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Engaging Thinking about the Study of French Films

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Abstract

This study investigated whether students would demonstrate increased awareness of the development of cinema in France if engaged in critical thinking about the contribution of each film to this history. Pre-and post-tests were administered, in which students were asked about criteria for selecting films to be studied. In addition to gains noted in the ability of students to articulate their criteria for choosing which films are important, leading the students through their own critical thinking impacted selection and made for a more satisfying teaching experience.

Introduction

As I prepared to teach an Introduction to French Cinema class in the fall semester of 2013, which I had taught before, I resolved to challenge students to think beyond instinctual likes and dislikes by engaging their critical thinking skills. My goal was to aid students in the ability to demonstrate critical awareness of the development of cinema in France through thinking from the start about the contributions of a movie to the history of French film. Students with advanced proficiency in French in a cinema class were invited to participate in this study and completed pre-and post-surveys. The course focused on examination of thematic elements, aesthetics, and innovative techniques (see Falk, Fox, Leopard, Tomasulo, etc. for approaches to these aspects).

Naturally, instructors may go through this process of question and redesign to some degree, whether systematically and as part of a study, or simply as part and parcel of regular course preparation. In other words, when selecting films, teachers may choose the ones that best correspond to their course objectives, or those that they judge to be most appealing. Or we may also simply defer to textbook authors as the experts in the field and teach the films or a choice of them that are covered in a book. Given the growing popularity of film studies, myriad textbooks with excellent resources are available (Berg, Cahir, Joret, Leopard, McNeill), whether for general conversation and culture (Rice, Gross), a focus on the francophone world (Boudraa), on literature and adaptation (Cahir, Ritterbusch), or student guides and manuals (Powrie, Singerman & Bissière).

However, teachers may supplement a textbook or construct courses, and in so doing, making critical decisions about which films are important. In this study, I decided to engage my students

in order to help them understand better why I made the choices I did, as well as to support their higher order critical thinking skills, rather than simply testing content mastered. I wanted students to appreciate innovation, for instance, rather than simply memorize facts, and thus to “become a bridge to help students cross over from the side of facts to the side of understanding” (Theodosakis, x). In the larger scheme of the class, then, I deliberately exposed my students to the reasons we were seeing each film, had them reflect on my choice of films in order to gauge what they learned, and at the end of the reflection loop, took that into consideration as the course continued to evolve. While I do not conduct such studies every semester, it is helpful to do so from time to time to better attain course objectives.

The specific objectives for my course were that students would be able to (1) describe the origins and importance of French cinema in its artistic development (2) demonstrate the ability to use cinematic terms to identify techniques and trends and (3) analyze prevalent themes of French cinema. I did not use a textbook, though I drew on multiple sources, and I put several books on reserve in the library, emphasizing that the films were the primary “texts” in the class.

Homework assignments were designed for each film, in which students had to articulate why it was being studied in terms of periods or movements. In a portfolio organizing this work, students were also encouraged to arrange these assignments in ways that demonstrated what they understood about the chronology, development and groupings of films. Participants also wrote a brief original scenario in French on a topic of their choice to increase awareness of this process. Finally, they wrote essays in class at the end of the semester for the post-test related to the question of the study.

Methodology

On the first day of class, then, after an introduction and a brief explanation of this study, I asked students to write an essay in French about what makes a film important in the history of French cinema, accompanied by examples which would illustrate their ideas. Students were told that they should not be concerned if they did not yet have much acquired knowledge in this realm, that this was part of a study, and that it would give me an idea of what they already knew. Closer to the time of the final exam, months later, they were told that they would write essays on general topics. Responses to the pre-test and post-test were then analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively, both individually and as compared to the responses of the rest of the class, such as the number of French film titles mentioned and the extent of the analysis.

Analysis

The results of the pre-test were relatively short essays: ten students wrote a paragraph of about three to four sentences, with the exception of one who wrote two paragraphs, one who wrote three paragraphs and one who wrote five. The latter used criteria such as the depth of film, the ability of the actors to convince of a true story or *vraisemblance*, and the film’s lesson as criteria for judging its success, but did not include any film titles at all as illustration. Others in the study mentioned possible factors such as style, artistic risks, unique elements, and inspiring content, for example, war and history (*Joyeux Noël*), immigration and social concerns (*Les Intouchables*) and color and sound (*Les Parapluies de Cherbourg*), but these were not developed. Four students named two French film titles, five named one film, and four did not name any. Overall, several French film directors were named (the Lumière Brothers, Truffaut, and Jacques Demy), but no

cinematic movements or artistic periods were mentioned, and one actor/director, dominant in French film, Gérard Depardieu, was recalled, but was linked incorrectly with a film. Two students indicated that a film that is worthwhile ought to teach the viewer something, one explaining that the film *Manon des Sources* reveals the value of kindness rather than greediness. The student who stated that she had attended a presentation on French film her first year of college also mentioned camera techniques, but gave no specific examples.

The brevity of the first day's essay could be explained by multiple factors, including limitations in French, particularly with regard to technical terms, simple lack of content knowledge in terms of French cinema, the fact that it was fairly late in the day on the first day of classes, or peer pressure because others finished after a brief period, though no time constraints were given. On the other hand, all students wrote at least a few lines in French on that first day. Many of them were quite humble in their approach, either stating that they did not know much about this topic or framing their hypotheses in terms of possibilities. Two students stated that they did not know much about French film, but expressed interest in learning more. Two students state that they liked certain films, but did not delve into why; this is precisely what I wanted them to think about more.

Post-test Results

On the post-test at the end of the semester, students were given the same question as on the pre-test for the first essay and were told that there was a second part to complete once they had finished that. The format of the essay was given with the ideal described by Bean that essay questions invite students to synthesize what they have been learning and "as a result, essay exams...help students see the whole course in perspective and thus can be powerful tools for learning" (Bean, 2011, 211). When they had completed the first part; they were given their pre-test response and asked to reflect on what they had learned in the class since the first day. While I will focus first on a comparison of the responses to the first essay question, I will then incorporate the general reflections of the students from the second essay with my own.

With regard to sheer length of the essays and quantity of information about French films given, increases were measurable. Most students increased the amount they had written on the pre-test significantly. Of the students who had written one paragraph in the pre-test, for example, two wrote four paragraphs, two wrote five paragraphs, and one wrote ten paragraphs on the post test. As one would expect after a semester spent on the study of French film, the essays on the post-test were also considerably more complex and sophisticated than the first essay. Some of the major criteria which the students offered for judgment of a film's importance in the development of French cinema included new use of techniques, impact on the viewer and society, such as giving a different perspective or view through a moving and memorable story, the theme of the film, such as childhood or identity and style, and technique and ingenuity with regard to narration and the way stories are told. These ideas were more developed, as the amount written alone suggests, but as the following also details.

The first question simply asked for examples to illustrate ideas, so that no particular incentive was given to include the greatest number of films possible. Nevertheless, the total number of film titles given, including the number of those used by various students on the post-test increased significantly over those referenced on the first (from 13 to 54), with an average of one

title mentioned on the pre-test and over four titles (4.15) on the post-test. Again, this compares in the pre-test with zero titles in four essays, one title in five essays, and two titles in four essays. In the pre-test, the total number of different film titles referenced at least once (regardless of how many students included it) was nine, with twenty-one separate titles designated at least once in the post-test.

While several students did not name French film directors in the post-test at all, the majority named at least one, one student named four, and another seven. Those who named at least one director without exception did so in connection with a film title, and the majority of these also connected names of film directors and titles with techniques, cinematic movements and/or themes. Just as significantly as breadth of knowledge, increased depth in analysis of the films was demonstrated by the majority of the class. Namely, with regard to how the students structured their essays, ten students stated criteria and illustrated these with films, four primarily with one film, while two of these also added one or more briefly towards the end of the essay, and six used several films or a combination of films and artistic movements to illustrate their ideas. Three students sketched the chronological development of French film in terms of cinematic movements, using specific films of directors to illustrate that. These three were among the most sophisticated, though they varied in degree of completeness and development. Overall, in any case, when presenting assumptions about what makes for significant cinematic artistry, the students were able to write in a considerably more coherent and cogent way, giving substantial context and thoughtful reasons for their choices.

Reflection on Learning

In a second essay question (Part II of the post-test), students were asked to reflect on what they had learned in the class, considering what they had just written on Part I of the exam, and were given back what they had written on the first day of class (pre-test) after they had finished the first essay. Responses were positive, given that students were now able to point to written evidence of both quantitative and qualitative gains in their own knowledge and appreciation of French films, including additional names of movements, films and directors which had not been mentioned in the pre-test.

One of the most rewarding aspects of the study was noting the number of students who had used the film *La Grande Illusion* (1937) in their discussion. This was the first time that I had included this film and came to it through the use of the criteria which I describe above. I was transparent with the students that the film did not appeal to me much before learning more about it and realizing that it was an important one to consider in the history of French cinema in terms of theme and technique. In fact, I moved from thinking about *La Grande Illusion* as a war film to an anti-war film that promotes respect for those of other social classes and ethnicities. Indeed, my own assumptions were challenged when I saw that more female students referred to the film on the post-test than male students. What is significant here is that several students, male and female, could appreciate it in terms of its theme and techniques. This was my over-arching goal in the class, to challenge students to think beyond instinctual likes and dislikes by engaging their critical thinking skills and creativity. Their thoughtfulness in the end about what makes a film worthy of consideration impacted my own selection process, and I used it again the next time the course was offered. When making choices, I continue to keep the course objectives in mind, and

consider what films will best help to illustrate the origins and artistry, techniques and trends, and prevalent themes in the development of French cinema.

Discussion

Overall, the results of the study were positive enough for me to continue challenging both myself and students to think about what makes films worthy of study and to make deliberate selections for a French cinema course. As exciting new films emerge, I will need to justify which ones to use in lieu of others, and to explain my choices. I will continue to try to make my assumptions known to students, so that they can understand them and refine their own evaluative processes, which in turn influence my selections.

Using this type of deliberative selection, rather than a single textbook with films already chosen, taking the time to make assumptions transparent about how to choose films for consideration, and leading students through their own critical thinking about the subject made for a more satisfying teaching experience. Even more significantly, through practice from the start in thinking critically about films, the students moved beyond simply stating dislikes and likes and gave evidence of improved ability to think critically about the development of cinema in France. In the end, they formulated their own criteria for choosing French films worthy of study.

Endnotes

Joyeux Noël ("Merry Christmas"), 2005, directed by Christian Carion, is based on the 1914 truce among French, Scottish, and German soldiers.

La Grande Illusion ("The Great Illusion"), 1937, directed by Jean Renoir, focuses on class relationships during World War I among French officers plotting an escape from prison.

Les Intouchables ("The Untouchables"), 2011, directed by Olivier Nakache & Éric Toledano, depicts the development of a friendship despite differences between two men.

Les Parapluies de Cherbourg ("The Umbrellas of Cherbourg"), 1964, directed by Jacques Demy, includes in sung dialogue the impact of the Algerian war on a romance.

Manon des Sources ("Manon of the Springs"), 1986, directed by Claude Berri, the sequel to "Jean de Florette", highlights a shepherdess seeking to revenge the cause of her father's death.

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