

Teaching French Film in a Christian Context: Cédric Klapisch's *Un Air de famille*

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Abstract

Often, when viewing a foreign-language film, students are unable to pick up subtle cultural cues essential to the film's message. If, however, students are well-prepared for a film, they become perceptive critics of the larger themes represented in the film. In this article I address pedagogical issues surrounding the use of Cédric Klapisch's film, Un air de famille [Family Resemblances] based on my experience in teaching a new interdisciplinary course at Calvin College.

As a foreign language teacher at a Christian college in North America, I show foreign language films in the classroom with feelings of eagerness and excitement.¹ From experience, though, I know that my favorite French films risk being judged boring or even offensive by many students even when these films address universal human issues relevant to a Christian worldview. Often, the problem lies with students' inability to comprehend subtle cultural cues essential to the film's message. If, however, students learn to recognize relevant cultural information prior to screening, they become perceptive critics of the larger themes represented in the film. In this article I address pedagogical issues surrounding the use of Cédric Klapisch's film, *Un air de famille* [Family Resemblances] based on my experience in teaching a new interdisciplinary course at Calvin College.²

As an example of French film illustrating characteristic daily French culture, Klapisch's film is an excellent choice in many respects. Based on Agnès Jaoui and Jean-Pierre Bacri's play by the same name, the film was nominated for Best French Film at the French Academy of Cinema in 1996 and

won the Best Screenplay award as well as the Best Supporting Actress and Best Supporting Actor awards. The French public generally loved the film, in part because it portrayed a familiar scene of family conflict and resolution, all with particularly French humor. The film's characters include Maman, the mother of three adult children, Philippe, Henri, and Betty. Philippe is married to Yolande, and has two sons of his own, Henri is married to Arlette, and Betty, the youngest and only daughter, is still single at age 30, much to her mother's chagrin. Finally, in the film, there is one last main character, Henri's sole employee, Denis. Though he seems at first uninvolved in the family dynamics, Denis takes on a pivotal role as an exterior force for change within the family. From a Christian perspective the film is rich in themes of the Fall and Redemption in its portrayal of a dysfunctional but close-knit family. Nevertheless, the film tends to remain opaque for North American students ignorant of French culture.

Films are not transparent carriers of culture. That is to say, a filmmaker's target audience is rarely a foreign language classroom. Rather, the filmmaker typically assumes that the audience is already familiar with the cultural context depicted on the screen. For non-native students watching the film, it is essential to have some pre-knowledge of customs in order to fully appreciate the film, the illustrations of culture that it contains, and the implications of those illustrations in a Christian perspective. Indeed, there is a current in foreign language education that emphasizes the need to increase the role of cultural knowledge in language learning. Michael Byram, for example, includes "socio-cultural competence" in his list of competences necessary for a language learner to interact successfully in a foreign language.

The problem of students misunderstanding the content of a foreign language film was especially pertinent in my teaching a newly instituted interdisciplinary course required of all first-year students at Calvin College.³ The course, titled "Developing a Christian Mind" (DCM), has a threefold goal. First, the course has as its purpose to introduce students to "the central intellectual project of Calvin College" (*Catalog for Interim*, 2004) which is, according to the college's mission statement, that "through our learning, we seek to be agents of renewal in the academy, church, and society" (*Calvin College Mission Statement*). Secondly, the course promotes the development of a Christian worldview. And thirdly, the course encourages "a faith-based engagement with culture" (*Catalog for Interim*, 2004). All DCM sections share common readings and plenary lectures that address these goals from the perspectives of various disciplines while each individual section explores in greater depth a topic of special interest to the professor. My section of DCM

had as its theme Christian perspectives on French society and culture. Based on my experience in teaching the course in 2003, I placed greater emphasis on preparing students for the films we viewed in class when teaching the course a second time in 2004.

Though the DCM course is always taught in English, the issues surrounding the use of films as illustrations of culture are similar to those in a lower-level foreign language course in that students typically have very superficial knowledge of the target culture. I chose *Un Air de famille* as an introductory film and example of French culture both times I taught the DCM course because Klapisch presents an ordinary middle-class family having their weekly get-together over a meal. Most French can easily identify with this very common family tradition. The setting of the somewhat lackluster family-run neighborhood bistro that serves as a place of social gathering is also a familiar one in France. From a Christian perspective, the film fits in very well with the Christian worldview that we elaborate in the DCM course as the director's main interest lies with the family's relationships, their dysfunction (symbolic of the Fall) and their moments of hope (Redemption). In an interview in which he talked about two of his best known films, *Un Air de Famille* and *When the Cat's Away*, Klapisch underscored his interest in family relationships, both literally and loosely defined:

Both films explore the theme of families, whether it's the family you're born in, or the family you create. In a way all of my films have looked at the question of how a person exists in relationship to a group (Lucia, 2).

These themes provide excellent opportunities for cultural and religious discussion in the classroom. Still, I found that my students were much more successful in grasping the universal human elements of the film the second time I taught the course, largely due to better preparation and guidance in understanding cultural norms.

With little pre-knowledge of French culture, North American students watching the film are unable to distinguish between banal examples of every day life in France and significant lapses in family etiquette that appear so obvious to a French audience. Yet, when students have read a text such as Polly Platt's well-known culture guide, *French or Foe*, or Jean-Benoît Nadeau and Julie Barlow's *Sixty Million Frenchmen Can't Be Wrong*, they begin to notice many of the cultural markers essential to understanding the personal dynamics between characters. For example, the lack of smiling in the film be-

comes less threatening when students have read a section of Platt's chapter "Six Codes: Rudeness is in the Eye of the Beholder" which explains that the French smile when they have reason to, but tend not to wear the banal friendly look that North Americans do. In a second example, students are much less admiring of Philippe, the most financially successful character, if they have read Nadeau and Barlow's chapter, "Private Space," in which the authors explain that the French "don't actually hate [money], but it is considered a vulgar topic of conversation. No class in France earns more general disdain than the one that dwells on money: the *nouveaux riches*" (Nadeau and Barlow, 37). Philippe well illustrates the lifestyle of the *nouveaux riches* as his favorite topics of conversation are how much money he makes, how many secretaries are needed to keep up with his work, and his television interview on that day's evening news. With this cultural knowledge, students realize that, contrary to North American expectations, Klapisch is portraying Philippe in a negative light by having him vaunt his wealth and influence.

In order to understand the plotline of *Un Air de famille*, one must be aware of distinct power relations that can be identified within the family. As Platt writes, "Like the government, like big business and industry, French families are pyramids of strict hierarchy" (Platt, 131). In this particular family, Maman, as matriarch, commands the most respect. She left her unambitious husband sometime in the past and she now identifies herself most closely with her favorite son, Philippe. Philippe has succeeded in the capitalistic and consumeristic part of society as he holds a high position in his company, he is married to a dutiful, submissive and pretty wife, and he has two sons, all markers of success in more traditional circles of French culture. For the most part, the other family members accept Maman and Philippe's opinions defining their roles within the family hierarchy. Yolande, Philippe's wife, has a low rank in the hierarchy as Maman and Philippe view her as mainly a complement to Philippe's success. Henri, the other son, is considered a failure by Maman, Philippe and Betty, though Betty's opinion changes in the course of the film. Henri has taken over the bar from his father and for much of the film he seems doomed to follow in his father's footsteps as the official family loser. In fact, as the rest of the family finds out in the course of the film, Henri's wife Arlette has chosen this very evening to leave him, much as Henri's mother left his father years before. Henri therefore shares none of the financial success of his brother, he cannot control his wife, and he has no children, only a sickly old dog that never moves. Arlette, his wife, never appears on screen, and her relationship with the other family members remains somewhat ambiguous. At the same time

it is reasonable to assume that her marriage to the loser of the family likely puts her in low esteem in the eyes of the family matriarch. Like her brother Henri, Betty falls quite low in the family hierarchy, though she is less aware of her status than is Henri. When Denis quizzes her as to how she fits in the family, she answers, “les filles, ça ne compte pas, c’est compté différemment” (“girls don’t count; they’re rated differently” [my translation]). Finally, Denis falls at the very bottom of the hierarchy since not only is he a simple bar employee and therefore excluded from the family, he is also Henri’s employee, that is to say, employed by the loser of the family.⁴

These relationships are illustrated in the small gestures of daily life in the film. For example, in the opening scenes of the film, Philippe drives up to the bar in his car with his mother riding in the front passenger seat and his wife, Yolande, sitting quietly in the back seat, a location symbolic of her secondary status. When exiting the car, Philippe immediately opens the car door to let his mother out but ignores Yolande. The fact that he does not open the car door for his wife, or later, that he enters the bistro ahead of her and then does not offer her a chair even though he does for his sister Betty, are blatant signs of his lack of respect for his wife, although North American students may not notice if they have not read Platt’s discussion of the “battle of the door.” As she explains,

In France, a door in front of you, approached in tandem or group, is not to be swept through first just because you got to it first. It’s a test of your *savoir-faire*. Like the formula you use for signing a letter, which depends on who you are and what rank and sex, and to whom the letter is addressed, and their rank and sex (there are 38 choices), you must consider who else is approaching the door with you and their rank compared to yours, and their sex (Platt 35).

Philippe violates the protocol that, as Platt goes on to demonstrate, has been in place in France since the days of Louis XIV and his court at Versailles. In another example of quotidian French etiquette, Maman lets Henri and Betty know that they are very low on the familial totem pole when she enters the bar and sweeps past them on her way to the bathroom, not taking the time to greet them properly with double-cheek kissing. Upon returning, she first greets the dog and then Betty, but completely forgets Henri who is left feeling ridiculous and excluded.⁵ Both Platt’s and Nadeau and Barlow’s guides emphasize the importance of the *bonjour/au revoir* ritual in French culture. For the French

viewer, these details are clear displays of the characters' attitudes towards each other but I have found that my students are initially much less aware of these dynamics.

These familial relationships in the film are not static, however. Using black-and-white flashbacks, Klapisch shows that the family knew happier times in the past. These flashbacks first show three young children running into their parents' bedroom to wake them in the morning, opening the curtains to let the daylight stream in. This first flashback is Eden-like, as the children joyfully jump on the bed with their parents and the soundtrack plays Dalida's "Comme Prima," Italian for "as before." Later in the film, Klapisch shows the continuation of the same flashback with the same soundtrack, but this time evil enters into the picture and disrupts the paradisiacal scene as inevitably in the course of the family horseplay one of the children gets hurt. It just happens to be Philippe, and Henri is blamed. The father promptly slaps and scolds Henri and the camera lingers on the father punishing the cringing child. As Denis points out later, Henri seems to have been assigned his role of loser and scapegoat early on by the rest of the family.

Klapisch's film coincides well with a Christian perspective in his portrayal of the characters and their development. For example, the flashbacks may be understood allegorically, with an original state of perfection followed by the entry of evil, or more historically, where the family lives in a fallen world and evil eventually emerges to undermine the family idyll.⁶ Furthermore, the film clearly develops the theme of redemption and renewal within the family. Though Philippe is apparently the model son, it is soon evident that he is egotistical, he cares little for the well-being of his wife and he probably is cheating on her. Indeed, the humble Yolande even protests to Philippe that "quand tu rentres tous les mardis à trois heures du matin, je ne te fais pas de réflexions, moi" ("when you come home at three in the morning every Tuesday, I don't complain to you" (my translation)). Henri, on the other hand, seems at first viewing to be crude, unlikable, sexist, and well-deserving of his fate of abandoned husband. First impressions are deceptive with him as well, as he actually has a very congenial relationship with his employee, Denis, and proves capable of kindness, humility, and self-reflection. Indeed, his relationship with Denis shows that he is capable of those qualities necessary to improve his relationship with his estranged wife. For example, even though Henri is Denis's boss, he insists on making Denis his dinner in the evening after work, a fact that surprises the rest of the family and anyone familiar with French social hierarchy. Whereas Philippe's character does not evolve much through the

course of the film, Henri's character changes much as he deals with the blow his wife has dealt him. In the end, he takes Denis and Betty's advice to apologize to Arlette even though Maman, the respected matriarch, plainly states that she would never do such a thing since apologizing is such a humiliating action. Here, the film clearly shares some ideals with Christianity as the act of apology, though shown to be difficult, ultimately bears fruit in the conclusion of the film when Arlette calls Henri to tell him that she appreciated his apology. The film closes with Henri telling Arlette that he can and will change for the better, thus giving promise of resolution to the couple's conflict.

It must be noted, nonetheless, that viewing the film from a perspective other than Christian can lead to different conclusions as to the importance of Henri's act of apology. Martine Guyot-Bender, who writes an article from a feminist perspective in which she focuses on the power relationships of the sexes in the film, draws a much more pessimistic conclusion from the film's portrayal of Henri's character:

Et si Henri accepte quelques infimes compromis pour qu'Arlette réintègre le foyer conjugal, la promesse que se fait la famille au moment de se séparer de se revoir « vendredi » ainsi que l'agressivité qu'Henri retrouve comme une capitulation, indiquent que personne, dans cette famille imaginaire, n'a tiré de leçon des drames de la soirée. Personne, sauf Betty qui brise le moule en substituant au « à vendredi » rituel un vague « à un de ces jours ». [And if Henri accepts a few miniscule compromises so that Arlette will come back home, the promise the family makes as they take their leave to see each other again "Friday" as well as the aggressiveness that Henri comes back to as though surrendering, indicates that no one in this imaginary family has learned any lessons from the drama of the evening. No one except Betty who breaks the mold by substituting a vague "see you sometime" to the ritualistic "see you Friday. (my translation)] (Guyot-Bender, 73-74).

Guyot-Bender essentially downplays the whole act of apology and Henri's ensuing goals for becoming a more considerate husband, preferring to see Henri's actions as ultimately self-serving. That is, in Guyot-Bender's opinion, if Henri is able to regain his wife quickly, he will not undergo the social humiliation of abandonment. Guyot-Bender judges Henri's temporary lapse

into his old ways of relating aggressively when speaking to his wife on the telephone as indicative of his inability to change. Guyot-Bender's feminist approach in her interpretation of the film causes her to focus solely on the battle of the sexes with male oppressors and female victims. Her decision to ignore the signs of hope manifested in Henri's character supports her conclusion that the film illustrates the continuing "obstacle infranchissable à une véritable parité entre [les femmes et les hommes]" (insurmountable obstacle to a true equality between men and women) (my translation) (Guyot-Bender, 64) in French society because in doing so, she is able to very neatly place Henri among the "bad guys." In my opinion Henri's character is more complex. Though he is clearly a male chauvinist and terribly sexist to the point of caricature when, for example, he makes comments on his preference for women tennis-players in skirts rather than in shorts, he does at the same time show signs of kindness, humility and desire to change especially in the second half of the film. I argue that the film demonstrates the effort it takes for a person to change. It is not realistic for Henri to have the ability to change his manner of relating immediately. In the play, spectators are left with less certainty of Henri's attitude towards his wife because the stage curtain comes down just after Henri answers the ringing phone and realizes that Arlette is on the line. Playgoers must imagine their subsequent conversation. The film more clearly portrays hope since, under Klapisch's direction, the final scene is extended beyond Henri's picking up the phone and viewers witness Henri assuring Arlette that he will change, even giving her concrete examples of how their life together will improve. The film shows that, in spite of his outbursts of frustration, Henri makes his way as best he can in the unfamiliar territory of treating his wife with respect, beginning with the act of apology.

Denis, the character with the least social standing in the film, actually is the most perceptive, thoughtful and self-reflective person in the group. Indeed, he is the most forceful agent of renewal and redemption in the film. In the opening scenes of the film, for example, Denis remarks to Betty that she only talks about Philippe, never about Henri. He is critical of her sisterly awe for this superficially successful brother, and as he points out, Henri is her brother too. This sets the stage for later remarks on Denis's part that help Betty to see how she has participated in the family's denigration of Henri his entire life. Betty, too, benefits from Denis's convictions when, in the final scenes of the film, he departs from his usual gentle ways and forcefully defends her from Philippe's incessant criticisms, allowing her the possibility of dignity in front of her family. In another example of redeeming, when the long-suffering Yolande

wishes to dance on her birthday, but neither brother is willing to dance with her, Denis offers his hand and subsequently gives her the best birthday gift she could have wished for. She leaves the dance floor rejuvenated as she rejoins her morose husband. Significantly, Denis and Yolande dance to Patti Smith's "People have the power," the same song that Denis sings along to in the opening scenes of the film. Klapisch seems intentionally to link the song with Denis's role of uplifting downtrodden members in the family. In one of the verses of Smith's song she calls for a renewal of creation as she has seen in her dreams: "and the leopard and the lamb/ lay together truly bound/ I was hoping in my hoping/ to recall what I had found/ I was dreaming in my dreaming/ God knows a purer view/ as I surrender to my sleeping/ I commit my dream to you," with the refrain calling for action from all people: "I awakened to the cry/ that the people/ have the power/ to redeem/ the work of fools/ Upon the meek/ the graces shower/ It's decreed/ the people rule/ The people have the power..." (Smith, "People have the power"). In sum, Denis, the seemingly meek bartender, becomes the greatest agent for positive change within the family. He bears some resemblance to a Jesus figure, albeit quite secular, looking out for the meek and oppressed and giving hope for a renewed creation of sorts.

In conclusion, *Un air de famille* can be a very effective illustration of the family gathering as a fundamental element of French culture, an illustration which also embraces the virtues of humility, kindness, and gentleness so important to a Christian belief system. With the knowledge necessary for understanding cultural cues, students will realize that human experience may be defined in many different ways and expressed in many different languages around the world. And with a Christian perspective, students will perceive more easily those illustrations of the Fall and movements towards Redemption even when they are not labeled in overt Christian terms or contained in a familiar cultural context. Indeed, with adequate cultural preparation, students frequently wrote comments such as the following after having watched *Un air de famille* in class:

"The film was very real... It contained powerful themes of love and redemption and broken family relationships. The cinematography was exceptional and it held so much tension! I really enjoyed the film for its character, humour and truth." (Student comments, DCM 2004).

With this type of feedback from students, I know that I have succeeded in sharing my enthusiasm for a foreign film and appreciation for its message.

These are the moments that make teaching a foreign language such a deeply rewarding experience.

NOTES

1 I would like to thank Calvin College for granting me a summer Calvin Research Fellowship in the summer of 2004 which made the writing of this article possible. I thank also my husband Pierre for his invaluable contributions to the article.

2 Though there are many recently published books on Christian themes in film such as Roy Anker's *Catching Light, Looking for God in the Movies* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2004) or Margaret Miles' *Seeing and Believing: Religion and Values in the Movies* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), I am aware of none that address possible Judeo-Christian themes in *Un Air de famille*. This film seems to have less international appeal than some of its French counterparts and I would hazard a guess that this is true in part because one must have a fairly good knowledge of French culture to appreciate its broader themes.

3 The Developing a Christian Mind course was offered for the first time at Calvin during Interim (January term), 2001.

4 The fact that Denis is excluded from the family mainly by Philippe and Maman (for example, in cutting Yolande's birthday cake, they do not think to include him but Yolande does) gives the final scene even more importance. At the end of the film, Denis and Betty leave the bistro together as a couple, and it is at this point that the other characters discover that Denis is Betty's mysterious "fiancé." Yolande and Henri are quite pleased at this discovery and she exclaims that this makes Denis her brother-in-law, and he is therefore Maman's son-in-law. Maman and Philippe are nonplussed by this news.

5 In the original play, the mother does kiss Henri in greeting, though the play notes do specify that the mother kisses both Betty and Henri "tout en parlant" ("all the while talking" [my translation]) (*L'Avant-Scène*, 956 (15 octobre 1994), 7). Her lack of interest in Betty and Henri is made clear with this scene.

6 Since Klapisch does not make his intentions known, nor am I aware of his religious beliefs, it is difficult to favor one reading over another. Agnès Jaoui and Jean-Pierre Bacri, co-authors of the original play as well as principal actors in the film, are of Jewish background though they avoid making overt references to this in their work. As Spira writes, "Si on les a souvent comparés à des Woody Allen français, ils ne font jamais référence à leurs origines juives dans leurs textes" ("Even if they [Jaoui and Bacri] have often been compared to French Woody Allens, they never refer to their Jewish origins in their texts" (my translation)) (Spira, 5).

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