Teaching French Language and Culture with French Feature Films on Videocassettes

Because of the videocassette recorder (VCR) and the increasing availability of reasonably priced French feature films on videocassette in NTSC (American television standard), teachers now have at their disposal an array of useful video documents to assist them in teaching French language and culture.

In this article, the author examines the conceptual framework for teaching with film on videocassette and discusses film in the classroom in terms of the following: as an authentic look at culture in general and as a revelation of verbal and nonverbal communication dynamics in particular.

Conceptual Framework for Teaching with Film on Videotape

Some years ago, William Markey (1976) wrote a short essay on using films in French language and literature courses. "Commercial film," he said, "...offers the advantage of being closer to reality in that it communicates by visual elements as well as oral ones, and is generally based on a strong narrative line" (p. 731).

Subsequently, Henry A. Garrity (1981) reported that he was able to generate great interest in French by introducing feature-length French films into the classroom. Garrity (and his colleagues) spent about 16 hours of class time in covering a film and concluded the following: "The choice of a feature-length film provided a continuing and developing story on which to base classroom conversation . . . the conversation generated by the film did away with the artificial conversation that can often discourage lively exchange in the classroom . . . students benefit from hearing French spoken at a normal rate of speed" (pp. 41- 42).

More recently, Toby Tamarkin (1986) has reported on the use of film on videotape in the foreign language classroom; she mentions some obvious advantages: "Feature films," she maintains, "are motivational...[they] provide an authentic look at culture—the values, daily customs, clothing styles, idioms, music, and goods" (p. 26).

Film as Mirror of Cultural Elements. In the framework of providing an authentic look at culture, Thomas M. Carr (1980)— author and expert on contemporary French culture—also finds pedagogical value in using French films. Using Clyde Kluckhohn's definition of culture as "the total way of life of a people, the social legacy the individual acquires from his group," Carr finds a feature film that takes place in a modern setting useful in analyzing three ranges of cultural data, namely, 1) the routine elements of life; 2) information about the functioning of social roles and institutions; and, 3) the kinds of behaviors and feelings that are appropriate in various circumstances (p. 359).

Nonverbal Dynamics in Film on Videotape

Rex C. Dahl (1984), in his theoretical discussion of culture, delineates seven "realms of nonverbal cultural signs" (p. 69) that merit citation because of their usefulness in analyzing culture via the feature film. Dahl's cultural signs constitute an especially valuable grid, or checklist, to refer to while sorting out the specifically French aspects of what one sees in a film. Dahl's seven realms of nonverbal cultural signs are as follows: 1) **Proxemics** which he defines as the ways in which people structure and use space in their daily life; 2) **Chronemics** which concern how one communicates through the use of time, i.e., how a culture relates to time; 3) **Physical Appearance** which deals with the appearance of the human body, such as body shape, height and weight, clothing, accessories, and cosmetics; 4) **Kinesics** which is relevant to the visual aspects of behavior; they include movements and posture, gestures, facial expressions and eye behavior; 5) **Paralanguage** which concerns the use of the voice in communication; it focuses on how we say something rather than what we say, and it is the real element of communication as opposed to the verbal element; 6) **Haptics** which is the use of touch in the communication process; physical contact transmits various meanings in different cultures; and 7) **Artifacts** which have to do with the use of the environment, objects within it, and how these affect the communication process (p. 69).

Joining Dahl and others, Philip Riley (1976) has established a conceptual framework for teaching French language and culture with films that teachers will also find useful. Concentrating specifically on "the role of the visual channel of communication" (p. 80), he states that "there are a large number of nonverbal, extra-linguistic sources of information and meaning" (p. 84).

Deictics. Concentrating on the nonverbal, Riley defines deictics as the process of "pointing at objects that are physically present in the communication situation. We refer to them without naming them" (p. 85). Moreover, Riley recommends that learners of a foreign language ought to be prepared "for the highly allusive deictic discourse usual in face-to-face interaction" (p. 87).

As many teachers of French know, deictic discourse is very prevalent in French. It can easily be found and isolated in a French film and used to encourage student comments and study. Pointing in typically French style with eyes or chin and pointing with index finger or outstretched hand are also quite common.

Turn-Taking and Interrupting. Closely linked to nonverbal behavior are Riley's turn-taking and interrupting speech behaviors. In analyzing French films, we can stop to view many examples of these behaviors: We can also scrutinize the gestures and touching behaviors that help effectuate turn-taking and interrupting.

Modal Function of Nonverbal Behavior. According to Riley, the modal function of nonverbal behavior covers "all the different ways which are available to an actor (speaker) to signal the extent to which he is committed to the literal meaning, the propositional content, of his utterances: is he serious, joking, enthusiastic and so on" (p. 90).

For example, irony and sarcasm are often detectable by observing modal nonverbal behaviors such as posture, gestures, or facial expression. While viewing a film on videotape, we can pause to observe and explicate these aspects of communication; in turn, we can discuss the extent to which they are culture-bound, that is to say, we can discuss how typically French a given way of signaling sincerity is or is not.

Four Categories of Nonverbal Behaviors. Stating that "some non-verbal behaviors at least can be highly conventional, systemic, and semantically precise" (p. 92), Riley establishes four categories of nonverbal behaviors (gestures) based on their communicative function. This useful typology of gestures can serve as an inventory of "things to look for" while viewing French films: 1) **Emblems** which are described as usually functioning as verbal surrogates and include gestures such as "Thumbs up" or the "V-

sign;" 2) **Illustrators** which are gestures related to the propositional content of the message ("It was this sort of shape..."); 3) **Enactions** which are gestures related to the illocutionary force of the communication act (Beckoning to command, for example as in "Come here."; and, 4) **Batons** which are those behaviors related to the prosodic characteristics of the message such as rhythm and tempo.

Teachers might find the concept of "batons" intriguing and fruitful, especially when comparing communication in English and in French. When viewing French natives in a film, we can note the ways in which the stress system and intonation are related to body and facial movements. For example, instead of trying to explain in words alone, we can *see* that the movements of the hands, even the whole body, correspond precisely to the production of a stressed syllable; even eye movements are often synchronized to the pronunciation of the final syllable in a breath group. These movements punctuate, as it were, the speech flow. The prosodic features of rising and falling intonation curves are often also manifested in eyebrows, chin, and arm movements.

Kinesics. In feature films, we have a perfect opportunity to observe kinesics or body language. While viewing a film, we can stop to focus on scenes which depict basic differences between French and American gait, demeanor, ways of holding oneself, and walking. Students can readily *see* that the French are generally more erect and stiff than Americans as they sit, stand, walk, and talk. Americans tend to swing their arms and sway back and forth far more than do the French. Moreover, Americans are more likely to slouch, lean back, and spread their bodies out by stretching their arms out on the backs of furniture pieces than are the French.

Faces. Much can be learned by focusing on faces in French films, both with respect to the facial expression and the vigorous mouth movements associated with the speaking of French. Just as a French person's entire body is generally more rigid and tense than is the American's, a similar tenseness is perceivable in the face—not necessarily nervous tension but muscle tension. Students can easily see that the muscles around the mouth and lips are harder at work in speaking French than in speaking English. This may explain in part why it is difficult for Americans to pronounce French in an acceptable and comprehensible manner. By freeze framing a character's face during the formation of rounded vowels in such expressions as "Tu en veux deux?", students can practice repeating these sounds with proper intonation and facial movements.

As will be readily apparent, questions like the one cited above involve more than just the lips; the eyes, eyebrows, chin and hands are also very likely to reinforce the intonation pattern and show that a question is being asked while, at the same time, revealing the degree of sincerity and enthusiasm of the speaker.

Other facial expressions that can be isolated in French films and "frozen" are those that express the entire range of human emotions: anger, surprise, skepticism, boredom, impatience, exasperation, etc. With teacher guidance, students can explore what emotions and feelings characters are expressing and feeling at a given moment.

Hands. The hand movements of French people can be analyzed in all their expressiveness in films on videotape because of the pause-and-repeat features of videotape machines.

Often, Americans do not realize how crucial hand movements are in French communication until hand gestures are singled out and examined carefully in terms of frequency and variety. Then, and often only then, does the importance of hands in French communication "hit home." Once isolated and analyzed—with the help of the videotape—many hand movements can be studied both for recognition and imitation. For example, students can *see how* the French use their hands to get someone's attention with "Salut!", "Viens ici!", "Chut!", "Tu es fou!", "Va-t'en!", "Non!" Furthermore, the clasping together of the tip of the thumb and index finger to signify insistence or preciseness can also be studied and imitated.

Eye Contact. Eye contact is as expressive in French culture (perhaps more so) as it is in American culture. In French films, by paying particular attention to the eyes of the characters, students can learn to interpret the communication of the eyes. Of particular interest is the study of contradictory communication when the eyes, for example, send one message, while the words convey the opposite meaning.

Proxemics. The use of space by cultures is a fascinating phenomenon. In French films, students have a unique opportunity to isolate and study how close to each other characters are standing, depending upon their degree of intimacy. Moreover, a comparison of distances maintained by Americans under similar circumstances can be both instructive and entertaining. For example, it is not uncommon to encounter many scenes in French films where adult strangers meet and begin to converse while standing less than 24 inches apart. Upon asking American students how they would react to such conditions, we are likely to hear that they would feel ill at ease. Often in probing more deeply, we may learn that they feel uncomfortable "that close" because of real or imagined odors. This observation could lead to a discussion of differences in levels of concern with personal hygiene from country to country, or from one socio-economic level to another within the same country. Discussion questions that often developed in this context are as follows: How do olfactory sensations common in France compare with those in the U.S.A.? How does it smell in a crowded elevator, bus, or subway in America as compared to those in France? How concerned are people with odors?

Haptics. In almost any French film that shows humans interacting, we see innumerable examples of haptics or people **touching** in ways that, at first, always seem alien to Americans. Related to proxemics, touching behavior can be scrutinized with great success in French films. An analysis of haptics often leads to an interesting comparison between cultures.

Verbal Communication Dynamics in Film on Videotape

Useful as the nonverbal cultural taxonomies and typologies are, they are not the only aspects of culture that lend themselves to study, analysis, and imitation via film: Teachers using film on videotape will find that this visual channel also affords them excellent opportunities to give equal emphasis to verbal communication dynamics such as greetings, leave-taking, little words that natives use, pausing/fillers, asking, speaking, listening, writing, reading, testing, vocabulary, and slang.

Greeting and Leave-Taking Procedures. Many of the little conventional rituals of daily life in a French environment are unfamiliar to Americans. With films on videotape, these conversational rituals can be isolated in a fast-moving story line and studied as long as necessary.

Little conversational rituals of daily life include greeting and leave-taking procedures. Even though these conversational rituals are normally treated at the very beginning of an elementary French course, many features of this authentic contact between natives are far more easily studied when seen and heard on the screen. What students are likely to learn from seeing people greeting one another in films is that the French say the other person's name or mention a title (Monsieur, Madame, etc.) more often than Americans do, but not always. The nuances involved in the use of "bonjour" as opposed to "salut" and the *tu/vous* alternative are also more dramatically observable on film, as are introductions.

Little Words That Natives Use. Among the many factors in conversational management in French that students can pick up from films depicting encounters are those little words that natives use but which are rarely found in textbooks. For example, on film, a character may say, "Eh! Oh!" either to get someone's attention (roughly equivalent to "Hey!") or to express objection to what has just been said or done. Another example is the phrase "Ca va pas, non!?" which is the approximate equivalent of "Are you crazy?" or "You can't get away with that!" Moreover, the repeated use of *Ecoute* to interrupt or to express objection to what has been said or implied can be seen and analyzed via film.

Pausing and Conversational Filler. French pause behavior and the correct use of conver-

sational fillers as used "spontaneously" by natives can be studied via film at length. A comparison of pausing in American speech often alerts students to their overuse of *uh* and *um* as conversational fillers. Directing students' attention to the use in context of the basic French equivalents, such as *euh, eh ben, voyons,* and others, often encourages them to confront this deeply ingrained "uh-um" American speech pattern.

Asking Questions. A topic that nearly every French textbook used in America deals with is that of asking questions. Often, the treatment of this topic is unrealistic and inadequate, especially in the informal spoken French. Granted, in a certain number of common fixed expressions, the inversion form is, indeed, the norm. However, when students study a film with informal conversational situations, they will also notice that often, in these settings, the question phrase or word is put *at the end* of the interrogative sentence, as in "Vous allez où?", "Il est parti quand?", "Tu pars à quelle heure?" It is well to keep in mind during analysis of this type the concept of *niveaux de langage* or registers.

Speaking Skills. With respect to developing the speaking skills rated by the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines, films (and class discussion of them) permit learners of French to recount actions in different tenses, use memorized words and expressions, show spontaneity by formulating their reactions to what they see, hypothesize about the past, present, and future, etc.

Listening Skills. Films afford students an unparalleled opportunity to improve their listening comprehension. In some ways, this opportunity is preferable to interaction with a living, breathing, native speaker; unlike the living, breathing, native speaker, a film segment on videotape can be engaged to repeat and replay as often as desired by the student. Moreover, the student listener is also less likely to be tense than in a real conversational situation; the student's affective filter is thus less likely to prohibit understanding.

In trying to improve listening comprehension, I find Krashen's (1982) idea of pushing the learner to accomplish a task that is somewhat beyond his current level of capability to be quite valid and instrumental. If students hear only what they can understand easily, they will never make any headway.

Writing Skills. Although film does not lend itself automatically to helping students improve their writing skill, writing skills ought not to be neglected. As many teachers know, writing can be linked to listening in the form of the time-honored but much maligned *dictée.* Quite simply, students can be asked to transcribe a certain portion of the dialogue. Moreover, it is easy to make an audio recording of portions of the film soundtrack. In addition to helping hone writing skills, isolating audio from the visual demonstrates how many clues to understanding the spoken word are visual: gestures, physical context, eye and mouth movements, and so on. Even without the visual, attempting to understand and transcribe the soundtrack is an effective exercise in listening comprehension and a reinforcer of writing skills. Writing practice also comes into play when students write short compositions about various aspects of the film.

Another aspect of writing that should accompany the treatment of film in class is the skill of note-taking—a skill closely associated with listening practice. Students ought to write down as much as they possibly can about what they see and hear as they view the film and as teacher and other students talk about it. This process is usually more successful if students feel free to ask at any time to have what they did not understand repeated, replayed, or rephrased.

Reading Skills. Reading skills can be honed by having students read articles about cinema in general or reviews of the films they are seeing; articles about French actors, actresses, and directors are also useful to promote reading. *Paris Match, L'Express,* and *Le Point* are good sources for some of this ancillary printed material.

Testing. With regard to the use of film in the classroom, teachers must address the question of testing. Teachers will find it helpful to make it clear to students from the outset that films in class are not just a "fun" activity unrelated to testing and grading. Many aspects of using film in class can serve as work for grading. One of the most effective is to grade the notes that have been taken concerning the film. If the notes that students are

taking about the film are to be graded, many students will be motivated to take clear, neat, and organized notes. Preparing notes for grading often causes students to review and re-think all the material.

Vocabulary. An inevitable and useful fringe benefit of examining and studying the verbal communication dynamics in film on videocassette is that of vocabulary expansion. As anyone who has or is studying a foreign language knows, vocabulary acquisition is a never-ending process that is particularly frustrating: Lack of vocabulary mastery hinders self-expression and interferes with understanding. The fun of watching a good film makes the learning of hundreds of words and expressions more palatable. Expressions commonly used in spoken French which may rarely appear in print will be presented to students in authentic, albeit fictious, contexts. Visual clues will help students guess the meaning of at least some of the unfamiliar vocabulary and discourage the practice of thinking in English and translating in one's head. Seeing a certain object or witnessing an action while hearing the corresponding French words will serve to engrain the concept and the linguistic label in the viewer/listener's mind. Depending upon the level of the class or the difficulty of the film's lexical content, teachers can leave students to their own devices for discovering meaning of unfamiliar items, or they can hand out lists of words and expressions (with French definitions, English definitions, or the items themselves).

Contemporary French Slang. A facet of vocabulary acquisition that never fails to capture the attention of young Americans is contemporary French slang. Opinion is divided as to the advisability of teaching slang to non-native speakers of French. A valid objection is that non-native speakers of French can commit egregious cultural and linguistic blunders by misusing slang.

Kathleen Y. Ensz (1985) has written two provocative essays on this issue, particularly in her appeal for a judicious use of slang with which many teachers could agree. Of course, neophytes are often not too discriminating or judicious. A way around the horns of this dilemma might be that any French slang used in film should be explained and taught *for recognition only.* A knowledge of basic slang and colloquial French can be considered to be a survival skill in real-life situations. While native speakers of French may make some attempt to edit their language when speaking to a non-native speaker of French, such is rarely the case when they talk to each other in the presence of a foreigner. It is imperative that we give our students the facts they need to make sense of exchanges they will encounter in actual situations, in books, and in films. Slang and colloquial French are not arcane expressions restricted to the language of a select group: They are an integral part of the living French language. Useful dictionaries of French slang are *Le Dictionnaire du français non-conventionnel* by Jacques Cellard and Alain Rey (1980) and *Le Petit Perret* by Pierre Perret (1982).

Using Film on Videocassette in Class

Until recently, it was both difficult and costly to obtain films for the study of foreign languages and cultures. The most richly interesting and pedagogically sound materials for teachers of French were films, usually not very recent or numerous, and always expensive to rent. In most instances, purchasing films for unlimited use was not financially possible. The films were often cumbersome and the quality of sound and picture was almost unfailingly mediocre. Because feature-length films were in the possession of teachers for so short a time, it was impossible to study them in detail or prepare exercises or activities based on their content. Thus, until recently, French feature films remained, by and large, a vastly under-exploited resource.

Today, however, many French teachers have access to a videocassette recorder (VCR) that can be brought into the classroom or language laboratory facilities with the latest video technology. Furthermore, French films on videocassettes are becoming more plentiful and more reasonably priced; in addition, more and more recent and classic French feature films are coming onto the market in NTSC, the American standard. As demand for French films on videocassette grows, the price becomes more reasonable. Today's French films on videocassette generally range in cost from $60-$100.

Sources of French Films on Videocassette. There are a number of well-known suppliers of French films on videocassettes who also publish catalogues of their holdings. Catalogues may be requested from the following: **Tamarelle's International Films,** 110 Cohasset Stage Rd., Chico, CA 95926; **Northeast Conference Media,** P.O. Box 623, Middlebury, VT 05753; **Polyglot Productions,** P.O. Box 558, Cambridge, MA 02238-0668; **Videofrance,** 12021 Wilshire Blvd., Suite 326, West Los Angeles, CA 90025; and **Facets Multimedia, Inc.,** 1517 W. Fullerton Avenue, Chicago, IL 60614.

As is well known, feature films on videocassette are not the only French material available on videotape. A number of series have been produced especially for teaching purposes. Although such series have been and are being used successfully by teachers, they often lack the production values of French feature films, produced by professional native French film makers (at a cost of millions of francs) who have engaged the best talent and equipment available. Moreover, specifically produced language teaching series do not come in the great variety of feature films, and they are, by comparison, quite expensive.

Copyright. In the *N. E. Conference Newsletter* (1986), there is a clarification about the classroom use of videocassettes carrying the "For Home Use Only" warning. It has been determined that it is entirely permissible to show these videocassettes face-to-face (not broadcast) in a classroom within a non-profit educational institution as part of the instructional program.

Useful Background Books. There are several excellent books that teachers and students would do well to peruse in order to correlate what they see and hear in French films. One of the very best is Laurence Wylie's *Beaux Gestes* (1977). The preface to this book is filled with insights into some of the differences between French and American gestures and body language: The dozens of photographs (accompanied by explanations, as well as the French vocabulary that goes along with the gestures) are invaluable to anyone who wishes to know more about how the French express themselves.

A second manual is Geneviève Calbris and Jacques Montredon's *Oh Là Là* (1980). In this book, the authors feature photos, drawings, and cartoons to illustrate French gestures and facial movements that accompany the spoken word. A great deal of informal yet primordial vocabulary is matched with the illustrations. Moreover, this book also explains the prosodic features that accompany the gestures depicted. The authors have up-dated and expanded their work in a more recent book entitled *Des Gestes et des mots pour le dire* (1986).

François Sulger's *Les Gestes Vérités* (1986) is a recent book that provides basic background information on the meaning of French facial expressions, arm and hand gestures, and posture in relation to the spoken word.

Methodology of Using Films on Videocassettes in Class. A wide range of linguistic and cultural phenomenon is usually present in a well-chosen film. However, just as in real life but unlike in textbooks, a well-chosen film does not present topics in a neat order; the same holds true for grammatical, linguistic, and paralinguistic features involving gestures, tenses, prosodic elements—they, too, are not neatly arranged for pedagogical purposes. Instead, all elements are arranged in an order dictated by the plot. For their pedagogical purposes, teachers must unravel and disentangle what the imaginations of directors and actors have woven together in an artistic mosaic.

The approach used to pedagogically unravel films should not be simply linear in execution, that is, we should not confine ourselves to moving ploddingly from one scene to the next, from beginning to end. Rather, we should use a **non-linear approach** that guides our students in discovering and discerning cultural and linguistic patterns. At the same time, we must alternate between dispensing information and encouraging students to reflect on the knowledge they have acquired; moreover, we must help them perceive analogies, relationships, and contrasts. All of this is part of the process of equipping students to think for themselves, with the eventual goal of enabling them to survive in a francophone environment.

It is paradoxical that this ability to shift from one topic to another yet never losing sight of the whole picture and its organization—apparently digressing while actually moving toward synthesis and recapitulation—provides the unifying principle needed in teaching French language and culture with films.

In order to accomplish our eventual goal of equipping students to function in a francophone environment, we must address the issue of how much class time should be devoted to the study of an average-length film. It is difficult to say how many hours of class time ought to be devoted to a 100-120 minute film. It is quite possible, perhaps even advisable, to **spend five to ten times the length of the film** going over it scene by scene or fragment by fragment. Although it may be helpful to have students view the film straight through one time before beginning it in class, this does kill the suspense.

Ideally, students should have **access to the videocassette outside of class.** Often, arrangements for such viewing can be made with the library, the language learning center, or the media center. If students are able to watch as often as necessary in advance the segment or segments that will be studied in class, they will be better prepared to ask questions and absorb the in-class presentation.

A part of the in-class presentation that American students need is information to **understand context.** The film maker expects his or her audience to possess an immense amount of cultural and linguistic background—background which is brought to the viewing/listening experience. Unfortunately, the American student audience is not equipped in the same way that a French audience is in terms of what it brings to the film; Americans do not have at their fingertips all the cultural and linguistic background that a native French viewer has. Time and study can do much to remedy this deficit to some degree. One way we can improve the cultural and linguistic awareness needed by our students is to press the PAUSE on the VCR and explain objects (often in the background and having no special link to the plot), procedures, and other details (clothing, food, etc.) that form part of the visual image.

In a pedagogical use of films on videocassettes, the issue of **subtitles** arises. Although most of the films on videocassette available for purchase through North American outlets are subtitled in English, there are a few that can be purchased with a French soundtrack only.

Are subtitles a plus or a minus when it comes to teaching? Certain teachers consider subtitles pedagogically sound; others advance arguments against them. A persuasive argument in favor of subtitles is that for students whose language proficiency is low, subtitles make studying the film less frustrating and discouraging. A persuasive argument against their use is that they allow students to literally ignore the French soundtrack.

No one should be allowed to ignore the French soundtrack, subtitled or not. A way of exploiting subtitles and keeping student attention focused on French is for the teacher to ask students what was actually said in French to correspond to the English subtitles; turning off the sound and having members of the class propose a French text to correspond to the English subtitles is also useful. Subsequently, the sound can be turned on for purposes of comparing the suggested version with the original soundtrack.

Conclusions

Those of us who, in our conversation, composition,and literature courses, use French feature films like *La Boum, La Grande Vadrouille, Les Compères,* and *Les Ripoux,* have helped our students experience what films can do very well: As teachers we have seen films motivate students (as the research of Tamarkin supports); we have seen films spark student interest in French (with which the findings of Garrity's research concur); and we have seen film expose our students to a comprehensive and authentic look at many of the elements that comprise French culture, especially the nonverbal and verbal communication dynamics of native speakers of French.

Given the nature of today's videocassette technology, feature films on videocassette permit students and teachers a great luxury in learning, namely, the possibilities of repeat, pause, and

freeze frame as often as necessary for analysis, understanding, and imitation. Because it is not always possible to explain everything in words, both teachers and students can augment their understanding of French culture by concentrating on the elements of French culture communicated via the visual channel: One of the most effective and easy to use visual documents of French culture is the French feature film on videocassette.

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