is a very touristic city. yes / no
  Explain: ________________________________

- There is a harbor in the city. yes / no
  Explain: ________________________________

- The city is close to Spain. yes / no
  Explain: ________________________________
Activity 2: The poster

a) Describe the two characters in the center of the image, their clothing, their posture.
b) What clues do we have about their professions? Which of the two seems more disturbing to you and why?
c) What relationship can you establish between the black child in the forefront and the two men?
d) Where does the film take place? Describe the city in the background.
Activity 3: Working with the trailer

To watch the trailer with English subtitles: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_ZjfdmvBLg4

a) What is the old man’s job? What can this demonstrate about his social status?

b) Choose the correct answers:
   According to newspaper critics, we can assume that the film:
   ☐ is sad ☐ is farfetched
   ☐ is funny ☐ is about problems of society
   ☐ is a love story ☐ is historical

c) Where does the little black child want to go? In your opinion, how come?

d) What is the policeman looking for? In your opinion, why?

e) Who hides him?

Activity 4: Thought and debate

Imagine the numerous difficulties that illegal immigrants can encounter before, during, and after their journey.

In small groups, complete the table with your hypotheses. Then, discuss them with the class.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Before the journey</th>
<th>During the journey</th>
<th>After their journey</th>
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Before the journey

During the journey

After their journey
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In French, it means: Natural harbor or built pier.

This word can also be used in the expression:

« Un havre de paix »: a refuge safe and sound.

According to Le Havre’s geographic location, would you say that:

- The climate is hot.  
  yes / no  
  Explain: The city is located in northern France.
- It is a very touristic city.  
  yes / no  
  Explain: It is not well known to foreigners.
- There is a harbor in the city.  
  yes / no  
  Explain: That’s where the city gets its name “Havre” -> Natural harbor
- The city is close to Spain.  
  yes / no  
  Explain: The city is located on the border of the English Channel and is in front of Great Britain.
Activity 2: The poster

a) Describe the two characters in the center of the image, their clothing, their posture. Answers may vary.

b) What clues do we have about their professions? Which of the two seems more disturbing to you and why? The man dressed in black looks like an inspector. At the other man’s feet, there is his shoe shine kit.

c) What relationship can you establish between the black child in the forefront and the two men? He seems to hide from them. He looks worried.

d) Where does the film take place? Describe the city in the background. In the city of Le Havre, at the harbor.
Activity 3: Working with the trailer

To watch the trailer with English subtitles: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_Zjfdmv8Lq4

a) What is the old man’s job? What can this demonstrate about his social status?
   He is a shoe shine. He seems to lead a modest life.

b) Choose the correct answers:
   According to newspaper critics, we can assume that the film:
   - ☐ is sad               ☐ is about problems of society
   - ☐ is funny            ☐ is a love story
   - ☐ is farfetched       ☐ is historical

c) Where does the little black child want to go? In your opinion, how come?
   He wants to go to London.

d) What is the policeman looking for? In your opinion, why?
   He is looking for the child to deport him.

e) Who hides him?
   The old man hides the young black boy. He wants to help him.

Activity 4: Thought and debate

Correction suggestions:

Before the journey: reasons for escaping to another country (misery, famine, repressive politics, freedom of expression, etc.), planning and payment of the trip to the “smugglers”, decision making, farewells to country of birth and family or friends, etc.

During the journey: extreme travel conditions and fear of getting caught, risk of dying or getting killed. Risks for underage children, pregnant women, and the elderly, etc.

After the journey: Finding employment illegally, language barrier (if different from mother tongue), culture shock, finding a home, homesickness, the looks from others, etc.