

# The iconography of the summer vacation in Julie Delpy's *Le Skylab* (2011)



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**Abstract:** Set over a weekend in the July summer holidays, *Le Skylab* (Julie Delpy 2011) depicts a typical family gathering in the late 1970s. On the occasion of her grandmother's birthday, eleven-year-old Albertine and her parents travel by train from Paris to spend the weekend in Brittany with her extended family. The film is loosely autobiographical and is in part an evocation of Delpy's own childhood; yet it nonetheless offers a universalised image of its milieu. Visually, Delpy's film can best be described as an impression (in the sense given the term in relation to painting) of a summer weekend spent in Brittany in which Delpy draws on a cultural storehouse of images and tropes to construct a milieu at once particular and universally western, which captures a certain time and place and also offers a more generalised and relatable representation of the summer vacation through its recognisable images and themes. Taking an iconographical approach, this article is primarily a pictorial or compositional analysis of the representation of the summer vacation in *Le Skylab*. The focus is on two main motifs or tropes of the summer vacation: the summer place and the beach. It will also consider typical tropes and themes of the summer vacation narrative including arrival, summer romance, anticipation and departure.

**Keywords:** summer, summer place, the beach, iconography, nostalgia.

**Résumé :** *Le Skylab* (Julie Delpy, 2011) se déroule le temps d'un week-end pendant les vacances d'été en juillet et dépeint une réunion familiale typique de la fin des années 1970. À l'occasion de l'anniversaire de sa grand-mère, Albertine, onze ans, et ses parents voyagent en train depuis Paris pour passer le week-end en Bretagne avec sa famille élargie. Le film est d'inspiration vaguement autobiographique et constitue en partie une évocation de la propre enfance de Julie Delpy. Il offre néanmoins une image universelle de son milieu. Le film de Julie Delpy peut être visuellement décrit comme une impression (dans le sens donné à ce terme par la tradition picturale) d'un week-end

d'été passé en Bretagne. Delpy puise dans un réservoir culturel d'images et de tropes pour construire un environnement à la fois particulier et universellement occidental, qui réussit à capter un certain temps et un certain lieu. Le film offre également une représentation plus générale des vacances d'été à laquelle les spectateurs peuvent facilement se rapporter, à travers des images et des thèmes identifiables. Adoptant une approche iconographique, cet article est avant tout une analyse picturale et compositionnelle de la représentation des vacances d'été dans *Le Skylab*. L'accent est mis sur deux motifs ou tropes principaux des vacances d'été : la maison de vacances et la plage. L'analyse porte également sur les tropes et thèmes typiques du récit des vacances d'été, comme l'arrivée, la romance estivale, l'anticipation des vacances et le départ.

**Mots-clés :** été, maison de vacances, plage, iconographie, nostalgie.

**A** CANICULAR sky, early afternoon, midsummer. A luncheon party congregates around a long table carelessly laid with a linen cloth, ceramic plates, cutlery, glasses and bottles of wine and pastis. Some are seated, some standing; all are enjoying a leisurely lunch *en plein air* amidst the trees in a sprawling country garden. The scene is awash with green – the seasonal colour of summer – in its various hues: the green-gold grass, the dark green cypress, the Veronese green and yellow-pear green foliage of poplars and elm trees, and the chartreuse green table umbrella. The atmosphere is free and relaxed and the voices of the guests overlap as the conversation moves easily from one topic to the next in the luminous dappled sunlight. In both its subject matter and its atmosphere of conviviality, this scene from Julie Delpy's *Le Skylab* (2011) recalls Pierre-Auguste Renoir's *Le Déjeuner des canotiers* (1881). In Delpy's depiction of an outdoor lunch, however, the *belle époque* details of the *mise en scène* are substituted for late 1970s period style: the straw boaters worn by Renoir's oarsmen are replaced by the straw fedoras of the bohemian street theatre performers; white cotton singlets by polyester polo shirts; the midnight blue and marine blue afternoon dresses, trimmed with white ruffles, with synthetic midi-dresses, blouses and skirts; the red and white striped awning by a green geometric print canvas table umbrella trimmed with natural cotton fringe. John Rewald described Renoir's painting as an attempt "to seize the animated outdoor mingling of people in an atmosphere glistening with sunshine and joy of living" (1973: 456). In *Le Skylab*, the guests are gathered for the birthday of the family matriarch and Delpy's scene is, like Renoir's tableau, a depiction of summer leisure; but it is also, more broadly, an episode, one among many, in the summer vacation of the eleven-year-old Albertine (Lou Alvarez). The colours, the light, and the subject matter all reference a western iconography of summer, while the particulars of the *mise en scène* locate the action of the scene in late 1970s France. This scene is one example of how Delpy composes her film, drawing on and updating pre-established tropes and motifs of summer to create a universally western vision of the summer vacation.

This article adopts an iconographical approach to Delpy's film. The theory and practice of iconography was first developed by Erwin Panofsky in relation to Renaissance art and later applied to cinema. In *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance*, Panofsky proposed a model for the analysis of Renaissance painting which corresponds to three levels or strata of meaning. For our purposes here, the second level or stratum is the one proper to iconographical analysis: identification and description of images or motifs (Panofsky, 6). Jean-Loup Bourget adopted Panofsky's model for cinema arguing that an analysis of cinema which draws on models or methods from art history is highly productive, primarily because it restores an imbalance in film studies, which has often focused on questions of narrative or plot derived from the history of literature, often neglecting the image or figure (38). Bourget also considers a reference to art history in the analysis of cinema fruitful in that films will often cite motifs, either intentionally or unintentionally, which come directly from the history of painting (40). For Bourget, nothing assures that the reference to painting is completely intentional, while at other times the reference is manifestly intended (40–1). Ed Buscombe's synonym for iconography is 'visual conventions' (Neale: 15). While there is some merit in this definition, the term is too narrow because iconography often encompasses more than just the visual, extending to more literary motifs such as narrative and character. Furthermore, these conventions are subject to historical variability. For Laurence Alloway, Panofsky's theory provided the foundation for a 'descriptive aesthetic' (qtd in Whiteley: 276) which begins with the "physical reality of the photographed world" (Alloway: 16).

What follows in this article is primarily a pictorial or compositional analysis of the representation of the summer vacation in *Le Skylab*. The focus is on two main motifs or tropes of the summer vacation: the summer place (including the typical outdoor lunch) and the beach. It will also consider typical tropes of the summer vacation narrative such as arrival and summer romance and themes such as anticipation and disappointment. The motifs, or visual and narrative references, in *Le Skylab* are at times intentional and at other times unconscious, belonging to a personal history or vision on the one hand, and a collective, specifically western cultural imaginary on the other. What this article thus proposes is an iconographical analysis of what might be called the film's 'holiday style'. *Le Skylab* demonstrates the way an individual artwork both draws on and reworks motifs from its own socio-cultural history.

Set over a weekend in the July summer holidays, *Le Skylab* depicts a typical family gathering in the late 1970s. On the occasion of the birthday of her grandmother (Bernadette Lafont), Albertine and her parents Anna (Julie Delpy) and Jean (Éric Elmosnino) travel by train from Paris

to spend the weekend in Brittany with their extended family. The film is loosely autobiographical and is in part an evocation of Delpy's own childhood; yet it nonetheless offers a universalised image both of its milieu and of summer vacations. *Le Skylab*, which might best be described as a choral family comedy drama, includes many tropes of a typical summer vacation narrative: arrival, communal outdoor lunch, outings to the beach and the disco, ghost stories, communal breakfast, and departure. At the same time Delpy offers a glimpse into the psyche of late 1970s France by exploring family dynamics within a broader socio-political and cultural context which includes the legacy of May 1968, second wave feminism, and the Algerian War. Filmed over six weeks in Brittany during the summer of 2010, *Le Skylab* in its evocation of the 1970s has been considered a nostalgia film. Jay Weissberg described it as "a nostalgia ride back to 1979" (2011), Isabelle Regnier notes the film's nostalgic tone (2011), Antoine Duplan remarks that the film "*remue la nostalgie des étés d'antan*" (2011), Peter Bradshaw calls it "a nostalgic period piece" (2013) and *The Hollywood Reporter* notes its "air of wistful nostalgia" (2011). Indeed, Tim Bergfelder writes:

narratives of cherished childhood and teenage memories are part of a broader nostalgic tendency that pervades popular European cinema in the 2000s. A particular focus over the past decade has been the 1960s and 1970s, revived and worked through cinematically in a number of different ways. (2014: 37).

However, *Le Skylab* constitutes more than a simple nostalgia film and such a reading tends to gloss over the way a utopian vision of the past is continuously disrupted in the film by frequent foregrounding of the socio-political climate, its mores and values, conflict, and disappointment. While close attention is paid to periodisation at the level of *mise en scène* and dialogue, including fashion, technology, and cultural references, Delpy's use of a framing device in particular pushes the film beyond mere periodisation to navigate a negotiation of the past, time, memory and nostalgia.

Visually, Delpy's film can best be described as an impression (in the sense given the term in relation to painting) of a summer weekend spent in Brittany in which Delpy draws on a cultural storehouse of images and tropes to construct a milieu at once culturally specific and more broadly western; which captures a certain time and place, and also offers a more generalised and relatable representation through the specificity of its images and themes. Critical reception of the film noted this dual aspect. Lisa Nesselson reads Delpy's focus on countryside gatherings and summer holidays with their attendant feasting and drinking as quintessentially French:

The French, after all, make films about summer holidays and weekends in the country the way Hollywood makes movies about losers overcoming obstacles to become winners. There is much greeting of aunts, uncles, cousins, grandmothers and near-endless eating and drinking. (2011)

Nesselson describes *Le Skylab* as “French-to-the-core” arguing that it “can take its place beside Louis Malle’s *Milou en Mai* [...] as a time capsule of French life” while nonetheless conceding that the film is “marbled with universal touches” (2011). A simultaneous Frenchness and universality was also noted by Duplan: “*Tous les clichés du genre sont reconduits sans vergogne. Chacun est invité à reconnaître les siens dans cette famille stéréotypée jusqu’à la caricature, de regretter le bon vieux temps de la rengaine et des premiers baisers, et L’Eté indien de Joe Dassin.*” (2011).

*Le Skylab* is not just a straightforward period film. It is, rather, ostensibly a series of recollections of Albertine (Karin Viard) who is taking a train trip to the site of her childhood summer vacation with her husband and young children. The film opens in a contemporary setting with the family boarding a train in Paris bound for Brittany and depicts the mundane problems of holiday train travel (finding a seat together, occupying the children, dealing with uncooperative fellow passengers). When Albertine finally settles into her seat, the soft light through the train window sets off a chain of associations in which a childhood memory of summer vacations is evoked. Thus, the frame narrative transitions from the present to the past by means of the Proustian device of involuntary memory. Over a mid-shot of Albertine, the following lines of dialogue are faintly heard: “Albertine, watch out for cold-water shock!”; “Albertine, keep the brown crabs” and “Titine, sing a song!” and the singing of *Joyeux Anniversaire*. This is followed by the superimposition of a shot of the face of the young Albertine onto the face of the adult Albertine. The camera then tracks out to show the young Albertine seated in a train compartment with her maternal grandmother, Mémé (Emmanuelle Riva), and her parents. This transition establishes the adult Albertine as the subject of the remembrance and her younger self as the object. The action of the remembrance is thus technically mediated through the eyes of the young Albertine; however, her absence from certain scenes often disrupts subjective remembrance. This shift between the subjective and the objective, between mediation and omniscience, allows Delpy to explore certain issues of the period in a more meaningful and nuanced way than may have been possible solely through the eyes of the child Albertine. Commenting on Delpy’s reconstruction of the late 1970s, Regnier writes:

Loin de l’imagerie conservée dans le formol qui caractérise tant de films contemporains, la reconstitution qu’elle opère séduit pour le

*parfum personnel qui y flotte. Bourré de fantaisie, ce passé n'est visiblement pas sorti d'une consultation de revues d'époque mais de son esprit.* (2011)

While a tension or contradiction remains between the frame narrative and the film proper which is never wholly resolved, the viewer is encouraged to read the film as spontaneous remembrance: what follows as the film proper is, as Walter Benjamin remarked of Proust, “not a life as it actually was, but a life as it was remembered by the one who had lived it” (1968: 202).

*Le Skylab* is primarily an evocation of lost time structured around memories of summer vacations pieced together into a pastiche of images and tropes which transcend period detail. When considering the representation of the summer vacation in *Le Skylab*, it is important to consider both the meaning of the term ‘vacation’ as such and the specific site of Albertine’s vacation: the summer place. For Tara K. Parmiter, vacations are “situated in a specific place for an extended period of time” as opposed to travel which involves “continued movement and often disconnection rather than connection.” (2006: 15). We can consider Albertine and her parents as vacationers as in “people who vacate their homes during the summer months and retreat to a more pastoral or natural environment.” (Parmiter, 2006: 17). Parmiter argues that while she considers vacations “more rooted” they are by no means motionless (2006: 16) and there is much movement in and around the summer house in *Le Skylab*, including a trip to the beach and the disco. In general terms, vacations are typically taken in the summer and thus carry with them a seasonal iconography conducive to cultural memory. Michael Kammen notes that writers tended to “ascribe distinctive sounds” to each season and that summer has typically been associated with “the racket made by droning cicadas, locusts, and crickets.” (2004: 151). Kammen further points out that “since the Renaissance, at least, artists have associated certain colors with each season” and claims that the “most traditional associations have been green with late spring and early summer; golden yellow with mid- and late summer” (2004: 151). In terms of site, the summer house has a particular place in the recent cultural history of the West. While not strictly a summer house in the sense of a site reserved for vacations, the home of Tante Suzette (Michelle Goddet) located in the forest near Saint-Pierre in the Morbihan department of Brittany, functions as such for the young Albertine. Parmiter uses the term “summer place” to “to signify a place away from home that one visits for an extended period in the summer” (2006: 2). For Parmiter, the summer place

combines a complicated set of associations: it is both a seasonal dwelling and a site of belonging; it offers both escape and relief from



daily life and a heightened understanding of the everyday; it encourages leisure and frivolity but also deep introspection. This complex, liminal space mirrors the comforts of the domestic home but reflects back on its limitations; in a way, the summer place is the home's wilder double. (2006: 3)

The summer place can also offer the “possibilities of escape, romance [and] renewal” (Parmiter, 2006: 2). Orvar Lofgren claims that summer cottages constitute a utopia “shaped by several forms of longing” (1999: 114). Most importantly, these include, for Lofgren,

the nostalgia for paradise lost, the idea of a golden age, when summer life was simple and affordable, and families took long vacations. Such longings feed on the many descriptions of ‘traditional’ summer life of wonderful picnics, sailing, straw hats, and white linen dresses. (1999: 114-115)

For Lofgren, summer houses are frequently sites of nostalgia and melancholy which are connected to summer as a season: “One of the main characteristics of summer vacations or summers on the whole is their hopeless brevity. Here is a utopia that we start to lose already at the beginning of our vacation. Summers are always drawing to a close” (1999: 115). Thus, for Lofgren, summer lends itself to memory precisely because its “bittersweet” passing “fuels the strong element of nostalgia for those seemingly endless school vacations in a distant past”; summer is not only a return to a simpler form of life, but also “a return to childhood” (1999: 115). Delpy depicts this return visually by having the adult Albertine travel backwards on the train.

### The summer place

There are two key spaces in the summer vacation narrative of *Le Skylab*: the family home belonging to Tante Suzette where the extended family congregates (Albertine's summer place) and the beach. In addition, other action in the film is set in the train carriage, on the platform at the St Malo train station, in the car driving from the station and to the beach, at the local hall which hosts the youth disco, and the tent Albertine and her cousins sleep out in on the grounds of the summer place. All these spaces are liminal or impermanent.

Our introduction to the summer place is by way of an establishing shot. There is a cut from Albertine and her family arriving from the station by car to a wide shot of the house and grounds. Joe Dassin's wistful

'*Été Indien*' from 1975 (in which he evokes fond memories of a brief love affair) plays on the car radio. The composition is well-balanced, the shot divided in half horizontally with the bottom half occupied by the house and garden and the top half by treetops and sky. Delpy carefully stages the elements of the *mise en scène*: in the lower left-hand corner two women and a small child are setting the makeshift dining table; right of centre in the midground a plume of smoke rises gently from a firepit; in the right-hand corner in the midground a small child plays on a swing set; in the centre midground another child rides his bike across the frame, presaging the appearance of the car. The house and its grounds with its assemblage of objects (swing sets, tables, firepit, deckchairs, bicycles) and bodies in motion are set against a forest of tall and verdant trees against a pale blue summer sky with brilliant clouds. The shot functions in much the same way as Malcolm Andrews argues for Monet's *Meadow with Poplars* (1875): "The passage in to the landscape's space is simple and alluring. Whether or not this is a particular place, local features and forms are loosely generic rather than insistently specific. This is an experience of place that can be totalized." (1999: 18). If this outdoor establishing shot is more generic than specific, the interior of the summer place is an opportunity for Delpy to clearly establish the period of the film in visual terms. The interior features many 1970s design elements such as beige pebble stone pattern linoleum flooring, high-back brown vinyl and chrome or off-white vinyl and timber dining chairs, a carved dark-wood cabinet, indoor plants, gold, white and brown geometric print wallpaper, Duralex amber glassware, a sea-green velvet sofa, and a television set typical of the era on which is shown coverage of the Skylab threat and news of the upcoming French elections.

The scenes shot in the gardens of the summer place capture the pure delight of a lazy summer afternoon following a long lunch: a group of men, old and young, playing pétanque on the gravel driveway; the two grandmothers seated in folding aluminium deckchairs shaded by an outdoor umbrella chatting, knitting and doing word puzzles; a husband and wife sitting in the shade of a tree, smoking, reading and talking; four women sitting around the lunch table playing cards while a baby in a highchair at the head of the table looks on. Of her vision for her film, Delpy remarks:

From the onset, I didn't want a classical narrative thread but very colorful and intriguing characters in order to tell the story with very few dramatic elements. For me, you can express very powerful things with simple moments from everyday life, when hardly anything happens. (2011)

The mosaic of captured moments is reminiscent of the approach of the French impressionists whose art consisted of capturing fleeting moments of everyday life:



The bright and mobile style of these impressionist painters, the simple and trivial scenes from everyday life they depicted, [were] so distant from the lofty historical and romanticized mythical or romanticized rural scenes of academic painters (Célestin and Dalmolin, 2016: 109).

Nearly all the impressionists painted gardens; in particular, they often also depicted figures reading in their gardens or the outdoors, including Monet's *Adolphe Monet in the Garden of Le Coteau at Sainte-Adresse* (1867), Manet's *Young Woman in a Garden* (1880) and *Woman Reading* (1880-81). Describing impressionist subject choice, Russell Ash remarks that they pursued "subjects beyond simple landscapes, and their works record such everyday leisure activities as boating and bathing, the pleasures of dining in sun-dappled gardens, outings into the countryside, picnics and walks through flower-strewn meadows." (1995: 10-11). René Gimpel noted that the impressionists "show their particular talent and attain the summit of their art when they paint our French Sundays [...] kisses in the sun, picnics, complete rest, not a thought about work, unashamed relaxation." (qtd. Ash, 1995: 37). Moreover, for Roger Célestin and Eliane Dalmolin, "more than scenery itself, light was crucial to the impressionists" (2016: 109). Delpy too explains the importance of lighting for *Le Skylab*: "I wanted the light to be bright, cheerful, and solar, to reflect the joy emanating from the film shoot and the characters." (2011). As part of her impressionistic evocation of summer leisure, Delpy includes a shot of Anna and Jean on a picnic blanket, leaning against the trunk of a tree reading and smoking. The composition has a distinctly pictorial quality. It is divided in half vertically by the tree trunk with Jean facing the camera directly and Anna seated in profile. With their knees bent to rest their books on, the acute angle formed by their legs mirror the frame of a swing set in the midground. The subject matter is generic, but the specificity of the image comes from the costume and props: Anna's sleeveless blue and white gingham midi dress and Jean's drill cotton pants and Hawaiian shirt layered over a rust-coloured singlet. The colour of the clothing contrasts strongly with the various hues of green of their surroundings and recalls Monet's use of contrasting colour in *Springtime* (1872) to create a focal point. To this scene Delpy adds a playful and personal periodising reference: Jean is reading a play by Copi, *Les Quatre jumelles* (1973), which Delpy's father Albert staged in Paris at the Lucernaire-Forum, Théâtre Rouge in 1980.

The course of the outdoor luncheon is interrupted twice by a summer storm, driving the gathering inside, carrying food, plates, glasses and even at one point, Mémé chariot style asleep in her chair. Here Delpy draws on a common trope of summer in the arts: the summer storm. The most famous example in music is Vivaldi's 'Summer', but the motif also

commonly appears in poems, including ‘Summer Storm’ by James Russell Lowell, ‘Summer Storm’ by Sara Teasdale, and ‘A Drop fell on the Apple Tree (794)’ by Emily Dickinson. The most apposite reference for Delpy’s film, however, is from Proust: “But what mattered rain or storm? In summer, bad weather is no more than a passing fit of superficial ill-temper expressed by the permanent, underlying fine weather” (1943: 208). Here Proust uses the summer storm as a metaphor for holiday familial dynamics in much the same way as Delpy uses the holiday mood to maintain equilibrium and harmony of the family unit even when disagreement or conflict threaten to tear it apart.

## The beach



Perhaps the site most commonly associated with summer vacations in western iconography is the beach. The beach is a key motif in many depictions of summer in the visual and narrative arts. Beach scenes were a favourite subject of the French impressionists and post-impressionists. In French cinema, the beach is a popular locale in films set during summer vacations, such as *Les vacances de Monsieur Hulot* (Jacques Tati 1953), *La Baie des Anges* (Jacques Demy 1963), Éric Rohmer’s *Pauline à la Plage* (1983) and *Conte d’été* (1996) – also filmed on the beaches of Brittany –, and *Été 85* (François Ozon 2020). In *Le Skylab* the visit to the beach occurs approximately mid-way through the film and in this sense functions as the film’s apex or culmination to which everything prior builds and after which slowly descends. Though it occupies only eight and a half minutes of screen time (in real time it covers several hours) the beach sequence contains some of the most memorable and finely wrought scenes in the film. Following a short repose after the long midday lunch, the beach trip is announced: “*La familia, on va se baigner ?*” Instead of cutting straight to the beach, Delpy builds the anticipation by filming the car ride to the beach through the countryside. Indeed, anticipation is key to the experience of summer vacations and Delpy achieves it by extending the temporal duration between expected events while at the same time maintaining the space for spontaneity which is also an important existential feature of the summer vacation. In the car ride to the beach, for example, the spontaneous telling of the fable of the sea bream and the mermaid both heightens and alleviates the anticipation of the arrival at the beach; a space for spontaneity is carved out from within the otherwise static and transitional space of the car. Delpy further delays the arrival at the beach with a cut to the family home, a shot of Mamie, Mémé, Tante Linette (Aure Atika) and Tante Suzette playing Belote in the garden. This brief interlude juxtaposes the cool green shades of the garden (a dark forest pine tree, vivid green belote board, chartreuse green umbrella and green-gold grass) and its

sounds (birds chirping, water lightly sprinkling as Tonton Hubert (Albert Delpy) hoses the rose bushes) with the pale sky, yellow sand and sounds of the beach of the following shot.

The beach sequence opens with a shot of a stretch of beach beneath a luminous pale blue sky dotted with wispy clouds. Figures are seated nearby but apart, reclining on beach towels or lounging under umbrellas, their straw beach bags and belongings scattered about them like the beige rocks on the golden sand. A group of beachgoers stream out from the dusty-green coastal tussock grasses of the dunes bordered by a weathered wooden picket fence. The harmony of the shot is achieved by the sunlight: bright in the clear and vivid sky and reflected upwards from the yellow sand. It is an illustration of the happy idleness of a French seaside summer. The apparent spontaneity of the composition is carefully balanced by Delpy's decorative *mise en scène*. The frame is divided horizontally – three-quarters sand and dunes, and one quarter sky – and diagonally by a cream beach umbrella in the mid-ground and the line of children as they emerge from the feathery coastal grasses of the dunes and run toward the sea. Touches of blue guide the eye, from Anna's dress to scattered towels to beach paraphernalia and a striped canvas foldout beach chair set in relief against the golden sand. Delpy builds the anticipation of the first view of the water through a series of shots of the sand and dunes: the first shot of the beach, a cut to a mid-shot of the children hurriedly stripping down to their bathers, a cut to a mid-shot of the adults and older children calmly yet purposefully strolling along the beach scouting a place to set up for the afternoon, a cut to a mid-shot of the young children sprinting towards the water framed against a background of sand and rock, a cut back to the adults laying out their beach towels and putting up their umbrellas and finally a cut back to the children arriving at the water's edge accompanied by the sound of breaking waves and squeals of delight. Through this series of seven shots (from the first shot of the beach to the first glimpse at the water) Delpy establishes not only a scene of idyllic leisure but also the youthful thrill of arriving at the beach and plunging into the water.

Following this opening sequence, Delpy goes on to construct a series of carefully staged scenes which draw on key works of art and popular culture to establish a recognisable – and at times self-referential or ironic – iconography of the beach in summer. In the first of these shots, Delpy references the beachscapes of the impressionists and post-impressionists, taking a broad, sweeping view of the sea from a higher vantage point. The composition is spare yet carefully balanced and closely resembles Paul Signac's *Port of Saint-Cast* (1890) painted on the Brittany coast. This shot of the beach has a softer, impressionistic palette when compared with the earlier, sharper shots. The colours are more muted and the pale sky and sea, washed out by the light, appear to merge at the horizon line, while

closer to shore, the delicate blue-green of the sea shimmers in the mid-afternoon light and the white caps of the waves and the sand are tinted a golden hue. The scattered figures, almost in silhouette, splashing in the water in the lower right hand of the frame, are as dark as the rocky cliff that juts out in the high midground of the right-hand of the frame. The arrangement of the elements of sea, sky, sand, gently lapping waves, and the distant rocky cliffs, gives the shot composition a balanced and timeless harmony while conveying all the spontaneity of a moment captured in time. If the seascape and the bathers at a distance and in silhouette seem timeless, the awareness that this is a point of view shot from Albertine's seventeen-year-old cousin Christian (Vincent Lacoste), reclining on the sand wearing only tight, red and black striped speedos and aviator sunglasses, anchors the action to the film's present. Another shot in which Delpy establishes clear iconographical connections with images of summer vacations is the staging of a shot of Tante Monique (Noémie Lvovsky) posing with hands on hips, wearing a black bathing suit, standing beside a large colourful striped beach umbrella, gazing out across to the water. This shot references the brightly coloured travel posters of the 1920s and 1930s promoting seaside resorts along the Atlantic and Mediterranean coasts. In particular, it recalls the elegantly posed women in black swimsuits in Roger Broders' posters '*Le Soleil toute l'année sur la Côte d'Azur*' (c.1931), '*La Place de Calvi. Corse.*' (1928) and '*Antibes*' (c.1928). The strong design of Delpy's shot – the diagonal lines created by the umbrella's pole and stripes, and Monique's bended arm and the bold colour palette (the vibrant cherry red, marine blue, sunshine yellow and aqua blue of the beach umbrella) – mirrors the composition, colour, and style of these typical travel posters. Elsewhere Delpy's choreography of elements of her beachscape *mise en scène* – brightly coloured beach towels and discarded clothing in 1970s geometric and floral prints scattered haphazardly amongst beach umbrellas, straw beach bags, yellow and red floating devices and beach toys and bodies in equally bright swimsuits in 1970s palette and pattern lying and sitting on the beach – also recall the bathers in Agnès Varda's *Du côté de la côte* (1958). Moreover, Delpy's framing in certain shots of multiple bodies in fragmented form recalls Varda's documentary which creates "incongruous hybrids of bodies" (Álvarez López and Martin, 2018).

Fiona Handyside argues that the beach is "a transitional space between nature and culture, a liminal space that accrues its own liberties and constraints" (2011: 92). It is at the beach that the young Albertine is permitted to explore themes of love and death: she reflects on the imminent death of the crabs they will eat that night and of the threat of destruction which hangs over them all in the image of the Skylab space station; passes over the barrier between culture and nature depicted as the barrier between the public beach and the naturist beach; and finds a love object in the son of a family friend. Indeed, an integral part of many summer

vacation narratives is the encounter with a crush or adolescent love object. The association of summer with both youth and romance has a long history in western art and culture. Kammen writes that from “antiquity through to the nineteenth century” summer has “commonly meant courtship for young couples.” (2004:1). Kammen cites the “immensely popular lithographs” by Currier and Ives *The Four Seasons of Life* (1868). These lithographs depict the season-human life cycle thus: spring as childhood (“The Season of Joy”), summer as youth (“The Season of Love”), autumn as middle age (“The Season of Strength”) and winter as old age (“The Season of Rest”). The summer print depicts a romantic scene: a young woman gazes yearningly at a young man as they stroll hand in hand along a country lane, shaded by the green leaves of the season, a field of wheat beside them. Two four-line stanzas of a verse are imprinted beneath the image, which begins with the line “Life’s summer comes” and ends “more bright the sunshine in the skies above, /As hand in hand, and heart to heart, we share/the sweet mysterious power of youthful love.” In his *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), Northrop Frye divides the four traditional literary genres into four seasons: spring as comedy, summer as romance, autumn as tragedy, and winter as irony and satire. The summer romance trope is a feature of many films, from earlier films such as *Une partie de campagne* (Jean Renoir, 1936) to post-war Hollywood films such as *Roman Holiday* (William Wyler 1953) and *Gidget* (Paul Wendkos 1959) to more recent films such as *Moonrise Kingdom* (Wes Anderson 2012), *Call Me by Your Name* (Luca Guadagnino 2017) and *Été 85* (Ozon 2020). Even in films which ostensibly stage all the seasons, such as François Ozon’s *Jeune & Jolie* (2013), it is the beach which is the typical setting for the fleeting summer romance and sexual awakening of its protagonist Isabelle (Marine Vacth) while she is on vacation with her family; while the iconic film *Grease* (Randal Kleiser 1977) ostensibly follows an entire school year, it is the beach during summer in which Sandy (Olivia Newton John) and Danny (John Travolta) first fall in love, recounted through the song ‘Summer Nights’.

In *Le Skylab*, the first blossom of young romance takes place when Albertine and her father, Jean, stumble onto a nearby nudist beach while looking for crabs. They run into Jean’s friend Chantal (Sandrine Bодenes). Albertine is visibly embarrassed and wants to leave until she sees Chantal’s son Matthieu (Anthony Kimmerle) walking toward them from the shore. Delpy shoots the encounter as a series of shot reverse shots between Albertine and the newfound object of her desire, in a reversal of the male gaze usually associated with such shots. Indeed, this sequence is a reworking along gendered lines of the famous sequence from *Dr No* (1962) in which Bond (Sean Connery) watches a bikini-clad Ursula Andress emerge from the sea wearing goggles and carrying a conch shell. It also recalls the iconic image of Juliette (Brigitte Bardot) emerging from the sea in Roger



Vadim's *Et Dieu créa la femme* (1956). In this restaging of the birth of Venus, Matthieu emerges from the waves and shakes out his long, wavy, blonde locks. The shots are in slow motion, tinged with the golden hue of the late afternoon sun and accompanied by a non-diegetic reprise of Joe Dassin's 'Été Indien' in which a sultry saxophone solo builds to a crescendo of youthful desire. The song is a leitmotif for Albertine's summer romance narrative which appeared on the car radio earlier in the film when Albertine first focusses her romantic attention on her young uncle. The exchange on the beach lasts only twenty-five seconds and is as fleeting as the young couple's summer romance which will culminate in a slow dance at the disco that night to Gilbert O'Sullivan's 'Alone Again (Naturally)' from 1972 before quickly fading.

## Conclusion


According to Lofgren, "one of the main characteristics of summer vacations or summers on the whole is their hopeless brevity. Here is a utopia that we start to lose already at the beginning of our vacations. Summers are always drawing to a close" (149). Like other films which deal with representations of summer vacations, *Le Skylab* depicts sites of brevity and impermanence such as the summer house and the beach with its attendant and fleeting romance. Delpy achieves this via the establishment of a recognisable iconography of summer vacations drawn primarily from France's cultural history but also extending beyond this to include more generally recognisable images and motifs. The film is, however, held together thematically by a central formalising image and periodising prop: the eponymous Skylab space station which threatens to crash to earth somewhere in France. Delpy puts it this way:

I wanted to talk about a family reunion over which hangs a threat, the Skylab, which ends up falling very far from where they are but which is ever present throughout the film. It is important to Albertine because everything could be destroyed – her childhood, her family, her first pangs of love, etc. In a certain way she undergoes another cataclysm: she falls in love and leaves childhood behind. (2011)

The Skylab space station is not only a "*fantasme occidental de destruction collective*" (Duplan 2011), but is also, according to Regnier, a way of condensing an era into a single signifier which best captures the mood of the time (2011). Thus, to the impermanence of summer vacations is added a more general existential sense of impermanence, tempered only by the enduring images of summer Delpy draws on to construct her film.



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