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# READING FOREIGN FILMS HUMANISTICALLY

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## ABSTRACT

Fewer foreign films are appearing on American screens than 20 or 30 years ago. As a result, American audiences, unaccustomed to them, are often puzzled by what they see. Distributors of foreign films are tempted to import high culture films (drawn primarily from classic literary adaptations with some name recognition) or foreign box office successes, provided that the story is told in a linear fashion. The American attempting to see a foreign film in its native country must be prepared for any number of unamerican elements, both thematic and technical. Americans depend on action-generated plots and want to know what happens next. Foreign films are often more ambiguous and rely on internal development, not through plot but through conversation. A survey of recent films made in France, India and Japan reveal the many cultural differences which make reading these films difficult for Americans. Yet, the prepared viewer can benefit from the experience and discover many things about a people and their culture through films, without knowing the language.

## INTRODUCTION

In this country, we know foreign cinema from a small unrepresentative sample imported either by independent American distributors who frequent film festivals abroad and see the latest foreign films available or by American studios which have contributed financially to the production. From this second practice, we begin to see more foreign (read American subsidized) films nominated for Hollywood Oscars. For those who might be interested in a foreign film festival experience, the Montreal Festival held the last 10 days of August, is interesting because it is the only one besides Cannes where it is easy to get from one screening to another, where everything is within walking distance of everything else, and where there are 450 films to please any taste.

If, when we scan the offerings of our hometown mall cinemas, we are lucky to see even a small number of films produced in foreign countries, can we automatically assume that we are seeing the best of those produced? Probably yes, if we understand best in terms

of American taste. American distributors are not known for sacrificing themselves on the altar of culture. Culture has its limits, and its limits are profitability.

In general, the distributors will select a big-budget film (at least big-budget by foreign standards) with "high productions values" (France's Cyrano de Bergerac, for instance) which tell their story in a linear fashion, a film in which there is as much action as possible so as to be entertaining (about which I talk more later). Failing those criteria, distributors will look for a film which has a "Masterpiece Theater" look. We should be grateful to that television program for having convinced distributors that they can take chances on a small film such as Denmark's Babette's Feast or Britain's Howard's End.

What is important always to keep in mind when approaching foreign cinema with American eyes is that we, as a nation, mass-produce and export popular culture and import HIGH culture. The second point to consider concerns the expectation of story-telling. Americans are acculturated to the "And then what happened?" syndrome. If a movie-goer cannot relate the plot of the movie easily and succinctly to his neighbor, the latter is unlikely to go to see the movie in question. Word of mouth is as important as publicity campaigns.

In our culture, Americans have a low tolerance for ambiguity. We generally do not like convoluted plot lines and murky morality. We will run to an unambiguous British tale of success in the face of adversity such as Chariots of Fire but shun Fellini, Antonioni, and Bergmann, except in New York, Chicago and San Francisco where a history of sympathy to the foreign has created a cultural familiarity, thus demand. Furthermore, we are very

conservative in our aesthetics and will balk at unfamiliar camera or editing techniques as, I think, is proven by the row now being caused by Woody Allen's camera in Husbands and Wives or which caused audience dissatisfaction with Orson Welles's now classic Citizen Kane when it was first projected to middle America.

If we venture into a foreign movie, either here or when visiting overseas, we are likely to be confronted with a personally-told story. A Hollywood studio director would rather take a chance on a movie with mass appeal and mass-profit potential because otherwise he will not be rehired by the studio to make another. Foreign cinemas work under a different aegis. On other continents, a movie does not have to make a lot of money because it probably did not cost a lot to make. A relatively modest number of ticket-buyers is often enough to propel the director to his next film. Then too, in many countries the film industry is subsidized by the government as a cultural industry, and profits, while pleasant, take second place to showing the flag.

As a result, an American seeing a foreign film is likely to encounter a story as interpreted by the director who is probably also the producer and script writer. Hayakawa in Japan and Bergman in Sweden can make very personal films because they don't spend much money producing them and because their audiences are interested in knowing how each sees an issue. The interpretation of the issue is usually more important to such a foreign movie-goer than the stating of the issue itself.

A foreign audience is therefore accustomed to see what is known as "auteur" films, in which the director is trying to express himself whether or not the public is interested in what he has to say. The French

New Wave (Truffaut, Godard, Chabrol) created this revolutionary film making in the 1950s and early 60s. Such personal interpretations can also end up in complete transformations of visual reality on the screen, not to mention dislocations of chronology. The American looking for what happened next may end up very confused. Instead of what happened next, he asks what was that all about?

Another phenomenon is that the foreign audience is more accustomed to deal with questions of interior action whereas the mass American audience responds more easily to exterior action. That is again the what-happened-next syndrome I referred to earlier. This syndrome is reinforced by a different concept of the target audience, too. American producers for the past 20 years have pitched their story selection to where the money is, the youth audience.

The American watching a foreign film will also find out that the culture which produced it has a different attention span. Many cultures are more wedded to an oral tradition than we. Western tradition from the Renaissance has set great store by visual story-telling and Americans have carried this to its logical limits in our films.

Moreover, an American seeing a film in a foreign country is likely to be confronted with disconcerting practices in movie houses. There are still cinemas in foreign countries where one is shown to one's seat by someone who is expecting to receive a tip. Ushers in our movie houses disappeared by the 50s and never expected tips. Strangely enough, movie going custom abroad allows movie houses to be used for advertising, much as one might expect on American television. Naturally, the film is not interrupted by commercials, but

commercials may often be shown before and after the screening of the film.

A third factor influencing the question of a humanistic reading of foreign films is the difficulty of finding them in many foreign countries. In some cases the economics of national film industries preclude showing large numbers of national film industry films to the citizens of the country. The most extreme case is Canada. Americans will be surprised to learn that from the very inception of the American film industry until today, Canada has been considered part of the domestic American market.

Sweet deals between Canadian producers and American studios, indeed the Canadian Government, have resulted in a situation where only 3% of screen time in Canada, whether English speaking or French, is reserved for Canadian produced films. Even Canadian television which prides itself on encouraging Canadian programming will show Canadian film on CTV and CBC often out of prime time (1). Similar situations exist throughout Western Europe where the Saturday night movie is likely to be American.

Even in Japan, the hegemony of American films is complete. In 1989, typical year for which we have complete records, of the 10 top-grossing films in Japan 9 were American, 1 was French. And 1989 was a year in which 255 of the 777 films released were Japanese. It is only in countries of the former Eastern block and Asian countries other than Japan where you will find a market as yet untouched by major American penetration. In a country like Poland, for instance, the top 5 grossing films for 1989 were all Polish.

What should the American watch for in a foreign film which may signal cultural or

aesthetic differences between the American and foreign point of view? An important element in what to expect when attending a foreign film is the concept of entertainment, a very Anglo-Saxon concept. In our cultural lexicon, movies are fun.

However, there are few words in foreign languages to translate this concept, because other people do not always see the world of leisure activity as we Americans do. The French, who usually have a word for everything, often use the word "divertissement" as the closest in meaning. But this is inadequate because the French word can refer to reading a book on philosophy as easily as watching a movie.

The English word implies the existence of some exterior visual or audio stimulus which causes the viewer to be moved emotionally in some way. Just as fun also implies a physical engagement on the part of the individual leading to some pleasurable experience. It is unlikely that a teen-ager would describe reading Dickens as fun, no matter how much pleasure he might have derived from it. But playing a game would be fun because, as I said earlier, fun like entertainment implies an ingredient of physical stimulation. To push the conceptual linguistic differences further, a foreigner who did not know English well might wonder what was meant if he heard Americans say they were entertaining guests in their home for an evening. Perhaps a soft-shoe routine, card-tricks or poetry reading might come to mind.

While it is clear from my remarks so far that I have not told you what exactly to expect each time you see a foreign film, I can indicate some things you should not expect, at least not necessarily. First, not all foreign films are entertainment, while most American films try to be. There are sociological, cultural and demographic

reasons to explain all this, I am sure, but I am not prepared here to cite you chapter and verse, leaving that to demographers, sociologists and cultural anthropologists.

But I will tell you the story I recently heard from a Polish film director, a man from a highly cultured background with university degrees in both philosophy and physics. As we were discussing the differences between American films and European (in particular French Film), he told the following anecdote. Before the second world war, his family always paid for the maids' night out at the pictures. They sent the maids to see whatever American film was playing at the time in Warsaw because the family was sure the maids would understand it. The family, however, never went to see American films which they considered diversions for the unthinking. The family went usually to French and Italian films because these films had an intellectual content. And although much has changed in the world's perception of the cultural content of American pictures, it is probably safe to say that we are still exporting mass, not elitist, culture. (2)

We might take for example a selective sample of foreign film cultures, those representing language groups other than English. A review of major production in those countries in 1989 will give us an idea of the spectrum of subjects about which film directors believe people in those countries are concerned: France, India, Japan.

In France, as is the case in many other Western countries, the movie public concentrates on only 2 groups of films: those from their own country and those from the US. In 1989 34% of moviegoers went to see French productions and 56% to see American productions. 1989 was the year of the extraordinary worldwide popular and critical acclaim for the new version of

Cyrano de Bergerac. Part of the phenomenon is connected with the equally extraordinary popularity of its star Gerard Depardieu. A second important production Nuit d'ete en ville is a story about a couple who spends a night in bed and afterwards discusses their past and present sexual and sentimental lives. Its structure is built on the form of an 18th-century novella.

Another moralist Eric Rohmer filmed a philosophical discussion in intellectual dialog. In the story, there is also a daughter jealous of her father's girlfriend and other characters caught in their psychological games. Another literary adaptation, Claude Chabrol filmed Henry Millers' Quiet Day in Clichy. Lest one think, however, that all French films in 1989 dealt with esoteric literary subjects, there was the usual batch of French comedies too, including one entitled intriguingly Stan the Flasher. (3).

What might such a collection of films tell us about the French. First that they have a higher tolerance for intellectual fare than the typical American moviegoer. Second, it might tell the viewer that the star system is alive and well in France. As one looks down the list of actors and actresses in these films, one reads the list of the biggest box-office favorites among the French public.

In Japan, as in France, we read a list of important and well-established directors making movies on a wide variety of subjects. Akira Kurosawa, Japan's dean of directors at age 80, made Rhapsody, about a vacation at a family's summer house. None other than actor Richard Gere, the lone American in a key role, plays a visiting Japanese-American son of the grandmother's brother who has emigrated to Hawaii after the bombing of Nagasaki. The film deals with Japanese-American relations and the

coming to grips with the atomic bombing of the two Japanese cities.

A film entitled Homemade Movie tells the tale of a school tutor's affair with the mother of a pupil. This plot line is not unusual; infidelity seems to be a popular subject in Japanese films. The biggest hit of the year Heaven and Earth was a costume drama about the lifelong battle between two samurai. (4).

India, the world's biggest producer of films, turned out 781 in 1989. What most Indian films have in common is that the favorite subject is love (typically the rescue of a young woman from the lascivious clutches of an older man) and that they are very long. An interesting statistic is that the majority language Hindi accounted for only 176 movies of the 781 total. The other films were made in the innumerable languages spoken on the Indian subcontinent. The target audience for the popular box-office films is the blue-collar and middle class worker, plus the poorer classes (5). What accounts for the subject matter of these films, curiously, is that Indian television does not carry soap operas in all its native languages, that the heat drives women into the air conditioned theaters during the day, an escape which also accounts for the extraordinary length of most Indian features. A three and a half hour movie is not unusual.

What we may conclude from this overview of film making in other countries is that they often differ greatly from American films in style and genre. There are, for instance, relatively few gangster films, no sci-fi movies, and few special effects movies. Those are American genres. However, like all good artistic pieces, these films talk about the human condition, and American

viewers, if they are able to divorce themselves from American expectations, may see, understand and enjoy them.

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