

FRANCOPHONE CINEMA, A PRIMER

Francophone cinema is a promising and relatively new language and culture resource for French teachers. Francophone cinema does indeed seem to have a lot to offer: The films present new voices, issues, and perspectives from the Francophone world, and at the same time, provide new materials for teaching and learning. I was first attracted to Francophone films as a way to show my students the importance of French as an international language and to help them experience life in a Francophone country as directly as possible. I began by making lists and watching as many Francophone films as I could and soon discovered the number of films could be overwhelming. I concluded, however, that they offered an effective way to explore *la Francophonie*, and that when grouped together, they constituted an area of research comparable to Francophone literature.

What is Francophone cinema? Essentially, a Francophone film is a French-language film that takes place in a country or region other than France. The writer, director, and actors are usually "local," and the film's narrative reflects the community in some way. Ousmane Sembene's *Camp de Thiaroye* and Claude Jutra's *Mon oncle Antoine* are classic examples of Francophone films from Senegal and Quebec, as are Alain Tanner's Swiss *Messidor* and Jean-Marie Teno's documentary-style *Afrique, je te plumerai* about the socio-economic problems in Cameroon. In reality, though, few films meet all the criteria of a Francophone film. Jaco van Dormael of Belgium wrote and directed *Le Huitième jour* starring the French actor Daniel Auteuil, and the Zairian film *La Vie est belle* was co-directed by Ngangura Mweze, an African, and Benoît Lamy, a European. The latter films would still qualify as Francophone because they meet the basic criteria of **geography**, **cultural setting**, and especially **voice**, which help distinguish the exotic and the authentic. Classifying a film can be a frustrating and sometimes fruitless experience because film is a very international medium, but grouping films under the banner of Francophone cinema helps us organize a body of work and expands our role as learners and teachers.

It was no surprise that a Francophone film from Belgium, *Rosetta*, won the most recent top-film award at the Cannes Film Festival. Belgium has had its share of award-winning films; *Le Maître de musique* was nominated for an Academy Award in 1989, *Ma vie en rose* won the Golden Globe's Best Foreign Language Film, and *Le Huitième jour's* Daniel Auteuil and Pascal Duquenne shared best actor award at

Cannes. Belgium has a long, successful history in cinema in spite of being divided into two linguistic and cultural camps, the Dutch-speaking north and the Francophone Wallonie, which dilutes production. Switzerland too is divided along linguistic and cultural lines but, like Belgium, has managed to carve out a cinematic presence. There are several Francophone titles, but only a few are well-known or have been widely distributed on videocassette. An exception is the work of Alain Tanner, a filmmaker of the *auteur* tradition who has some 18 feature films to his credit. One of these is *Messidor* in which two girls, a 17 year-old shop clerk and a bored university student, hitchhike through Switzerland and resort first to petty then serious crimes. *Messidor* has all the requisite nature panoramas and reflects the placid, orderly tenor of life in Switzerland that the girls do all they can to disrupt.

African Francophone films come typically from former French colonies. Countries of the Maghreb, that is, Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco, have produced a number of notable films but most are in Arabic. There are a few Francophone titles, however: the classic *La Bataille d'Alger* represents a whole group of films on revolution and colonial liberation and still seems valid even after 35 years. Many of the Francophone titles by Maghreb directors are like Merzak Allouache's *Salut Cousin!* about Algerian immigrant experiences in France. Or like Férid Boughedir's *Un été à La Gouette*, a multicultural story in French, Italian, and Arabic that takes place in Tunisia.

A host of Francophone film titles are available by directors from Senegal, Ivory Coast, Cameroon, Congo, and Burkina Faso, among others. Filmmaking in sub-Saharan Africa had its beginnings in the 1960's just after independence. Most films from the early years had social or political agendas because the film medium was often used as an instrument of social and political progress. Manthia Diawara groups films into three broad thematic categories: (1) **(neo)colonial confrontation**, (2) **social realism**, and (3) **cultural identity**. These categories are useful in that they help determine whether a film is primarily about exploitation, alienation, conflicts with the West, or the search for heroes and myths in the pre-colonial past.

Ousmane Sembene is without question the dean of African cinema. He was a pioneer with *Borom Sarret* about a cart-driver on the outskirts of Dakar and *Mandabi* in which an illiterate Dieng gets duped out of his money order. *Mandabi* is considered sub-Saharan Africa's first full-length feature film. Sembene's *Camp de Thiaroye*, about

a massacre of expatriated Senegalese troops returning from battle in World War II, is one of the most potent colonial confrontation films. Ousmane Sembene continues to make films and is one of the few African directors with several titles to his credit. Unfortunately, few of his films are available on videocassette. A totally different film is Ngangura Mweze's *La Vie est belle*. This film is about Kourou who comes in from the Zairian countryside to Kinshasa to find success. Kourou is played by Papa Wemba, in real life a legendary singer/musician known throughout sub-Saharan Africa as well as in Europe. (Papa Wemba makes a cameo appearance in Ngangura's most recent film, *Pièces d'Identité* that won the 1999 FESPACO best-film award.) Ngangura's *La Vie est belle* is a good example of Diawara's social realism while Burkina Faso's Dani Kouyaté sought to retell a major African epic, the thirteenth-century *Sundjata Epic*, in his *Keïta, L'Héritage du Griot*.

Francophone films from the Antilles are similar in many respects to their African counterparts. Euzhan Palcy's *Rue cases-nègres* recounts with style and grace the coming-of-age experiences of José during the early 1930's in colonial Martinique. This uncontented Antillean classic has become a favorite among French teachers because of the engaging characters and because of the wealth of materials available to help incorporate the film into instruction. Euzhan Palcy is not the only Antillean film director to achieve success. Christian Lara of Guadeloupe is the most prolific of the Antillean directors with some 10 films to his credit. His films include, among others, *Adieu foulard*, *Vivre libre ou mourir*, and, more recently, *Sucre amer*. Aside from *Rue cases-nègres*, however, Francophone films from the Antilles are difficult to find.

Francophone films from North America, that is, Quebec, pose a whole new set of questions. *Québécois* films are similar in many respects to their African and Antillean counterparts even though the cultural and linguistic contexts are very different. For starters, the market for *Québécois* films is relatively small and the resources to make a film are limited. At the same time, *Québécois* filmmakers have to compete with the overwhelming number of imported films, particularly those from the United States. Still, *Québécois* cinema has a long, complex history, and many of the films are world-class.

The classic of early *Québécois* films is *Mon oncle Antoine*, a coming-of-age, rites-of-passage film that takes place just before Christmas in a small asbestos mining town in Quebec during the late 1940's. This film

provides a lot of material to learn about Quebec and *Québécois* issues, for example, cultural roots, conflict with Anglophones, family problems, and decadence. And there are ample materials to help adapt *Mon oncle Antoine* for instruction. Another *Québécois* classic is Gilles Carle's *La Vie heureuse de Léopold Z.* This film recounts the adventures of Léopold Tremblay during Christmas Eve. Léopold, a snowplow driver, makes several side-trips during his working day, first to borrow money for a fur coat, to meet his wife's friend Josette at the train station, and to haul a sofa for his boss Théophile. This is a relatively short film, some 68 minutes, that captures Montreal in the mid-60's. *La Vie heureuse de Léopold Z.* is ideal for the classroom because the French is clear and there are no questionable or explicit scenes that would prohibit its use.

Charles Binamé's *Eldorado* and Louis Saïa's *Les Boys* are recent *Québécois* films. *Eldorado*, 1994 is an urban film that follows the lives of four twenty-somethings in Montreal. As you might expect, it's an R-rated film and would be appropriate for only the most advanced students. *Les Boys*, 1997, is a somewhat raunchy film about an irreverent hockey team. *Les Boys* became Quebec's most successful film of all time and was followed by *Les Boys II*. Clearly, Quebec cinema is on an upswing and should no longer be ignored.

Keeping up with Francophone cinema in Quebec, or for that matter in Africa and Europe, has become easier in recent years. Distributors such as Facets, California Newsreel (Library of African Cinema), and the Canadian Film Distribution Center offer a wide variety of films on videocassette. The purchase cost for these films is often reasonable (although still a strain on meager budgets), ranging from \$20 to about \$100. Rentals are also available. The Internet provides a wealth of current information about films: It is no longer as difficult or time consuming to gather facts about film directors, actors, and production or to find reviews and information on film festivals and awards. I have included a few of the major Internet film sites below.

In addition, there are book-length studies that supply background information on Francophone cinema. Manthia Diawara mentioned above writes about the politics and culture of filmmaking in Francophone Africa. N. Frank Ukadike discusses theory and practice of Black African filmmaking from the colonial beginnings to the 1990's. Mbye Cham edited a unique book on the relatively unknown cinema of the Antilles. Janis Pallister provides a thorough treatment of Quebec cinema in her study which includes sections on historical roots, women directors, literature into film, and film as mir-

ror of society. Peter Cowie's annual *Variety International Film Guide* lists new films by country and provides up-dates on cinema worldwide.

There are also numerous resources, both books and articles, for using (Franco-phone) films in the classroom. Garrity includes *Mon oncle Antoine* and *La Vie de Léopold Z.* in his *Film in the French Classroom*. Sugarman and Ward prepared a 54-page study guide for *Palcy's Rue cases-nègres*, and more recently, Flore Zéphir outlined a plan for using film documentaries on Haiti for teaching language and culture. It's important to remember that films require special treatment and that students need help in sorting out what to do and what to look for. A viewing guide with some basic vocabulary and grammar is always useful, but in most cases, films are less suited for teaching discrete vocabulary and grammar items than for exposing our students to culture in context. It makes more sense to construct activities, for example, like those suggested by Zéphir and others, that address topics such as greetings, clothing, housing, transportation, daily-life activities, social roles, values, and cross-cultural comparisons. In this way, students take advantage of the strengths of the film medium. Beyond language and culture, Francophone films are also applicable to other areas of the curriculum: cinema studies, literary works on film, historical figures, and gender studies.

Whatever the application, for teaching and learning or just for enjoyment, Francophone cinema is an important resource to us as French teachers. Francophone cinema helps us extend our field of studies, and at the same time, provides dynamic "portraits" of the Francophone world.

Selected Resources

Books and articles:

- Diawara, Manthia. *African Cinema: Politics and Culture*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1992.
- Encyclopedia of European Cinema*. Ginette Vincendeau, ed. New York, NY: Facts on File, 1995.
- Garrity, Henry. *Film in the French Classroom*. Cambridge, MA: Polyglot Productions, 1987.
- Pallister, Janis L. *The Cinema of Quebec. Masters in Their Own House*. Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1995.
- Sugarman, Judy and Nancy Ward. *Rue cases-nègres*. A study guide. Vernon Hills, IL: FilmArobics, 1995.
- Ukadike, Nwachukwu F. *Black African Cinema*. Berkley: University of California

Press, 1994.

Variety International Film Guide 1999. Peter Cowie, ed. Los Angeles, CA: Silman-James Press, 1999.

Viswanathan, Jacqueline. "Approche pédagogique d'un classique du cinéma québécois: *Mon oncle Antoine*." *French Review*, Vol. 63 No. 5 (April 1990): 849-858.

Zéphir, Flore. "Caribbean Films in the French Curriculum: Strengthening Linguistic and Multicultural Competency." *French Review*, Vol. 72 No. 3 (February 1999): 515-528.

Internet:

- Internet Movie Database: [<http://us.imdb.com/>]
- Canadian Studies: [<http://canada-acsus.plattsburgh.edu/>]
- Vues d'Afrique: [<http://www.vuesdafrique.org/sommaireframes.html>]
- Festival Panafricain du Cinéma: [<http://www.fespaco.bf/>]
- Selected Film Titles: [http://www.uncc.edu/colleges/arts_and_sciences/fornlang/francocin.htm]

Distributors:

Canadian Film Distribution Center
SUNY Plattsburgh
Plattsburgh, NY
Phone: (800) 388-6784

Facets Multimedia
1517 West Fullerton Ave
Chicago, IL 60614
Phone: (800) 331-6197

FACSEA
972 Fifth Avenue
New York, NY 10021
Phone: (212) 439-1439

Library of African Cinema
California Newsreel
149 Ninth Street #420
San Francisco, CA 94103
Phone: (415) 621-9196