

## Is Film a Universal Language? Educating Students as Global Citizens

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# Is Film a Universal Language? Educating Students as Global Citizens

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*Carolyn A. Durham*

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AS THE punctuation of my title suggests, the notion of film as “a universal language” raises a great many questions. When originally proposed as the focus of discussion at the roundtable cosponsored by the ADE and the ADFL at the 2006 MLA convention, session organizers hypothesized that the study of world cinema in general education courses might heighten student awareness of linguistic, and hence cultural, variance more effectively than a more traditional focus on literature in translation. My short answer to the question raised by this essay’s title (and its implications) is that film can indeed help us educate students as global citizens. Its teaching, moreover, constitutes a key area in which English and foreign language departments can collaborate; this is so because the language that matters is that of film itself, even as the particular language spoken in a given movie remains largely irrelevant. I draw on my experience teaching film at the College of Wooster to explain what I mean.

Wooster is a private liberal arts college of approximately 1,800 undergraduates. We have a required first-year seminar program with common goals but with specific interdisciplinary topics selected by individual instructors. Film is used at some point in almost all sections, and several sections a year use film exclusively or, as in my case, extensively. Since 2005, the college has also had a film studies minor, which focuses on film analysis, criticism, theory, and history (i.e., not on production). After thirty years of attempts to establish a film studies program, the minor finally won the support of the administration and the faculty, largely because of its strong focus on national cinemas. For a college our size, we have a fairly wide range of course offerings on films from different countries and cultures. Courses

in American, Chinese, francophone, German, Hispanic, Russian, and Native American (and other indigenous) cinemas are all taught in English.

The only required course for the minor is Comparative Film Studies, taught at present with a focus on American and western European film. This course, like all our national cinema courses, has no prerequisites, and it enrolls first-year as well as upper-class students. Because students may take courses in any sequence, the initial goal in all our film courses—and, of course, in all first-year seminars devoted to film—is to teach students to read film, to understand the visual strategies and the accompanying lexicon of the medium. Our assumption, then, is that the language of film is essentially universal (despite some differences in terminology), so that a student who knows how to analyze the visual strategies of a cinematic text can read any film, regardless of the country where it was made and of the language spoken by the actors. Certainly, a subtitled film alters the student’s reading endeavor to the extent that the visual information that must be processed has increased, but again, the endeavor itself will be the same for any subtitled film.

My experience tells me that students are oblivious to the linguistic aspect of a non-English-language film. Curious as it may seem, they don’t hear German, Spanish, or Chinese any differently;

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unfamiliar languages all come down to something they don't understand and that they therefore ignore as a kind of background noise. This is, of course, perfectly consistent with the universality of the primarily visual language of film; indeed, most of us who teach film no doubt use a silent or largely silent film early in the semester to reinforce students' command of the visual strategies of filmmaking. The students' experience of the cultural foreignness of film is not dependent on the language spoken by the actors. This is very good news in a world in which nonanglophone countries are increasingly filming their own national cinemas in English and in which film in general is rarely a strictly national product.

Let me clarify: I think that a syntax of images, the language of film, is universal; I'm less convinced that film itself is a universal language. I also think that this is all to the good, since the fact that film isn't universal, that foreign film exists (including many foreign films made in English and some made in the United States), is essential to educating students as global citizens. There must be an experience of estrangement, a challenge to students' expectations, for an awareness of cultural difference to take place. But what makes a film foreign and how this works pedagogically to educate students is much more problematic. Before I take two examples from my teaching experience, I want to cite three other texts on this topic; originally designed to inform discussion, the quotations function here as something like delayed epigraphs. First, A. O. Scott comments in the *New York Times Magazine*, "Movies . . . may be universal, but they are universal in radically distinct ways. Some of them we regard as foreign" (81). Second, Atom Egoyan and Ian Balfour argue in the introduction to their recent book *Subtitles: On the Foreignness of Film*, "Every film is a foreign film, foreign to some audience somewhere—and not simply in terms of language" (21). Finally, in an earlier but still compelling essay, Georges Santoni notes, "There is a native understanding of objects, persons, or situations experienced visually and stylistic constraints are definitely tied to cultural contexts. Other people do not necessarily organize their visual production and perception in the same way as Americans do" (68).

My two pedagogical examples are taken from my Comparative Film Studies course. The first example is of a universal film that seems very foreign to my students; the second is of a foreign film that seems

highly universal to them. These two films engage different teaching strategies. By way of background, let me note that the first feature-length film I teach in this course is *The Wizard of Oz*. One reason I begin with it is to give students the experience of seeing what they believe to be a very familiar film as foreign. *The Wizard of Oz* is also a film that sets up boundary crossing as significant and establishes the ambivalence of the idea of home, concepts that will be important throughout the course. Later I teach the film that epitomizes these notions: Theo Angelopoulos's *Ulysses' Gaze* (1995). I teach it toward the end of the semester, at a time when objections to subtitles or slow pacing are generally a thing of the past and when students have already seen a number of non-Hollywood-style films. Moreover, they should be able to connect the film to their experience as Americans and as citizens of a twenty-first-century world, for *Ulysses' Gaze* is arguably a highly universal film, one that deals with such global concerns as the problematic nature of national boundaries, the futility of war, the experience of exile, and even the making of movies. To quote the director: "I think my films are about voyages we all take, anywhere in the world. The problem is a universal one of not having a place, a home to call our own. . . . I feel the deeper one goes into one's particular place . . . the more universal it will become for others" (qtd. in Horton 11).

*Ulysses' Gaze* therefore provides an important context in which to explore students' expectations as spectators and their awareness of what makes a film foreign. For students do find the film foreign, almost unbearably so, foreign in both content and visual strategies. Significantly, their initial estrangement has virtually nothing to do with the film's being in Greek and everything to do with Angelopoulos's work being so radically different from the dominant cinema of Hollywood and from what students are accustomed to that the film can't be understood without negotiating its differences. To take just an example, spectators have to know something about the geographical and historical background of the Balkans, where the film is set, to understand how place functions metaphorically in the film. They also have to rethink what they know about visual language. Angelopoulos relies on long shots and long takes, on extremely slow pacing, on dramatic dead time, and on offscreen space to draw viewers into a place of meditation on time and meaning. In addition to shots that track into the past or into

the imagination, there are a stunning eight-minute silent sequence of a statue of Lenin floating down the river and an equally astonishing sequence of the literally invisible shooting of an entire family hidden behind the white screen of the fog in Sarajevo.

My second example is Alejandro González Iñárritu's *Amores perros* (2001). The pedagogical situation is now entirely reversed—students find Iñárritu's film thoroughly familiar, and teaching it involves helping them see its foreignness. My students are delighted—especially, perhaps, after *Ulysses' Gaze*—to (re)discover a film that has violence, sex, loud music, and frenetic cutting; indeed, they are so pleased that they largely fail to notice that the film is also in Spanish, and they are certainly unaware that it was conceived—and received at home—as a study of *mexicanidad*. Their indifference to language is particularly telling in a film, described by the director himself as “one continuous scream,” that arguably privileges sound over visual image. Once the film was released in the United States, Iñárritu was immediately hailed as the “Mexican Tarantino,” and his film was most frequently compared with *Pulp Fiction*. Because I also teach *Pulp Fiction* in this course, my first strategy often involves small-group discussion to lead my students to reflect on the similarities between the two films so that they understand why the comparison gets made and why they too are initially prone to make it. More important, I ask them to consider the differences so that they understand the originality of both films, the Mexican outrage over the analogy between Iñárritu and Tarantino, and also, in retrospect, the sheer Americanness of *Pulp Fiction*. Such discussion leads them to realize, largely on their own, something about the difference between Tarantino's postmodern playfulness and Iñárritu's gritty realism.

In conclusion, then, film can provide invaluable and irreplaceable access to other cultures, but its ability to do so requires initially teaching the language of film itself—or making students conscious of the knowledge they may already have—so that they can understand and appreciate the variations that make film at once universal and foreign. To quote Theo Angelopoulos once again: “The world needs cinema now more than ever. It may be the last important form of resistance to the deteriorating world in which we live. In dealing with borders, boundaries, the mixing of languages and cultures today, [the cinema is] trying to seek a new humanism, a new way” (qtd. in Horton 3). This makes film an excellent example of the “rooted cosmopolitanism” that Domna C. Stanton presented in her 2005 MLA presidential address as an educational ideal of particular relevance in a twenty-first-century world “where old boundaries are ceaselessly being crossed” (629).

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A universal language sounds like a great idea when you first think about it. If everyone spoke the same standard language then we would have no language barrier to prevent us from connecting with others around the world. We could resolve conflicts in a civilized manner. Heck, we could all be more aware of each other's needs and maybe there would be more prosperity in countries that live in poverty. If a universal language was introduced, wouldn't that make our mother tongues superfluous? Part of my own identity comes from the languages I use, just like any culture. If we start using a universal language, we would be taking away part of our identity. Furthermore, what language would we use? Would it be an existing dominant language like English or Chinese?