Intercultural Moments in Teaching English through Film

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Abstract

This paper describes the advanced course, "Intercultural Encounters in Anglophone Film," in the English program at the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana-Iztapalapa, pointing out why its various films can promote intercultural reflection. After indicating the importance of culture in the foreign language curriculum and its relationship to film, the author presents a general overview of the course, summaries of the films analyzed, and describes specific instances in which an intercultural perspective can be fostered.

Keywords:

Curriculum English Film Intercultural

Resumen

Este artículo describe el curso de nivel avanzado "Encuentros Interculturales en el Cine Anglófono" diseñado para el programa de inglés de la Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana-Iztapalapa, y señala cómo las películas incluidas pueden conducirnos a una reflexión intercultural. A partir de una discusión sobre la importancia de la cultura en el currículo de lenguas extranjeras y de su relación con el cine, la autora presenta un panorama general del curso, los resúmenes de las películas utilizadas, y concluye con una reflexión en torno a momentos propicios para el fortalecimiento de una perspectiva intercultural.

Palabras clave:

Currículo Inglés Cine Intercultural As witness the international turn toward intercultural attitudes being considered an integral part of foreign language education, it is no longer sufficient (if it ever was) in courses to present merely banal "cultural capsules." Becoming intercultural means going beyond stereotyping, gaining knowledge about the complexity of the foreign culture and how its members see each other and outsiders, and reflecting on one's own culture and perspectives in a process of "decentering" (Byram, Gribkova and Starkey 2002: 12). This paper will describe the course created for the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) program at the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana-Iztapalapa in Mexico City, "Intercultural Encounters in Anglophone Film," emphasizing why the films chosen lend themselves to intercultural reflection. First, there will be a brief summary concerning the new emphasis of intercultural competence in foreign language curricula, followed by its relation with film. Afterwards, a broad overview of the course and its particular films will be given, focusing on those moments in class where students have the possibility to enter an intercultural space while learning English. The films under discussion are: Barcelona, Black Robe, Iron & Silk, The Searchers, Witness, Lone Star, The Treasure of the Sierra Madre, West Side Story, and A Passage to India.

Intercultural Competence in Foreign Language Education through Film

Given our present era of "interconnectivity" or "globalization", defined as "the intensified and accelerated movement of people, images, ideas, technologies, and economic and cultural capital across national boundaries" (McCarthy *et al.* 2003: 454), it is not surprising that foreign language curricula throughout the world are includ-

ing a new emphasis on the cultures of the languages in their programs. Major international language policy statements, such as the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (2001), Standards for Foreign Language Learning: Preparing for the 21st Century (1996), and Education in a Multilingual World (2003), all stress that a deeper understanding of the languages' cultures is now needed in order for students to develop an appreciation and tolerance for the complexities of foreign cultures while they reflect on the multiple dimensions of their own native culture(s). "Culture" here is understood as the attitudes, behaviors, and products (both tangible and intangible) shared and revealed in any society; that is, both "culture" as well as "Culture." Claire Kramsch has further enhanced that definition to include an imagined social space:

[C]ulture can be defined as membership in a discourse community that shares a common social space and history, and common imaginings....[T]his diachronic view of culture focuses on the way in which a social group represents itself and others through its material productions over time —its technological achievements, its monuments, its works of art, its popular culture—that punctuate the development of its historical identity. (qtd. in Scott and Huntington 2002: 622-623)

Notwithstanding, to create interculturality, it is not sufficient to merely know the target culture and its "imaginary" through the "inventory" method of "cultural capsules." For Bredella, in the same vein as Kramsch (1993) and Byram (1991), among the diverse traits of the intercultural person, we find decentering or "outsideness," that is, the ability to see the world from the viewpoint of others, and the voluntary distancing of oneself from one's own culture:

Being intercultural means to reconstruct the others' frame of reference and see things through their eyes in order to overcome our ethnocentric tendency to impose our categories and values on their behavior.

Being intercultural means to enhance our self-awareness as cultural beings. This makes us aware of the relativity of our beliefs and values and protects us from cultivating fundamentalist attitudes. (Bredella 2003b: 237)

From this perspective, Bredella underscores a certain quality of imagination and "flexibility of mind" as predispositions for interculturality (2003a: 38).

This same author points out that experiences with art can provide encounters of imaginative immersion and self-reflection that equally characterize rewarding acts of interculturality (2003b: 230). That is, all forms of art have the potential to involve the readerspectator in a "foreign" world: we share the "otherness" of an aesthetic text (or object), the point of view of the author/ creator, his or her culture, etc. Especially in the case of English language learning, art's power to submerge us imaginatively and completely in "otherness", and moreover, a truly complex Anglophone otherness, can play a decisive role in forming the intercultural personality (Lee Zoreda, forthcoming).

Film and Interculturality

In considering film, however, it is not exclusively an art object; it also falls into the realm of popular culture, both of the country that produced it and the foreign countries that consume it. Hence, the recent call for students to develop "multiple literacies," that include, among other abilities, "reading" critically the mass media that they are immersed in, with a perspective of inter-culturality, has been sounded by the New London Group (1996), Douglas

Kellner (1998), and Kress (Kern and Schultz 2005: 383). Since college students of EFL all over the world are virtually bombarded with American and other metropolitan Anglophone "texts" through movies, music, television, advertisements, etc., it is clear that it should be an educational imperative in EFL teaching to examine and interpret such international productions. After all, the globalized mass media is now part of our students' popular culture—for better or worse; we note that, from a Gramscian point of view, popular culture is pedagogical in that it

is the site where our taken-for-granted interpretations of the world are made: what we "know" about the world is largely formed through our interactions with popular culture...[It is] where identities are produced and, by extension, it is the location of considerable struggle for consent. (Dolby 2003: 263)

Recently, within the specific field of EFL, there has been a move to promote critical interculturality and the reading of the mass media as cultural texts. Sandra McKay criticizes the banal view of culture that, unfortunately, most EFL text-books present, if they present culture at all. She suggests integrating culture into EFL programs in the following way:

...[T]he materials should be used in such a way that students are encouraged to reflect on their own culture in relation to others, thus helping to establish a sphere of interculturality. Second, the diversity that exists within all cultures should be emphasized. And finally, cultural content should be critically examined so that students consider what assumptions are present in the text and in what [other] ways the topic could be discussed. (McKay 2002: 100)

To develop such critical perspectives in EFL, John Corbett acknowledges the usefulness of recurring to literary, me-

dia, and cultural studies in the intercultural classroom for "strategies of interpretation" in order "to foster the crucial skill of interpreting the language and the wider social practice of the target culture" (Corbett 2003: 168-169). He wisely points out that for cultural analysis, we cannot take mediated texts, like movies, television programs, recorded music, advertisements, etc., which are created for a specific audience, at face value; one has to be conscious of "their function as entertainment or propaganda. However, mediated texts also enter into the ongoing social negotiation of what it is to be a member of a given culture at a particular time" (Corbett 2003: 181-182). Therefore, although students may not be able to enjoy direct, unmediated, contact with the target culture (e.g., living and working for an extended period of time in an Anglophone society), mediated texts are probably those cultural "experiences" most readily available to them, and they have undeniable cultural importance in the target societies as barometers of social and cultural identity. After all, popular culture is intertwined in the



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society that produces and enjoys it; in the particular case of film, society sees a reflection of its image-identity on the screen, and subsequently, film representations continually alter and shape that collective identity. We can also say that the mediated representations that are viewed in film are, in essence, "the dominant forms or modes through which people experience the world" (Ryan and Kellner 2005: 213). In fact, many films become so iconic that "some are recognized worldwide as a common frame of reference" (Stempleski and Tomalin 2001: 1).

Therefore, the power of film to create images of social identities which become "truths" for subsequent human action demands an ability to critically appraise it instead of passively receiving it as mere entertainment. This social force of cinema is commented on in the words of Abrams:

Film has disseminated explicit discourses of identity by translating the abstract ideas of social class, race, gender, and ethnicity into visible and concrete images consumed by millions worldwide. In doing so, film exercises an important role in not just reflecting but also shaping popular understandings of these terms... Since film attracts so many viewers it has exercised a profound influence on both individual and collective consciousness. (Abrams 2005: 1)

Thus, by critically examining Anglophone film, EFL students can uncover how English-speaking societies view their own social groups and those outside those cultures, and at the same time, students can ponder their own creation of identities within their country. It is a necessary corollary that EFL professors must place a high value on developing their own critical intercultural attitudes about Anglophone societies in order to create the ideal environment in the classroom for the students. Certainly, this would entail a

paradigm shift from deculturalized textbook language drilling to studying and teaching the English language and Anglophone cultures from a critical perspective, or as Gee states:

The English teacher can cooperate in her own marginality by seeing herself as a 'language teacher' with no connection to ...social and political issues. Or she can... accept her role as one who socializes students into a world view that, given its power [in the us] and abroad, must be viewed critically, comparatively, and with a constant sense of the possibilities for change. Like it or not, the English teacher stands at the very heart of the most crucial educational, cultural, and political issues of our time. (Gee 1990: 60)

The School and the Course

The Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana (UAM) is a four campus urban public university, founded in 1974 in Mexico City, with each campus having at present a student population of approximately 10, 000 (9,000 undergraduates and 1,000 graduate students). As a continuation of the advanced level in the General Program of English, "Selected Topics in Anglophone Cultures" was created to perfect linguistics skills as well as critical intercultural ones. In the UAM-Iztapalapa curriculum, there is no common core of humanities courses required for all undergraduate majors; so, in a way, foreign language courses have served as a humanities component in all majors. The ten-week trimester course under discussion, "Intercultural Encounters in Anglophone Film", was first offered in 2002. Its primary objectives, similar to other courses in "Selected Topics...," are the following:

 Explore and reflect on intercultural representations in a selection of English-speaking films, and ponder one's own cultural representations.

- Become acquainted with the complexity of Anglophone cultural history.
- Begin to appreciate critically, and thus enhance the enjoyment of, the art of the cinema.
- Improve and diversify communicative abilities in English through film viewing, reading on cinema art and critical reviews of the course's films, class and small group discussions, and short written assignments.

Its content consists of nine films—Barcelona, Black Robe, Iron & Silk, The Searchers, Witness, Lone Star, The Treasure of the Sierra Madre, West Side Story, and A Passage to India— originating from Canada, England, and the United States, and embracing a variety of genres: adventure, coming of age, drama, thriller, western, mystery, musical, and film adaptations from novels. Many are classic films; some are more recent. All have been chosen because in one way or another, different cultures are shown to come into contact with each other, often in complex, conflictive, and surprising ways. Perhaps it can be said that the overriding question to think about in the course is: How can one live with difference?

Each film has a guide to orientate the students before viewing, with a short summary and questions to think about before, during, and after seeing the film. These guides were originally written to help students in their visits to the self-access foreign language multimedia center. All films are shown with English subtitles or closed captions. The films are projected during one of the two hour weekly sessions, followed by the discussion, which may be with the entire group or in small groups. Included in the syllabus are readings about the nature of cinema from William Costanzo's, Great Films and How to Teach Them (2004), and several film reviews of each movie obtained from the Internet or from other sources.

To successfully complete the course, students must actively participate in the sessions, submit the writ-

ten answers to the film guides, and write and present to the class a short essay during the last week. The topics for the essay include, among others, evaluating the intercultural encounters in two or more films, analyzing which film made the students reflect more on their own culture, and criticizing film reviews basesd on their own perspectives.

The movies

In this section, we will briefly describe the movies and indicate why they were chosen for their didactic possibilities to provoke intercultural moments of insight in students.

Barcelona, from the independent director, Whit Stillman, takes place in that city in the 1980s. It deals with the experiences in love and work of two American cousins, Ted, a middle management businessman, and Fred, a US Navy officer. They both have to confront the increasingly anti-American political movement in Spain during the last decade of the Cold War. The style and humorous tone of the film, with the aid of 1970s disco music and American pop songs sung in Spanish, produce a distancing from the characters, somewhat Brechtian, with each sequence ending in a blackout. There is a constant flow of talking and commentary both by the two men and their romantic counterparts, Marta and Montserrat, about how each other view American and Spanish culture—especially cultural stereotypes and sexual and political attitudes. An additional character, Ramón, is a journalist who espouses leftist, anti-American beliefs about US foreign policy. While the Spaniards insist that "Americans have a total lack of culture", only eat hamburgers, and are fascists (facha), Fred the officer proclaims that "It's well known that anti-Americanism has its roots in sexual impotence," and Ted sees life through the lens of current business management ideology. In the end, Ted marries another Spanish woman, Greta, and Fred, Montserrat, and

all are enjoying a barbecue in the US, with the women commenting on, "How delicious the hamburgers are!"

Since the entire movie is really an intercultural encounter, it gives the students a lot to think about. Are the portrayals of the main characters stereotypes, or not? Does your idea of Americans coincide with that of the women? Have you ever traveled to another country (or within your own country) and had misunderstandings? What about the representations of the Spaniards? Is the director's intention to satirize American life and attitudes? Most students react favorably to these kinds of questions to probe the movie, especially aided by the humor of the film. For this reason, it is a good choice to begin the course.

The next film, Witness, directed by the Australian, Peter Weir, uses the police action genre and popular star, Harrison Ford, to let us enter into the Amish culture. A young widow, Rachel, and her son, both members of a selfsufficient, cooperative, non-violent, and religiously oriented Amish community in rural Pennsylvania, travel to the city of Philadelphia. In the train station there, the child witnesses a murder, with the killer being a police officer. Another detective, John Book, gets involved protecting them, and with John injured, they go into hiding with the Amish. There, Book comes to know a very different kind of life from being an urban cop. But the murderer and his co-conspirators in the police force come searching for the child—the witness. However, Book, with the non-violent tactics of the Amish, successfully thwarts the criminals. He leaves the community to return to his city life.

The richness of this film is the contrast it gives between contemporary American urban culture and that of the pastoral, strict, patriarchal Amish community. Although in the northern state of Chihuahua, Mexico, there is a similar settlement, the considerably large Mennonite society, most students in Mexico City have not had contact with

it. However, it does not take a leap of the imagination to see similarities (and of course, differences) between the Amish and the culture of small towns, pueblos, and also that of Indian communities (even near big urban sprawls), with which it is probable that city students have had some kind of first-hand contact. How would they react if they, like Book, had to seek shelter within these societies and stay within them for an extended period of time? It can provoke reflection on the students' images of these cultures, and even the recognition of a lack of real knowledge about them, especially in the case of the Indians.

The third film, Black Robe, is directed by another Australian director, Bruce Beresford, in a Canadian-Australian co-production. It tells the epic of the French Jesuit missionary, Father Laforgue—Black Robe—who travels into the Canadian wilderness of Quebec to convert the Algonquin and Huron tribes in 1634 while compiling a grammar and dictionary of the indigenous languages. He travels 1,500 miles up the St. Lawrence River with the Algonquins to the Hurons, living and enduring hardships as an Indian. Black Robe is abandoned by the Algonquins because they think he is an evil spirit. He continues his journey only accompanied by the Frenchman, Daniel. They are rejoined by the Algonquins, but all are captured and tortured by a warring tribe of Iroquois. Laforgue finally alone arrives at his destination, a Huron village, to find only one dying Jesuit left and half the Indians dead from disease.

Although this film deals with the French exploration and settlement of Canada, its narrative is similar to what is virtually a national epic that has been immortalized in the Anglo-Canadian E. J. Pratt's poem, *Brébeuf and His Brethern* (1996). As such, one of its principal themes is that of survival, which the Canadian writer Margaret Atwood believes is the predominant character of Canadian literature and identity (Atwood 1996: 359-361). The

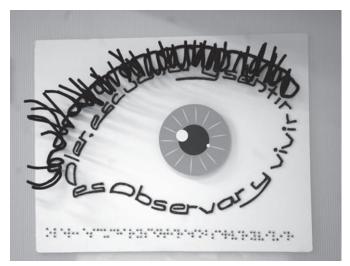
priest's physical journey is also an interior search concerning his religious beliefs, and his relationship to the "heathen" tribes whom he wants to convert. At the beginning, he is very sure of his beliefs and self-righteous and condescending to the natives; in the end, Laforgue comes to see the Indians as humans and to love them as they are. Unfortunately, the intervention of the Catholic missionaries makes some of the Indian tribes dependent on them, and as a consequence, vulnerable to other warring tribes. So, with the students, a key question is the role of the Church in the conquest of America (no small topic!): do "missionaries" (of wha-tever religion or political affiliation) have any right to change another people's way of life, i.e., culture? Also, it is important to consider and contrast the intercultural experience in Black Robe with the Spanish missionaries in Mexico and the urban students' attitudes toward the Mexican Indian population. Finally, students are led to reflect on other film versions that they may have seen that treat the "civilized" white man coming into contact with the "savage" indigenous peoples, such as The Mission, Dances with Wolves, and Cabeza de Vaca.

Iron & Silk is an autobiographical, intercultural "coming-of-age" film, based on Mark Salzman's memoirs in the late 80s, after graduating from Yale with a degree in Chinese, becoming an English language teacher of adult EFL professors in China and a martial arts student just when the country was opening itself to the outside world. Salzman himself wrote the screenplay and stars in it. The movie explores the intercultural encounters between Mark and his students in their rural village, the people he works with, both his calligraphy and Tai Chi teacher, the strict martial arts master, "Iron Fist" Pan, and the woman he falls in love with.

What is interesting about this film is that students end up identifying with an American in his adventures, and subsequent personal growth, in what is truly a foreign culture for most Mexican students—China. In other words, they are seeing and reflecting on China through both American and Mexican lens. Granted, Mark Salzman can hardly be classified as a typical young American; nonetheless, his frankness and openness are certainly in the American character, as contrasted with the more circumspect and reticent Chinese. On the other hand, throughout the movie, we see Mark as he grows more knowledgeable in communicating with the Chinese and understanding their character. Therefore, all of the different situations in the film provide the students with a three-way intercultural lens and mirror: the American, the Chinese, and the Mexican culture.

The next three films, *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, The Searchers, and Lone Star, reveal, among many other great qualities, representations of Mexicans in them. The first film is based on the novel by B. Traven, an author who is a mysterious legend in Mexico and who died there. A parable about the terrible effect greed can have, it was mostly filmed in the northern Mexican state of Durango in accord with the setting in the novel. Nevertheless, students point out that the scenes in the film where the old prospector, Howard, goes to cure an Indian boy in his village, are not part of northern Mexico, nor are the Indians depicted those from the north, but rather, are typical of the central part of Mexico. In fact, as one student noted after a Web search, those scenes were filmed in the central state of Michoacán. Students become aware of how Hollywood tends to consider the "other" (like "Mexican Indians") as a uniform type, child-like, with complacent women just waiting for a gringo-like god to arrive. This can also lead to a discussion of what are the Mexican stereotypes of Anglo women. In addition, in this film we have the American stereotype of all time of the Mexican bandito, Gold Hat ("We don't need no stinkin' badges!"). What is particularly amusing to students is how Humphrey Bogart as Dobbs, when under siege by Gold Hat and his gang, jumps for joy when the federales (the national police at the time of the novel and film) come to rout the bandits. As every Mexican student knows, the Mexican feared the federales because they took anyone suspicious of a crime (or out of favor with the local political leaders) and summarily executed them.

Another masterpiece, the great Western, John Ford's *The Searchers*, takes place both in Texas and northern Mexico (although it was filmed in the legendary Monument Valley in Arizona) and narrates the seven year wanderings of Ethan Edwards to recover (and kill) his niece Debbie who has been kidnapped as a child by the Comanche Chief Scar and is now his squaw. In his search, Ethan crosses over to "Mexico", and we see him and his nephew, Martin, being entertained in a *cantina*, by a sensuous *señorita*, who expresses her desire for Martin by accelerating the clicking of her castanets as she dances! Again, we see the other culture's woman portrayed as a sexualized individual; also we can observe the com-



Fotografía: José Ventura

mon Anglo confusion between Spanish and Latin American cultures. Dancers in the north of Mexico did not and do not use castanets when dancing. Additionally, this movie touches on a sensitive topic, miscegenation; here it is Ethan who cannot bear to think of Debbie having sexual relations with an Indian, professing the belief, in a paraphrase, "Better dead than red." Although Hollywood (and Ford) have Scar played by a blue-eyed German actor, as was the usual custom for Indian roles above the category of extras, the movie does provide reflection for students on their own attitudes toward their own Indian cultures and Mexico, and their viewpoint about interracial marriages and, perhaps, the more subtle light-skinned versus dark-skinned prejudice.

This same topic, the mixing of cultures, races, and nationalities, is taken up in John Sayles' multi-narrative, Lone Star, whose key story is about the Anglo Sheriff Sam Deeds' search for the truth about his father and how it leads him to discover that he is really the half-brother of his childhood and current sweetheart, Pilar, a first generation chicana. The setting, the fictionalized border town of "Frontera," can be interpreted as a metaphor for the intercultural and interracial encounters that occur throughout this movie. We have the mother of Pilar, Mercedes the restaurant owner, who came as an illegal, but now, as a respectable businesswoman, berates her Hispanic employees to "Speak English!", and is all too eager to report new illegals crossing her property to the Immigration authorities. We also have the story of the mixing of African-Americans with Seminole Indians, and the interracial romance in the Army of an African-American woman officer and a Caucasian officer. Native Americans are shown, as are Mexicans who live across the border. In all, this movie is an ideal one to provoke discussions (as in the final scene, when Pilar suggests, "Forget the Alamo!") about the complexities in keeping and erasing differences.

The next film, the musical, West Side Story, takes the Romeo and Juliet tragedy and transposes it to New York

City in the twentieth century, with María and Tony falling in love amid the ethnic rivalry of two teenage gangs, the Sharks (the Puerto Ricans) and the Jets (the Anglos and European immigrants). We see how clothes, hairstyles, body movements, ways of dancing, and family structure through the lens of the creators of this film mark each group as Anglo and Latino. For instance, the song, "America," is a debating female chorus on the pros and cons of immigrating to the US or staying in Puerto Rico. Students can reflect on these perceptions and of course, on their own feelings about how they see the US and Mexico. There is, additionally, material to stir a discussion about the all important gun in American life, and the subsequent violent environment it provokes.

The last film in the course, A Passage to India, based on the E. M. Forster novel, concerns the effect of the Raj the British occupation of India—on both the colonized and the colonizer. We see different social strata in India as well as how different English persons respond to the Indian culture. Mrs. Moore, Miss Adele Quested's future mother-inlaw, is open to the otherness of Indian culture, and as fatalistic as the Hindu Godbole. The headmaster, Fielding, is an intercultural person who can understand both cultures and see where points of conflict and/or confusion could arise. He is an intermediary between the British and the Indians; but he does not remain neutral, as when he stands up for a decent treatment in court of the accused Dr. Aziz. The pivotal character, Adele Quested, in the beginning seems to want to be open to understanding the Indian culture, but her own psychological and cultural baggage prevents that and causes great harm to many people, both Indian and British. All of these conflicts enable students to witness that authentically encountering another culture is no easy matter; it can be rewarding, but also arduous, conflictive, and painful as it stirs perhaps unacknowledged personal experiences and beliefs. As Mrs. Moore says, "India forces one to come face to face with oneself." One can substitute here any other country that is foreign to oneself instead of "India."

Concluding Remarks

In describing these nine films, I have merely touched briefly on the riches they reveal for encouraging English students to reflect about the cultural representations and situations that are narrated in them with their own parallel native culture equivalents. Moreover, there are many other films that offer the same opportunities for intercultural reflection on how one can live with difference. Personally as a teacher, one can only be in accord with the new focus on intercultural immersion that English language programs must have in order to provide students with the proper formation to thrive in what is truly a complex and interrelated world. In this, I must second what Byram, Gribkova, and Starkey have already astutely pointed out:

....the "best" teacher is neither the native nor the non-native speaker, but the person who can help learners see relationships between their own and other cultures, can help them acquire interest in and curiosity about 'otherness', and an awareness of themselves and their own cultures seen from other people's perspectives. (2002: 10).

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