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## Exploring the Cultural Content of French Feature Films

by Thomas M. Carr, Jr.

OF THE MANY FORMS OF REALIA AT THE DISPOSAL of the French teacher, the feature film can be the most engaging and rewarding. Nothing holds students' attention quite like a movie or gives them as vivid an experience of France, short of going abroad. Moreover, movies can furnish glimpses of milieus and personalities the average tourist or student rarely encounters.

Instructors have been quick to make use of this potential in the classroom. In literature courses the movie version of a play or novel is compared with the original text. In civilization classes films are used along with supplemental readings as historical documents. Recently French departments have added to the traditional literature sequence courses devoted entirely to film.<sup>1</sup>

I will concentrate here on the wealth of information about French culture found in many feature movies, defining culture anthropologically as "the total way of life of a people, the social legacy the individual acquires from his group."<sup>2</sup> The range of cultural data which can be implicit in a film, assuming it is set in contemporary times and handled in a more or less realistic fashion, can be divided into at least three levels. Consider first of all the facts about routine features of life which form a kind of background to the action—how people dress, what kind of housing they have, how they greet each other, etc. Secondly, a great deal of information about the functioning of social roles and institutions is equally apparent. Finally, the culture's value system will be brought into play as characters make choices and decide what kinds of behavior and feelings are appropriate in various circumstances.

Historians, psychologists and social scientists have all dealt with the cultural analysis of film, but their studies have often lacked a pedagogical orientation or required special expertise and access to a large number of films.<sup>3</sup> I hope that by

<sup>1</sup> William L. Markey, "The Use of Film in French Language and Literature Courses," *French Review*, 49, 5 (April 1976), 730-35; John J. Michalczyk, "The Teaching of French Civilization on the University Level," *French Review*, 50, 2 (December 1976), 227-35; Richard Figge, "The Use of Film in Teaching German Culture," *Die Unterrichtspraxis*, 10 (Fall 1977), 88-94.

<sup>2</sup> Clyde Kluckhohn, *Mirror for Man* (New York: Fawcett Publications, 1970), p. 24.

<sup>3</sup> For a psychological analysis of movies as cultural myths, see Martha Wolfenstein and Nathan Leitis, *Movies: A Psychological Study* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1950). Paul Monaco's *Cinema and Society* (New York: Elsevier, 1976) explores French and German movies of the 1920s in much the same vein. Anthropological perspectives are found in John Weakland's "Feature Films as Cultural Documents," *Principles of Visual Anthropology*, ed. Paul Hockings (The Hague: Mouton, 1975), pp. 230-51, as well as in Karl G. Heider, *Ethnographic Film* (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1976).



*L'Argent de poche*. Courtesy of François Truffaut and New World Pictures, Inc.

combining the insights of researchers in these disciplines with my own experience I can offer some strategies for exploring the three levels of cultural content of individual feature films thoroughly and systematically in the language or culture and civilization classroom.

It must be remembered, of course, that a feature film, even one that has a contemporary setting and that is handled in a realistic fashion, is not a documentary. It is fiction, and like any work of art, it is the product of a process of selection, highlighting and exaggeration. Yet the immediacy of the medium can trick us into accepting as a realistic portrayal of life that which is only a stereotype, convention or even fantasy. As Jean Decock has put it, film offers us "la réalité dans l'imaginaire . . . mais surtout l'imaginaire par la réalité."<sup>4</sup> For this reason we must take care not to generalize too quickly on the basis of a single film, but evaluate each movie in light of all available information about what is most typical in French culture.

The strategies I will outline are not designed for all feature films, but for those set in contemporary times whose background is meant to be recognized as authentic by French audiences and whose actions and characters can be taken as

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Weakland's bibliography (pp. 249–51) lists the major contributions to the field. See also the annotated bibliography in I. C. Jarvie, *Movies and Society* (New York: Basic Books, 1970), and his *Movies as Social Criticism* (Metuchen, N. J.: Scarecrow Press, 1978), as well as Andrew Tudor, *Image and Influence* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1974).

<sup>4</sup> Jean Decock, "L'Utilisation du film commercial dans l'enseignement des langues," *French Review*, 43, 3 (February 1970), 472.



*L'Argent de poche*. Courtesy of François Truffaut and New World Pictures, Inc.

plausible.<sup>5</sup> Fortunately, such films include many of the best productions since the beginning of the Nouvelle Vague. For example, Truffaut's Antoine Doinel cycle or Rohmer's *contes moraux* are excellent for this sort of analysis. A large number of recent releases by less well established directors are equally suitable; to mention only a few 1978 films, Claude Sautet's *Une Histoire simple*, Yves Boisset's *La Clef sur la porte*, or Coline Serreau's *Pourquoi pas!* are all in this realistic vein. Some previous knowledge of French society on the part of the student is assumed, but it need not be extensive. In fact, my first-year classes have seemed to enjoy this analysis as much as advanced ones. My illustrations will come from Truffaut's *Argent de poche* (1976); the glimpses this film gives into a variety of French homes makes it a fine vehicle for the study of family life and childhood. An appendix based on Agnès Varga's *L'Une chante, l'autre pas* (1977) provides additional examples.

### Outline of Activities

*Introduction.* When one is dealing with advanced students, it is often useful to begin by asking them to evaluate how faithful a picture of life in France they

<sup>5</sup> Of course, current films that do not convey this air of authenticity also contain indicators of contemporary cultural patterns. I have not chosen to treat them here because the evidence about society today they provide is more indirect; films set in the past, action-adventure productions and comedies are often best analyzed in terms of their mythic quality or elements of daydream and fantasy, as has been done in the studies of Wolfenstein and Monaco.

think the movie presents. Does the action seem exceptional or unlikely? Are any of the characters obvious stereotypes? Another way to sensitize students to the fact that they are dealing with a work of art rather than a documentary the first time they approach a film this way is to evaluate the view of life in the U.S. a particular American movie would present to a foreigner.

Thus, although *Argent de poche* seems realistic, students might be asked to assess the extent to which it presents an idealized view of childhood by pointing to the episode of little Grégoire, who survives unscathed a fall from a balcony, and to the fact that all the children are physically attractive.

I. *Routine Patterns of Daily Life.* These details create much of the film's impression of authenticity. While they may go almost unnoticed by the native moviegoer, who concentrates on the film's action, they hold social interest for the foreign viewer.

1. It is easiest to concentrate on the patterns which contrast with American practices. Students can list differences between life in the U.S. and France on a surface level—food, table manners, dress, driving habits, body language, etc. Items that will not be discussed more thoroughly later can be mentioned here. This is a good warm-up activity, requiring a fairly unsophisticated level of observation. Students usually enjoy recognizing cultural differences they have already studied, and their curiosity is aroused by unfamiliar ones. In *Argent de poche*, things such as children's dress, life in a *colonie de vacances*, or the layout of French school buildings stand out.

2. A more ambitious activity which is sometimes feasible is to describe in as much detail as possible the elements of a particular event—for example, a meal, wedding, or class in school. The stress here is not so much on contrasts between the U.S. and France as on the event as a whole, but this activity is possible only when the film focuses on such an event for an extended period of time, or if more than one occurrence is shown. In the Truffaut film the long dinner scene at Laurent's home might be compared to some of the other meals shown more briefly to point out the order of courses and the role of meals in family life.

3. A film's setting often allows for a discussion of life in a particular locale or milieu. This might include the impact of environmental and geographic features or population density (urban, suburban or rural, etc.). Thus *Argent de poche*, which takes place in the Massif central town of Thiers, furnishes a panorama of small-town life.

II. *Inventory of Social Roles and Institutions.* The characters can serve as the point of departure for the investigation of the behavior associated with various social roles; the film's presentation of these roles can then be considered in light of more objective information found in textbooks, reference works or the press. Since this involves determining how the behavior of all the characters in a particular category is treated, it is often helpful to begin with a checklist of the movie's characters both major and minor. Giving such a list to the students before they see the film simplifies their work, making it less likely that they will overlook

some episodic, but significant character. The checklist reminds them that in order for one to see how a particular role or institution is treated, it should be considered in terms of all the characters, not just those in the spotlight. Occasionally I have asked the class to turn the checklist into a chart summarizing the *état civil* of the characters.

1. Some roles, such as those associated with age, sex, family status and social class, are universal and can be analyzed in almost every movie, although the emphasis will vary from film to film. To give one example of how these roles can be treated, the characters might be divided into age groups with the help of the checklist. The students might then discuss such questions as how each group sees itself, how it reacts with other groups, and what behavior seems expected from it. Is one group presented with more sympathy or in a fuller way, while others are merely stereotypes? Finally, the way these roles are presented in the movie should be compared with other available sources of information on the topic.

For example, *Argent de poche* shows a variety of family situations, including a single mother, a young married couple and middle-age parents. Do all the husbands and wives seem to work together as equals? How do parents show affection to their children? How do they discipline them? How do the children seek to escape the pressures on them to conform? This film also examines youngsters' attitudes toward sexuality from a number of perspectives—from young boys' curiosity about sexual matters to an adolescent's crush on an older woman. Boy-girl relationships in the context of a mixed group are seen in the camp sequences, while necking scenes in the movie house illustrate peer pressure of a different kind.

Class distinctions also show up particularly well in almost all films. An enormous number of facts about French life can be brought out by the instructor's asking students to determine the social class of each character, and more important, to explain on what basis they made their determination—job, dress, housing, hobbies, language and so on. In this Truffaut film the status of the poverty-stricken Julien differs drastically from the class of most of the other characters. How does his consciousness of his position influence his behavior?

2. The characters can also be a point of departure for the study of various institutions such as the Church or political parties. These institutions are usually identified by a look at the characters' professions. A detective movie will involve the judicial apparatus; a teacher will usually be related to educational institutions, an actor to the film industry. In other cases, passing in review the ideas and opinions of the characters will reveal institutional loyalties, as is the case for religious or political affiliation. These institutions come alive in movies. They are not seen in the abstract, or in terms of an organizational chart as is so often the case in textbooks, but in terms of how individuals function within them.

3. A variation is to focus on the multiple roles of a single character by tracing the changes in behavior as the character functions in a variety of social roles. This reverses the perspective used in the preceding two sections, since it emphasizes the individual rather than the group. A character, for example, may behave

differently as a father or spouse in the intimacy of his home from the way he does in his professional capacity, or even as a neighbor. Does the character's behavior correspond to what seems generally expected from a person in his position? If a conflict arises between some of the roles a character is called to play, how is it dealt with? In *Argent de poche* the police chief's authoritarian behavior as a father and official could be compared. Even more striking is how the male teacher combines his role as a father and educator when he announces the birth of his first son to the class.

The view of such institutions and roles in the film will be partial at best and often colored by bias or stereotyping. Simply recognizing any stereotypes can be difficult enough, for even natives often accept them uncritically as representations of reality. But once they are identified, with the instructor's aid, the simplified version of life they offer can be pointed out if the class discusses them in light of more complete data on the subject. The cameo shot of the jolly neighborhood shopkeeper may be in part a touch of nostalgia when one realizes that such merchants are increasingly threatened by mass merchandising. American students are probably already familiar with the way stereotypes of blacks have been used in U.S. films to reinforce and justify racial prejudice. Are immigrant workers or members of the lower classes treated in a similar way in some French films? Christian Metz calls such uncovering of stereotypes an "aspect libérateur"<sup>6</sup> of film analysis.

III. *The Action and Values.* When characters act, they make choices or express preferences that bring into play the culture's values and world view.<sup>7</sup> This makes the film's action or story line an ideal basis for the discussion of the foreign value system.

1. One technique of investigation is to begin with concrete examples of behavior found in the movie and to isolate the values that underlie them. What problem is the subject of the film? Does it involve a conflict of values, perhaps between individual preferences and social obligations, or between two social obligations? The film's ending can be examined to determine how any conflict is resolved. Does the resolution involve social integration, or do the protagonists stand alone?

2. The approach that I have found most easily handled in class is to combine a comprehensive discussion of the French value system with analysis of the film's action. After presenting Howard Nostrand's summary of the twelve "centers of value" listed in his "emergent model,"<sup>8</sup> I ask students to rank the two or three values found on his list (such as love, friendship or individuality) that seem most prominent in the film. This allows them to examine the extent to which the culture's value system is illustrated by the movie's action. As they discuss each value in more detail, the students determine how clearly the characters formulate

<sup>6</sup> Christian Metz, *Essais sur la signification au cinéma* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1972), II, 146.

<sup>7</sup> Frederick Elkins, "The Value Implications of Popular Films," *Society and Social Research*, 38 (May-June 1954), 320.

<sup>8</sup> Howard Nostrand, "The 'Emergent Model' Applied to Contemporary France," *Contemporary French Civilization*, 2 (Winter 1978), 277-94.

their values and how intensely the values are held, as well as their relation to the social roles and institutions previously discussed. Usually it is discovered that the action involves a conflict between several values as characters are forced to choose between various options. In other films the action will center around one primary value seen from many angles. This is the case in *Argent de poche*, where the importance of the family is central.

When discussing that film the students might be asked to relate the teacher-protagonist's eloquent defense of the rights of children near the end of the film to the episode showing the arrest of Julien's mother for child abuse. This emphasis on the family in French culture can be further stressed by mention of the neighbors' indignation at Sylvie's feigned neglect and of the crowd's anger when Julien's mother is taken into custody by the police.

The next two sections can be used as concluding activities to draw together and focus the students' reactions to the movie.

IV. *The Cross-Cultural Dimension of the Action.* Two different areas are involved here: how any other cultures are presented in the film, and comparisons between French and American society.

1. If foreigners or episodes in foreign countries play a role in the plot, how are these other cultures treated? Discussion should center on how the French perceive other cultural groups.

2. In most of the preceding sections the effort has been to see French culture as a whole, rather than in terms of how it differs from our way of life. Nonetheless, student interest is often stimulated the most by any points of contrast between the two cultures. Sometimes comparisons are best made as the class discusses particular patterns of daily life, social roles and institutions or centers of value; in other cases it is useful to reserve such comparisons for the end of the discussion. For example, if the action could be set in the U.S. would the director have to make certain adjustments? If the film's action probably could not be set here, can the students identify a parallel problem that might arise in the U.S.? How would the students handle it? Such questions can help them sum up their findings and identify differences between French and American values, resources and life styles.

V. *The Film and its Audience.* As Estelle Jussim has noted, "Movies reveal audiences, not just 'auteurs' . . . A film can be examined for internal evidence of what the audience will accept, laugh at, cry over, or reject."<sup>9</sup> Thus, we should inquire about the kind of audience for which the film was intended. If it does not seem directed at a general public, but rather towards a special group, to what extent does it play on the values or attitudes of that group? Will the movie continue to have appeal ten or fifteen years from now? Is its success or failure at the box office an indicator of trends in taste or interest in certain themes? If the students have access to French newspapers they might examine the cultural implications of advertisements for the film, or they could be asked to write their

<sup>9</sup> Estelle Jussim, "Film as History," *Media and Methods*, 12 (September 1975), 69-70.



own ads and design posters emphasizing the film's appeal to themes in French culture.

Now that the main lines of these strategies have been sketched, some suggestions about their use in the classroom are in order. They were conceived for courses in which there is some emphasis on contemporary French life. This is not necessarily an advanced-level culture and civilization course, since most beginning texts and intermediate readers today stress modern society. These strategies could just as easily be used in conversation courses where the subject matter is not fixed. Their breadth and flexibility were designed to take advantage of individual movies that appear on television, in a film series, or at commercial theaters, as budgets often do not permit ordering feature films specifically for classroom use.

Since some of these activities overlap, the instructor may choose to omit or expand them, according to the kind of film under consideration, the makeup of the class, and course goals. In some cases it may be profitable to attempt an exhaustive discussion of a movie's cultural content; in others, it may be more appropriate to concentrate on a single aspect or to combine cultural analysis with other kinds of film study. I sometimes ask small groups to be responsible for one section of the analysis or assign parts of it as written reports. This is especially useful when the schedule does not allow for the several class periods usually needed to treat a movie thoroughly.

Compared with books, which can be reread or reconsulted with ease, movies present many difficulties to the student. Under ideal conditions a film could be viewed repeatedly and key episodes could thus be isolated for discussion. But until video cassettes make film as accessible and convenient as records have made music, such close study will seldom be feasible in the language classroom. However, this problem can be minimized if the instructor previews the film and prepares in advance a checklist of characters and specific questions similar to the ones in the appendix. The questionnaire alerts the students to what they should look for before viewing the film, or at least before discussing it in class. When available, scenarios that have appeared as books, or have been published in reviews such as *L'Avant Scène Cinéma*, might be consulted.

The use of role playing and interview techniques can add a change of pace. Students might take the part of characters in the film and be questioned about their social roles and institutional affiliations instead of having the discussion led by the instructor. Audience response can be treated in much the same way if students assume a rather well-defined French personality and give their reactions to the film. For example, students might put themselves into the role of a French primary school teacher or a ten-year-old who has just seen *Argent de poche*. Another possibility is to invite to class someone French whose reaction to the film could be compared with those of the American students.

Students with little direct experience of French culture will sometimes accept uncritically situations and characters as typical or authentic, even though they are only stereotypes, in much the same way as *Cousin/Cousine* reinforced the preconceived ideas of many Americans about love and sex in France. Unfortu-

nately, there is probably no easy key to identifying stereotypes. However, as the class becomes sensitized to the danger of hasty generalizations based on the view of France a film presents, the students will recognize the need for follow-up research to confirm or correct their findings. One source of information on values and attitudes which should not be overlooked is the opinion polls that appear regularly in news magazines such as *L'Express* and that are often found in adapted form in textbooks, or collected, as in Roland Muraz, *La Parole aux Français: cinq ans de sondages* (Bordas, 1977).

Emphasis on the foreign culture in the language classroom aims at giving students both an informed appreciation of the second culture and a point of comparison that can foster insights into their own way of life. The feature film has the potential to be a focal point for just such study—providing an occasion for bringing together what students have already learned and becoming a springboard for further research.

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### Appendix

#### *L'Une chante, l'autre pas* (1977)

These questions are not meant as a complete guide to the film, but as a further indication of how some of these strategies can be handled—in this case, how they might be applied to a movie with a strong ideological slant. *L'Une chante* chronicles ten years in the lives of two young women (one a singer in a feminist pop group and the other a family planning director), and questions many of the traditional assumptions about family life, among them that the married couple should be the center of childraising.

I. *Routine Features.* Some of the differences in Suzanne's life as she moves from Paris to a rural community and then to the Mediterranean coast could be mentioned.

II. *Social Roles and Institutions.*

A. Class. In spite of the fact that Suzanne's parents are peasants and Pomme's solidly bourgeois, do they react in similar ways to their daughters' quest for independence? How plausible is Suzanne's transformation from an insecure peasant girl into a pediatrician's wife? Is such mobility common in France?

B. Age and the family. Three generations are shown. Contrast the lack of communication between the two heroines and their parents with the openness of Suzanne and her children.

C. Sex roles. Situate the heroines' abortions and feminist activities in the context of the women's movement in France and of French legislation concerning family planning and divorce.

D. State institutions. Are all the representatives of various state agencies (police, Ministry of Culture, schools, welfare services, etc.) pictured in terms of stereotypes, including that of the *fonctionnaire* as impersonal and uncaring?

III. *Values and the Action.* The film's action revolves around three or four of Howard Nostrand's themes—family, friendship, individuality and perhaps the quest for community. The students might be asked to show how Pomme is caught between, on the one hand, her desire for marriage and children and, on the other, the demands of individuality and independence. To what extent is her rather unusual solution (leaving her first child with her husband and having a second whom she will raise alone) influenced by Suzanne's

success as a single mother? Does the tight friendship between the two women replace in some way the traditional bonds between man and wife? To what extent is their friendship only part of their larger quest for community within the family of women?

IV. *Cross-cultural Dimension.* Show that the episodes in Holland and Iran are meant not so much to provide a touch of exoticism, as to represent extremes in the condition of women. Is it as likely that Pomme would have made the decision to give up her first child if her husband had been a Frenchman instead of an Iranian? Would women in the U.S. have encountered the same obstacles as Pomme and Suzanne? Would they have achieved the same independence?