

<研究ノート>

Fulfilling the Objectives Outlined in the Course of Study for Foreign Languages: University Extension Program Film Discussion Courses

Robert JUPPE *

Abstract

This paper aims at providing a model for teachers at university extension centers in Japan for courses involving film discussion. Examples from courses done over the past five years demonstrate the breadth and scope of discussion undertaken by students. Moreover, background information and relevant worksheets are presented, as are student reviews on the three films selected for scrutiny in this paper. It is hoped that this course can serve as an example for teachers contemplating a similar such undertaking in the future or help teachers currently at work on a similar project to revise their approaches and objectives. The course approaches the development of language skills from a global perspective while continuing to aim at the fulfillment of the objectives outlined in the Course of Study for Foreign Languages at the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology.

Keywords: film discussion, extension courses, the Course of Study for Foreign Languages

INTRODUCTION

When Sergei Eisenstein had just completed his international classic *Battleship Potemkin*, it was difficult for Goskino, the Soviet State Film Agency, to decide on a new project for the globally renowned master of alternative film who eschewed “mass movies.” A civil engineer and mathematician by training, Eisenstein claimed to have dealt with movie-making using the same approach he would have had he been assigned to create equipment for a poultry farm or to produce an installation for a water system. His approach was to wallow in life and disdain intuitive creation. (Eisenstein, p. 46). He was certain that his highly focused form of realism transferred to the screen at every level of production would prove superior to Hollywood’s studio-dominated approach, though he held American technology in high regard.

Eisenstein’s sought-after assignment involved heading into China that year (1927), where the

* 筑波学院大学経営情報学部、Tsukuba Gakuin University

nation was in great turmoil. The workers and peasants were involved in a life and death struggle for freedom; Eisenstein claimed that capturing this on film would prove a new weapon in humanity's struggle, that for the first time in history, film would become as terrible a weapon as a hand grenade. (Leyda, p. 220). In other words, he sought to take Soviet film in yet another new, uncharted direction.

Eisenstein was instead assigned by Sovkino (the name of the central Soviet film studio had already changed within a year of the release of *Battleship Potemkin*) to attempt a film on the collectivization of agriculture. After several months on his farm movie, he and his group of colleagues were shifted to a film commemorating the tenth anniversary of the Russian Revolution of 1918, a work that needed to be ready by November 7, 1927. It was yet another project that would aim to engineer societal change rather than merely entertain and "distract" audiences. Both films would have been completely uncharacteristic of film studios in the West at the time.

That Soviet, and thereafter Eastern European, film production developed along such radically different lines from their counterparts in the West is critical to understanding the works that came out of these respective cinematic spheres. The average Westerner watching a product of the Soviet system might have been apt to, in the early days of cinema, to judge the film to be of inferior quality based on the differing structural paradigm to which he or she was accustomed. In other words, their standards of a "good film" would have differed based on what they were used to. The systems catered to different perceived needs and objectives. For one, in the Soviet system, there was no "market" per se to which filmmakers had to appeal. There was no real need to succeed commercially. This resulted in a different focus on content. Films of historical or intellectual significance could be produced without much fear of failing at the box office. (A poorly received film, however, might be interpreted as failing to educate the public.) Moreover, there was no need for a director to appease a financier simply because that person was "putting up money" for a film. Facilities and personnel were often placed at the disposal of filmmakers in the Eastern European/Soviet systems, resulting in more realistic material in certain genre. Other forms of film, such as animation, could be given more attention than could be done in the West. Naturally, there is much more to this discussion, but suffice it to say that there were positive aspects in the other systems of filmmaking, most of which were eventually crowded out of international markets by an increasingly victorious, aggressive American film industry. This outcome was not limited to film studio systems in societies following a radically different ideological nature; it happened in Japan as well from the 1970s. Earnings from foreign films had surpassed those of domestic productions while the general audience had been reduced by television (and later on by other alternative media forms) (Richie, p. 212). Both *manga* and *anime* have come to dominate book and film markets. Film critic Sato Kenji interpreted the modern cinematic situation this way: "For animation to push aside live-action films, a growing number of people had to prefer the thin, insubstantial reality of animation to the flesh and blood world of live-action. These genres' lack of realism is their ability to exploit the appeal and fascination of the unreal. These are the only two media capable of portraying reality the way Japanese feel it should be." (Richie, p. 252).

LANGUAGE EDUCATION THROUGH FILM ANALYSIS

It is helpful for students of film, or students learning language through film discussion, to familiarize themselves with such differing systems as the Soviet/Eastern European example when attempting to better understand global cinema and hence society on the whole. This would certainly appear to be the aim of serious film viewing and reviewing: to better understand society through this art form and to achieve more substantive conclusions and analyses through discussion of a particular work or set of works.

Reviewing a film might appear to some at first glance to be an undertaking akin to seeing the forest for the trees when in fact, the converse might be a more accurate description. "The first task of a film history is to establish the existence of those thousands of movies as a meaningful condition of the medium. Comprehension becomes a function of comprehensiveness. As more movies are seen, more cross-references are assembled." (Sarris, p. 19). Moreover, film critique is readily open to the auteur. The early montages, realism, and camera mobility of an Eisenstein were interpreted as genius by many at the outset, but as time wore on, as with other directors, his later films were open to an array of interpretations, many unfavorable. Discussion of his body of work had led, over time, to a more diverse array of opinions, which would make him an excellent choice in a film class to discuss.

Andrzej Wajda, the well-known Polish filmmaker, once had this to say about the films of the East Bloc: "Films made in Eastern Europe seem of little or no interest to people in the West. The audiences in Western countries find them as antedeluvian as the battle for workers' rights in England at the time of Marx. Thus the efforts here in Eastern Europe have nothing to show audiences in the West who look upon the world they live in as permanent. And that is a pity, for I am certain that those concerns are not ours alone but apply to the world at large, or will in the very near future." (Iordanova, p. 92).

Similar observations have been made about Japanese culture. Take, for example, comments made by Kenzaburo Oe after he received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1994. "There is the old Japan of samurai and Zen gardens, and the new Japan of gadgets and efficiency. Between the two there is a blank, where the Japanese live. You can see Japanese technology in Europe, you know all about Japanese economic power, you know all about the quaint tea ceremony, but these are all images, masks of Japanese modesty or technological strength. We are inscrutable in the eyes of Europeans and Americans. There is not much of a desire to understand the people who make all those Hondas. I don't know why. Perhaps we only imitate the West or are just silent in the face of European peoples." (Smith, pp. 10-11).

The point is that in order to understand Japanese film of the 1950s or Eastern European cinema, the moviegoer needs exposure in addition to understanding the background of a particular country's film in terms of history, the political situation, and other relevant social conditions. Quantity plays a critical part in understanding the mass of work that a particular system produced as well. Moreover, to better understand the work, an understanding of the system and the society in which it was produced appears essential. This would most easily be achieved through background infor-

mation on a film, the staff producing it, the society in which it was made, and subsequently, through a discussion of this visual, but literary form.

Film differs from other art forms in that it lacks an academic tradition of even the most elementary structure. Scholarship remains largely an amateur undertaking, which is one reason why it is perfect for combining discussion and foreign language practice in an academic setting. In terms of language competence, J.P. Allen posited that a student would pass through several phases of communicative competence before achieving experiential competence. (Stern, pp. 260–261). Even with a highly proficient functional level of competence, a student can easily engage in intelligent, diverse discussion developed around a film. It is far easier than wading through a difficult piece of literature. Furthermore, discussion of a particular work is more interesting and diverse in a group setting such as a classroom, and the guidance of a knowledgeable instructor helps students, through foreign language practice, to deepen their knowledge of film and hence, society.

Taking these conditions into consideration, the film discussion class in Tsukuba Gakuin University's Open College was launched in 2009. Though it was thought that the course would last one or two years at best, it is now (as of 2014) in its fifth. With its heavy emphasis on productive language skills in the form of active discussion (speaking) and review writing, participants expand their knowledge, views, and interpretations of the world and its many issues. Moreover, the class is called "global" not only because of the content of the works shown, but in the sense that its enrollment is not restricted to those learning English as a foreign language. The class, though comprised mainly of Japanese students, is a diverse international group using English as its common language, or lingua franca, for discussion.

In this paper, several films will be selected to show the effectiveness of such an approach in building discussion skills and deepening an understanding of global society. Activities relevant to the films will be reproduced in part due to considerations of length, and reviews presented so that the reader can come to understand the breadth and depth of discussion achieved by these "auteur" film critics, all done in a "common" albeit a "foreign" language for most of the participants. The three films selected for review here are *Umberto D*, an Italian neo-realist film from 1952, *Mr. Hulot's Holiday*, a light French comedic film from 1955, and *The Big Lebowski*, an American film from 1998. The selection is representative of the course; films from outside the dominant Hollywood studio system are shown with regularity and given preference. The first is a classic film that is "dense" in terms of content. It should be noted that though it dealt with a difficult social problem, the plight of the elderly, it received an overwhelmingly positive review on the part of the students. The second film is one that provoked markedly different views and comments on a seemingly straightforward and simple film. Finally, the last represented a major commercial production that took on cult status, but which held less appeal for the class, though in its defense, it should be pointed out that the negative reactions provoked and fueled voluminous discussion on the work, its background, and issues connected to the content.

The course is conducted in the following manner: After seeing a film, most often in two parts, the participants are instructed to write a review. No length is specified, but the submittals tend to be fairly concise and brief, roughly 100–300 words in length. This assignment is designed to get

participants to think at length about a film prior to discussion, to prepare them in terms of ideas, concepts, and vocabulary. Moreover, they are asked to score the film on a scale of 1–10. This score is then compared with the Internet’s IMDb (International Movie Data Base) score to see how their opinions compare with those of general audiences.

FILM STUDY A: *Umberto D* (a classic, non-Hollywood film)

This neo-realist Italian film was selected for the course with a particular emphasis on “Great Directors.” (Each term, the course has a different focus.) It was selected largely because it was the director’s favorite of all his films. Moreover, it was thought to be, by the instructor, the most promising in terms of provoking discussion among Vittorio De Sica’s films.

The film achieved a score of 8.8, above the 8.2 registered by IMDb. In other words, the class members seemed to have liked this film a great deal and evaluated it highly. (It should be noted as well that relatively few films seem to be able to command a score higher than 8.0 on IMDb.)

The film is about a retired public servant in post-World War II Italy. He has no family, just a small dog named Flag. His fixed income is not enough to support him; this is the crux of the film. (Each of De Sica’s neo-realist films is developed around a problem plaguing post war Italy. *Bicycle Thieves* on unemployment, *Shoeshine* on poverty, and *The Roof* on the housing shortage). (Curle and Snyder, p. 38). Essentially, *Umberto D* is the story of one proud, upright man’s efforts to keep from descending into poverty, and the failure of those around him, even those with means, to assist him in this quest.

Prior to seeing the film, the class was given a reading assignment for homework, excerpts from an interview Vittorio De Sica, the film’s director, gave just before he died. De Sica was born in Naples in 1902 and grew up in a lower-middle class family. He began acting and made a name for himself in light comedies. During World War II, he became interested in directing and by the end of the war, was collaborating with the writer Cesare Zavattini, a pairing that would result in many successful film scripts. Throughout his career as a director, De Sica continued to appear in commercial films so that he could gather sufficient funds to finance his own productions. This would most likely qualify him for Sarris’ categorization as a “Pantheon Director,” those who were fortunate enough to find the proper conditions for full expression of their talents. (Sarris, p. 36).

The reading assignment appears in full just below. It was designed to give deeper insight into the life and work of Vittorio De Sica. It was discussed and explained in greater detail by the course instructor prior to seeing the film so that participants were familiar with the socio-economic and political situation in post-World War II Italy, as well as the work of the director. Moreover, the neo-realist genre was explained in greater detail.

SAMPLE

A QUICK BACKGROUND LOOK: Vittorio De Sica

These parts were taken from two different interviews that De Sica did just before he died.

FATE: Just after World War I, I got my degree in accountancy. I was walking down the street one

day and I ran into a friend. “Where are you going?” he asked. I replied that I was an accountant, but that I was looking for a job to help out my family. He convinced me to come with him to work as an extra in a theatre production. I played a waiter... and I never left show business. (AUTHOR'S NOTE: De Sica, an extremely erect, tall, and good-looking man, acted in more than 100 films during his life.)

REACTIONS: I was hosted in Hollywood at the home of Merle Oberon, a famous actress, in the early 1950s. I brought a copy of my new film, *Umberto D*, with me. After the film finished, I looked around the room nervously. Charlie Chaplin just sat there with his hand covering his face. I was afraid that he had hated the film. When he took his hand off of his face, I saw that he had been crying. He turned to me and said, “Mr. De Sica, it is great... a GREAT film! However, few Americans will understand it. *Bicycle Thieves* is closer to the public heart, though it may not be better.”

CASTING: A man had come with his son to try out for *Bicycle Thieves*. He gently pushed his son forward to try out. I then said to the man, “Sorry, I am not interested in your son, but I am interested in you.” I gave him (Lamberto Maggiorani) a try-out right then. I told him that he could have the main role if he promised to take his hard hands and return to his job as a laborer after the film was done.

It is remarkable. David Selznick said that he would give me money for the film, but only if I would cast Cary Grant in the main role! Imagine; Cary Grant!

One day, I saw Battisti (who portrayed Umberto D in the film) in the street. I followed him all the way to his university. I sat outside of his classroom. When his lecture was over, I talked to him about appearing in *Umberto D*. He was totally confused. He was a highly educated man who had no clue about the cinema. However, he was cranky and unpleasant. He didn't need any make-up. I had been making films about the proletariat. Now it was time to include a poor soul from the middle class. He was a perfect choice.

FAVORITE WORK: Look, I agree that *Bicycle Thieves* and *Umberto D* were my finest films. However, the latter is far better. It is a film that nobody touched. I had to make concessions on *Bicycle Thieves*, but *Umberto D* is all my work. Nobody tampered with it.

NEO-REALISM: This is reality shot through a filter. It is filtered through poetry, it is reality transfigured. Through neo-realism, we got reacquainted with our humanity. We got to know the people and the problems around us. Before this, we lived under a totalitarian government in Italy. We had been controlled in every way. We needed to reconnect with our human side, we needed to recover our morality. We had to confront unpleasant experiences in our lives, both during and after the war.

NEO-REALIST FILMS: I once considered naming all my pictures in this way: Egoism 1, Egoism 2, Egoism 3, all the way up to five. *Umberto D* would be Egoism 4. All of my independent films are about the search for human solidarity. However, people just cannot bear each other. Human incom-

municability is eternal.

Shoeshine was about poverty. *Bicycle Thieves* focused on unemployment. *The Roof* was about our housing crisis. *Umberto D* was about the problems faced by the elderly. *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* sums up humans... terrible as a species. I am not Jewish and I was not a Fascist, but I helped in some way to kill millions of Jews. Why were they killed? Because a lunatic, a criminal, wanted that. I belong to the country that collaborated with Hitler. I wanted, out of conscience, to make this film. I am glad that I did.

CAREER: I have been ruined by a lack of money. All of my good films, which I financed myself, made nothing. Only my bad films made money, and those were made for others. Money has been my ruin. (INSTRUCTOR'S NOTE: He won four Academy Awards.)

NOTE: When making *The Monte Carlo Story*, it is rumored that De Sica lost more than \$10,000 some nights while gambling in the casinos. In *Sunflower*, the producer, Carlo Ponti, added on an ending that De Sica hated. In *Indiscretion of an American Wife*, he was forced, by David Selznick, to use Jennifer Jones and Montgomery Clift, both of whom he found to be terrible actors and awful to work with. After *The Condemned of Altona*, De Sica left Hollywood. "Nobody who made *Umberto D* could make *The Condemned of Altona*. It was a mistake for money. Robert Wagner and Frederic March made me melancholy, they were so bad. The music by Shostokovich was horrible, forced on me by the producer."

(Source, *Vittorio De Sica: Contemporary Perspectives*, University of Toronto Press. 2000.)

Prior to showing the film to the class, the instructor showed the participants (students) several clips from *Roman Holiday*, a popular film by William Wyler made in the same year. The purpose was to juxtapose the overall mood of the two films, both shot in Italy, one a neo-realist work, the other a fantasy. *Roman Holiday* was a large studio production; *Umberto D* was produced on a meagre budget.

After watching half of the film, the class engaged in a review and discussion of the film up to that point. Here is the outline used for the discussion with a list of questions posed to the students to check comprehension. The outline includes notes for explanation:

GROUP DISCUSSION: *Umberto D*, Review

1. What is the main character's full name?
2. What is Umberto's problem, or crisis?
3. How does he try to take care of this?
4. At the beginning of the film, what are they doing? (strike) Why did it fail?
5. What is his dog's name? (Flike/Flag) SUBTITLE IMPORTANCE, explain video vs. DVD
6. Who is the maid? (Maria) Where is she from? (S. of Italy) EXPLAIN SIGNIFICANCE
7. What is her problem? (pregnant) Who is the father? (doesn't know) SOCIETY UNRAVELLING: Discuss the problem of youth in this film as well.

8. Relationship with the landlady?
9. Describe the landlady.
10. Umberto had lunch. Where?
11. What did the woman in charge at the cafeteria warn him about?
12. How much did he sell his watch for? (3000 and change) How much is rent? DISCUSS UMBERTO'S FINANCIAL SITUATION IN 2013 TERMS; use examples from *Roman Holiday* to further explain financial situation of 1951 Italy.
13. SHOW WYLER VERSION, CHASE SCENE
 - a. Supposed to be made by Capra in late 40s, w/Cary Grant and Liz Taylor.
 - b. Cary Grant suggested by Selznik for *Bicycle Thieves*.
 - c. Audrey Hepburn: Wyler shaped her into actress, as so many.
 1. Crying in car; bawled her out.
 2. Scene at the Mouth of Truth... surprise. (Explain two versions of the story.)
 3. Pushed in Tibor many times... went willingly.
 4. U.S. and Europe; simultaneous hit. Ian Hunter, writer; Dalton Trumbo, ghost writer... fell in love with her. WOODY ALLEN... *Hollywood Ending*, *The Front*... got two stories from this bio???
 5. Biggest coup, however, was 1955 Japan. Took country by storm. SALES.
 6. 1960. Lenin Sports Palace. 3 sold-out performances.
 7. Wyler: On a tour with a friend in Rome, the guide said this: "On these steps, Marc Anthony spoke. Over there, Caesar is buried. And over there is where Audrey Hepburn and Gregory Peck played a scene in *Roman Holiday*." (Source, Wyler book)
14. How is the landlady making money? (love hotel)
15. What scenes of ordinary life seem different and interesting? (ants, lighting stove)
DE SICA: People may offer you a drink of water, but basically, do not care.

After this discussion was finished, the class watched the second part. Its homework assignment was to review the film. Written comments on the film are excerpted and presented below. The names have been omitted. The reviews were edited lightly by the instructor prior to printing and distributing them. The instructor's comments, which appeared in the original copies, were left intact. Also, in a departure from his usual style, the instructor spliced comments by a film critic and Cesare Zavattini, De Sica's collaborator, into the students' comment sheets to encourage further reflection on and deepen understanding of certain issues.

COMMENTS: *Umberto D.*

IMDb Score: 8.2

Class Score: 8.8

Student 1 (male): Score, 9.0

COMMENTS: What a plaintive story in this movie! De Sica might have intended to focus on pathos through an old retired man whose life had become connected to innocent Maria and while Umberto couldn't win against the current of time, I felt sensitive toward this pathos of life (*mononoaware*) as

you taught us the other day. (AUTHOR'S NOTE: *Mononoaware* refers to an empathetic appreciation of the ephemeral beauty manifest in nature, which includes human beauty as well.) I also should point out that the leading roles of the film were played by laymen who had no experience in this field, but they have carried out their jobs perfectly. I wonder if these techniques come from De Sica's eagerness? (INSTRUCTOR'S NOTE: Yes, in a sense. Many neo-realist directors work in this way, but De Sica was a pioneer.) If I must find good relief from this disconsolate story, it's the scene at the Catholic charity hospital. Umberto was rescued by many hands, which showed us the humanity of people, I thought, there people were working in an oasis for those who had suffered the cruelty and neglect in society.

The counterpart of the film was *Roman Holiday*. It was amazing. I cannot but be surprised that it was made in the same year, 1951. This film shows us dreams and hope, the young energetic side of a nation, which also disclosed the diversity of humans. I can't explain correctly in the year 1951, but I was in primary school, Japan still had many struggles in society, especially concerning foods production. We school kids drank skim milk from the U.S. during lunch time, which some pupils refused to drink, but I couldn't due to my starvation. I moved mostly on bare feet. The Korean War had just started the year before. (INSTRUCTOR'S NOTE: Keep in mind what Shigeru Yoshida said about the Korean War: "It is a gift from the gods.")

James Price (film critic): Beside *Bicycle Thieves* and *Umberto D*, De Sica's *Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow* is such garbage that it would be hard for a visitor from Mars to connect the three to the same individual. (Curle and Snyder, p.51)

Student 2 (female): Score, 9.5

COMMENTS: Several comments on the background of the films are very interesting but sometimes very disappointing. De Sica's interview reminds me again that it's very true that life is not always successful.

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Umberto loves Flike deeply and he is his life-long partner. He saved his life when he was taken to the pound, and Flike saved Umberto from suicide and I believe he gave Umberto a will to live. Society is similar to the one now in 2013; people are suffering from a hard life, young people are anxious if they can really get a reasonable amount of pension. De Sica was so lucky he could meet C. Battisti. He is NOT a professional actor! Amazing! Also, the dog. I can't forget him standing with a hat in his mouth. Umberto was struggling with his life but there was a peaceful world at the park as in the world of *Roman Holiday*. Always there are both dark and peaceful sides together. Sigh.....

Cesare Zavittini: A starving man, a humiliated man must be shown by name and surname. No fable can be offered for a starving man because that is less effective and less moral. The true function of cinema is not to tell fables. To its true function we must realize it. (INSTRUCTOR'S NOTE: This was very similar to something Sergei Eisenstein had said in the 1920s.)

Student 3 (male): Score, not provided

COMMENTS: This film is far from my idea for the time being. Someday, getting along well with me. I wish, I could.

(AUTHOR'S NOTE: This particular student never provides a score for a film. Moreover, his reviews are usually extremely short and somewhat vague/abstract in terms of content.)

Student 4 (female): Score, 9

COMMENTS: Despair. Black, thick, overwhelming. De Sica knows it well – and he caught it in his film brilliantly. It's a film that too many people out there understand it far too well, as they go through this kind of situation at least once in their lives. It was a film about nothing much, until the old man was teaching himself how to beg. That scene alone makes the film worth watching at least once. From that scene on, the film becomes a masterpiece.

One last thing: somebody give that dog an Oscar, and make him a professor in acting for the Hollywood actors!

Student 5 (male): Score, 6.5

COMMENTS: The film seems to be a somewhat ideological one accusing capitalism and Catholic power. Though the talent of the main actor and the dog, Flike, are excellent, overall the movie is too stuck in a gloomy story.

DISCUSSION ON THE FILM

The discussion took an interesting direction. One participant began to focus on loneliness and alienation. Connected to this was the concept of sound in the film. There was the bell at the start of the film, signaling trouble; the tick, tock, tick, tock of Umberto's watch, a piece of machinery vital to his survival (as he hoped to sell it); the voices of socialization emitting from Umberto's room, the sound of the madam singing in her room, the thunder of the train when Umberto is contemplating suicide, the loud barking of the mastiff, the volume of the rosary reading in the hospital, and finally, the overall pessimism of the music.

A poem has a certain rhythm and cadence. It was concluded by one of the participants that this film is about broken rhythms and cadences. Italian society resembles the Troglodytes of Montesquieu's *Persian Letters*. Tyranny is needed; there is discord in anarchy, as society needs to find connections in the sympathy and compassion for one another in order to set it right again. De Sica seems to want to bring us back 200 years to a time when the Enlightenment was heavily debated and concern was strong for a break from a stronger, more entrenched and traditional tyranny: monarchy plus church. He seems to compare this with Italy after another dark age, Fascism, a form of tyranny that turned the clocks ostensibly back. (Hence, the many references to watches, clocks, and time.)

It was brought up that *Roman Holiday* is a story, a tale. *Umberto D*, on the other hand, brings us into an uncomfortable reality. Italian society, after fascism, appeared anarchic, in a sense, and had not strongly found or rediscovered the links of sympathy and compassion. Young people seemed

to be ignored or left out, the old seemed to be ignored or discarded. This seemed to represent the cruel coldness of modern Italy after fascism. *Roman Holiday*, on the other hand, seemed to help us forget reality while *Umberto D* seemed to force the viewer to look at reality straight in the face. (AUTHOR'S NOTE: This last paragraph is a summary of comments given largely by two of the students.)

At the end of the film, Umberto is trying to regain confidence in his dog. Like Italy... trying to regain confidence in society. Umberto opened the film in a crowd of old people; he ended amid a crowd of kids running into the camera. Again, this could be taken as a warning about society after fascism: It is dangerous to ignore the young and forget the old.

Other literary references were brought up in the course of discussion. Voltaire's work *Candide* was one. Our duty and obedience are not needed for the church, but for our fellow humans here on Earth, to make life as good as possible for as many as possible. He refutes the Leibnizian idea that, "This is the best of all possible worlds." Voltaire, and De Sica alike, seem to suggest that society could be much better. (In fact, De Sica's battery of neo-realist movies expose the exact problems that need tackling.) The French philosophes, or intellectuals, of the 1700s argued that it was time to break the hold of the monarchy and church on power. In Italy, the fascists have just been broken. Perhaps De Sica uses the church for this purpose in the film. It seems to keep the people tethered to it, wielding its power to keep them marginalized, while other participants argued that it was the only institution providing true humanitarian support in the film.

Finally, there was a famous Italian work of literature called the *Beccaria*, one of the most important works of the Enlightenment, which was mentioned in the course of discussion. This work urges governments to stop dominating people and insists on an end to torture and arbitrary justice. In short, the work concluded that people must give up the least amount of freedom in return for getting the greatest amount of happiness, safety, and order.

The class was in total agreement that De Sica seems to have transferred these concepts and ideas to film through this important picture. This film highlights the marginalized and those largely shut out from society's fruits. In fact, one participant mentioned, "It would be good for Mr. Obama (the U.S. president) to watch this film." Another then mentioned the Japanese prime minister, and yet another student concluded that all political leaders ought to watch this film. Do not protect financial predators, do not cut education or social security too recklessly, do not use the government to police the world and cause misery, do not torture others... all of these ideas were heavily considered about 250 years ago. De Sica seemed to think it was time to reconsider them in 1951/1952. (AUTHORS NOTE: The period of filming and the period of release differed.)

How about now? The film seems as timely today as it was in 1951 in regards to these issues. This was very much evident from the students discussion, which, as can be seen in this summary, reached high levels of sophistication.

There were two more ideas of interest that came up during discussion. One involved the group vs. the individual. At the start of the film, Umberto is in a crowd. At the end, he is also in a crowd. Yet, we see him singularly in the film, trying to connect with basically just one person: another marginalized person lacking in hope named Maria. Again, Montesquieu's problem of the Troglodytes

comes back to mind. Under anarchy, many are lost, but if they rise up against those in power, the result could be significant.

Moreover, there was the question of the morning scene. It does not advance the narrative, or story, unless it is examined from an iterative point of view. It is the opposite of an ellipsis. We see the morning rhythms. Maria grinds the coffee, opens the blinds, and watches a cat walk nonchalantly across a rooftop, as we see the unfolding of a day through this very ordinary person. However, on this particular morning, Umberto breaks that rhythm or cadence; he is going to the hospital. Maria and the cat are in their usual rhythms. However, the cat is free, Maria is not. Friends of Umberto offer surface words of sorrow, then run. Umberto seems trapped in an uncaring society, disturbingly similar to the concept of society put forth by Jean Jacques Rousseau again during the time of the Enlightenment.

Finally, there came this question from one of the students: Why doesn't Umberto just move somewhere cheaper? Given De Sica's next picture, we get our answer: A housing shortage. It would seem that Umberto is lucky to have anywhere to live and cannot risk losing this life-raft.

No doubt the discussion brought up enormous numbers of tangents and key issues for thought. Are filmmakers doing this in contemporary times? It would seem that there are a number of films out that address such issues and problems, however, as was pointed out during the discussion, the impact of films is far diminished in modern times. For one, there are too many released each year. Two, there are numerous distractions that reduce the impact of movies, such as electronic media, games, the Internet, communication devices, etc. Compared with decades earlier, large audiences do not exist to support the industry to the extent people once did.

While the participants seemed to agree that De Sica and Zavattini would find themselves overwhelmed in modern society attempting this project, they agreed that this discussion was highly valuable and enlightening.

FILM STUDY B: *Monsieur Hulot's Holiday* (comedy, non-American)

Monsieur Hulot's Holiday would again be an example of a work by a pantheon director, one who had the good fortune to have control over his work, though he did not have much control of the finances, which is the reason Jacques Tati produced so few films. (Katz, p.1340)

Unlike *Umberto D*, which generated a complex and multi-tangential discussion, *Monsieur Hulot's Holiday* is a relatively simple film in all respects. The story itself is episodic. There is ostensibly no plot. People go on vacation at a resort hotel during the summer in the south of France, and we see what happens to them during the course of their holidays. There is virtually no dialogue in the film, and the lead actor (Jacques Tati) plays his role silent.

The comedy in the film is largely simple as well. Janice Anderson cites one scene as iconic: The scene in which Hulot tries to paint a name on the boat and the paint can floats away, always returning to just the right point when Hulot dips his brush in. (Anderson, p. 7). Perhaps most contentious about the film, however, is its opening message: "The people in this film will be very familiar to you. You have seen them. Perhaps you will see yourself."

As the film was the starting point for a new term's course focusing on comedy, there was little

in the way of preparation for the film, largely because there was no time. The instructor gave background information on Tati, which will be summarized below. There were no vocabulary worksheets, background information sheets, or activities other than writing a review. The transcendent and simple nature of the film seemed suited to such treatment.

Here is the only informational background sheet that was distributed to the students prior to watching the film (this time, in one sitting).

COMEDY OPENER: *Mr. Hulot's Holiday* (France, 1953)

DIRECTOR: Jacques Tati

This is the film that introduced the world to Monsieur Hulot. He is an eccentric, harmless character whose presence at a conservative French seaside resort results in one funny escapade and debacle after another. Though the film has virtually no dialogue at all, and little in the way of plot, it provides satirical commentary on a newly emerging vacationing class and its strange habits in post-World War II France. Moreover, it critiques political and economic creatures, from the overweight wealthy to trendy intellectuals to the stuffy hotel proprietors. As he does in other films, Tati takes pot shots at modern technology and its tendency, even in the 1950s, to distract people from the simple pleasures of life.

Above all, it is an extremely interesting and indirect examination of a new class rising out of the ruins of the Second World War, a class of people that is ostensibly unable to find happiness amidst all of the social demands and obstacles modern life puts in the path of that fundamental pursuit.

Note that it has considerable depth for a film that seems so light on the surface. (AUTHOR'S NOTE: This line became the focal point of an argument with a participant who was not Japanese. He insisted that the film had been made to entertain exclusively, a point that had been emphasized by another academic decades earlier in a similar course.)

Tati received an award at Cannes for this work, and an Oscar nomination, though he did not win.

The comments on the film can be seen below. At the time, scores were not revealed. As the students grew more familiar with one another, they indicated that it was not important whether anyone knew who had written a particular review. The instructor then began printing the individual scores on the sheets for distribution.

COMMENTS: *Mr. Hulot's Holiday*

IMDb Score: 7.5

Class Score: 8.0

Student 1 (female): The good old days!

At a small resort people are enjoying their vacation. Most of them are old people. Among them Mr. Hulot is making trouble from the beginning of his arrival. However, people are patient(?). They don't blame him. Why? Do people at that time think it is a manner among their small 'commune'?

Furthermore he is lucky enough to get along with a young, charming girl! She seems she is really enjoying her holiday.

.....

Jacques Tati seems to be very talented like Chaplin; he is a director, writer, and actor! (But how about music ?) Is his odd movement of walking a performance like Chaplin's?

"Silent" is border-less . I felt stress-free from trying to read subtitles.

Student 2 (male): A low score was posted because unlike the expected content from French comedies, which often have cynical themes or sometime sensual nature, throughout the film, I was looking for what is there beyond what was shown on the screen but there were not. Beside above comments, I found succession of funny acts unnatural to be too much of it and the striking noise of the swinging door further enhanced my irritated feeling.

However there were positive points as well. The music at the turn of every scene which provided nice melody and a comfort and the skill of manipulating animals to fit the scenes plus the many scenes that showed the way people lived during the 50`s should have cultural value.

Student 3 (male): This film shows me whenever and wherever I can find the essence of laughter in my daily life. Mistakes, preconceptions, and ignorance are the spice of laughter, I think. Here is a funny story from my recent life. My friend changed two ceiling light tubes, climbing up a high ladder with fear. But the lights did not go on. Why? He has a single and triple phase of the electrical sources. He asked me why. I pushed up the triple circuit breaker. Trouble gone. In general, the single one is for lights.

Student 4 (male): Being born and raised in Hollywood in the 1960s, seeing this film for the first time in the 1960s was a revelation that a film could be plotless, episodic, simple, and wonderful. It continues to wear well after several viewings. After 50 years, however, some of Mr. Tati's moves seem a bit too mannered, and things sometimes drag, being too predictable. Still on its own terms, it's wonderful and I hope anyone could have a chance to see it.

Student 5 (male): High points: We feel the peaceful summer time, seeing people enjoying vacation near a pretty beach; we understand that the ways of enjoying a holiday have not changed much over 70 years.

Low points; We get tired with repeated tricks. There were not many funny scenes, except for the dog's great performance.

Student 6 (male): Super story. It did not involve much, but each moment of action through which every part of every scene was connected was excellent. I think these types of film-makers required great imagination and understanding of the human identity, however, I thought it is impossible to figure out finely and precisely. I have already experienced many hardships in the past. I think that movies must bring us the feeling or surrealism. This film recognizes that humor and foolishness are

present in man's life, also this film used such techniques as pantomime, as Chaplin did. It was much more difficult to make such films than it is to make ordinary ones.

It should be noted that when the instructor began giving this assignment to students, approximately half of them submitted it. Over a two-year period, the reviews became longer and more voluminous in number.

DISCUSSION

Discussion on the film revolved around comedy. Was the film funny, or not? Overall, the students found the material amusing, while some claimed that the humor was either outdated or uninteresting in general.

Another line of discussion involved meaning. Some seemed to believe that it was an episodic, solipsistic work while others seemed to argue that it was a movie with a potentially broader message. The comments focused on possible criticism toward modern lifestyle trends to condemnation of conventions, particularly with regard to lifestyle. One participant suggested that the film might even be critical of globalization and the encroaching influence of all things foreign. One comment focused on the existential nature of the main character and his inability to connect in any substantial way with any of the others. Yet another focused on the loss of individuality in a world in which conventions seemed to increasingly restrict free expression.

For an ostensibly simple film, *Mr. Hulot's Holiday* provoked a great deal of discussion from a wide range of perspectives.

FILM STUDY C: *The Big Lebowski* (comedy, commercial production)

Released in 1998, *The Big Lebowski* was directed by Joel and Ethan Coen, brothers who had won an Oscar for Best Film with their previous work, *Fargo*. The film had a fairly large budget at \$15,000,000, but it fared only moderately at the box office. Reviews were initially mixed, though later, many of those issuing negative reviews revised their interpretations of the movie.

The film is a complex comedy-mystery, hence it was shown in the course sub-titled "Comedy Blends." The story is about a lazy, unemployed man who is mistaken for a wealthy man with the same name. In the opening scene, he is beaten by two thugs who demand money from him. After realizing that they have the wrong person, one of the thugs urinates on his rug.

The main character, Jeff Lebowski, nicknamed "The Dude," then shares this account with his two friends and bowling team partners. One is a conservative, tough-talking Vietnam War veteran, the other, a drifting surfer who seldom speaks. Walter, the veteran, insists that the Dude approach the wealthy Lebowski for compensation of the rug. The successful Lebowski refuses outright; the Dude craftily steals one of his rugs and runs into the wealthy Lebowski's young, attractive wife by the pool. She is later kidnapped, though this turns out to be a ruse to extract money from her husband. The wealthy Lebowski hires the unemployed Lebowski to act as an intermediary in the kidnapping ransom payment, but it turns out that he does so just to steal money from his own family foundation.

The plot becomes unnecessarily complex, which adds to the humor of the film. The dialogue is heavy in profanity and the characters very accurately reflect the echelons they represent. It is a realistic portrayal of 1990s life in southern California with a wonderfully bizarre story well-suited to this setting.

The overall reception of the film in this instance was poor. The score was 6.62 compared with an IMDb rating of 8.2. However, as the reviews and discussion show, the movie was a springboard for a wide range of comments.

Between the first and second parts of the film, a multiple choice quiz sheet was distributed to the students. The purpose of the sheet was to help students understand many of the cultural references and to help guide them to an understanding of a very complex plot. Also, as there had been a holiday, a period of two weeks lapsed between the two viewings. It was important to review the first part thoroughly as a result.

The reviews are shown below. As was the case with *Mr. Hulot's Holiday*, the individual scores were not yet shown. Also, it should be pointed out that at the outset, students were given an A-5 form on which to write comments and a review. Half a year later, most of them began typing and submitting the reviews using the Internet. This resulted in longer, more thoughtful reviews.

REVIEW: *The Big Lebowski*

IMDb Score: 8.2

Class Score: 6.62

Student 1 (female)

COMMENTS: This movie is a good reference on how to use four-letter words properly.

Student 2 (female)

COMMENTS: This movie represents America, I think. Each cast member has such a unique and interesting character. Sometimes the scenes change without consistency. In other words, the changes are unexpected. Rambling is such a good fit for southern California besides laid-back, a new word I learned last week. I enjoyed this movie and its music so much.

Student 3 (female)

COMMENTS: I enjoyed the Dude's dreams. I can't understand Walter's way of thinking, but without Walter or the Dude's bowling buddies, we can't fully enjoy ourselves. I cannot really remember what I saw two weeks ago.

Student 4 (male)

COMMENTS: Due to my lack of basic American cult comedy knowledge, it was too difficult for me to follow this story.

Student 5 (female)

COMMENTS: When this movie started, I didn't feel at ease, but the last scene of spreading the ash-

es made me laugh and cry. The world in this film is very distant from mine and very opposite that of Aki Kaurismaki, whose film I enjoyed so much. (AUTHOR'S NOTE: That film was *The Man Without a Past*.) What would Bunnie, an empty-headed girl, say if she saw the girl who lost her toe? She got nothing. It is a real tragedy.

The word "nihilist" is misused in this film, I think.

Student 6 (male)

COMMENTS: This type of movie is not to my liking. However, it is interesting that many of the acts were deliberately based on mistaken identities. Why do men with straight minds break into a dinky apartment for big money? How could an inept old man be the director of a big charity foundation? How could Maude seek conception with another inept man, the Dude? It is interesting that this story shows us a cross-section of society.

Student 7 (female)

COMMENTS: I really enjoyed this movie a lot, as it had a complex plot and great dialogue. Its surrealistic situations were a great source of comedy. I especially liked one of the last scenes, when Walter tried to throw Donny's ashes into the sea- the ashes that had been stored in a big coffee can. Dude took the whole can of ashes in his face- the same way he always had to take Walter's angry and insensible ranting.

Dude was my favorite character. The fact that he possessed common sense and good mental health attracted all the other insane people around him- people like Walter, who had an obvious psychological problem. In the beginning, I was a bit baffled by Dude's way of dressing, but then I thought that his overly casual fashion could actually signify the fact that he doesn't want to pretend to be what he is not. Dude is not a fake-as Walter or Maud might be- the former pretending to be a hero, the latter a hip, sophisticated artist.

I also loved Jesus, the one who treated bowling as a ballet genre. His appearances in the film gave it an exotic flavor. One thing I did not particularly enjoy, though, was Dude's surrealistic dream. I thought it was completely unnecessary and even tedious.

All in all, it was a great comedy, due to the great screenplay and the acting.

DISCUSSION

Class discussion focused first on understanding many of the cultural aspects of the film. Why did the Dude always drink White Russians? Are they very popular in America? Why did the Hollywood director have such an elaborate party at his home? How could the Dude drive such an old, battered car? Doesn't the registration system prevent such cars from being on the road? How can Dude live if he does not have a job? Is bowling very popular in the U.S.? Do people use profanity as much as these characters did? Etc.

Aside from providing extensive insight into daily life in southern California, much was said about technique and style. A few mentioned the film's strong points: Plot development/complexity, filming, characterization, music. Others found it to be hopelessly convoluted and relatively point-

less, yet others contested that this was part of the film's charm.

Finally, one interesting insight emerged that no professional reviewer seemed to catch. Through the bowling scenes, the film appears to comment on the overall complexity of American society and its political nature. As the opening credits appear, we are shown bowlers one by one in slow motion. Hispanic, white, black, old, young, female... there is almost an entire cross-section of a multi-racial, multi-ethnic society doing something associated with pure Americana: bowling.

Moreover, the writers appear to have used the iconoclastic sport to comment on another hopelessly convoluted situation: The political scene in the 1990s. The team is comprised of three members: the Dude, Walter, and Donny. It was noted that the Dude is a considerate person who goes out of his way to help others. He is concerned about the welfare of ordinary people. He would seem to represent the so-called blue states politically. Walter, on the other hand, appears to be a libertarian neo-con, representing the strongest and visible element of the so-called red states. Finally, Donny, the drifter, seems not to think about much of anything. He might represent the large, apolitical section of the United States that does not seem to care much about what happens politically.

Many of the participants who had spent time in the United States said that this analysis made sense to them. Whether or not this had been the intention of the filmmakers was impossible to discern; no review or report in the media touched upon it, but again, it was a sign that the analytic skills of the students in the class were sharp and that the discussion had again reached a complex level.

CONCLUSION

From the summary of the discussion sessions presented in this paper, it is clear that this film course encourages thought-provoking exchange. In terms of content, references are made to the world of politics, to philosophy, to history. The students are able to talk about the film contents from a wide variety of perspectives while exercising their English skills. If one examines the Course of Study for Foreign Languages (MEXT, 2013), one sees the following objective stated in the opening section of the document under overall objectives: *"To deepen the understanding of languages and cultures through foreign language learning; to foster a positive attitude to attempt communication; and to develop basic communication abilities in listening, speaking, reading, and writing."*

It would seem that the objectives for this film course at Tsukuba Gakuin University are identical with those set for the Course of Study that guide students in their study of English all over Japan. Moreover, in Section 2 A. (a), one finds the following guidance regarding suggested activities to be used in achieving these objectives: *"Students should engage in such activities as will lead them to exchange their thoughts and feelings by actually using the English language."* Through an examination of the comments given in the discussion sessions following the films, it is clear that this is taking place in the global film course.

Finally, under section D (c) in the section on Writing, it is suggested that students write on what they have seen or heard, and offer opinions, reasons and support for their positions. As can be seen from the comments given on *The Big Lebowski* versus the comments given on *Umberto D*, the

writing of reviews has shown improvement in just two years. Moreover, the students are doing just what is recommended in the national guidelines for foreign language education: expressing, in writing, their thoughts and opinions on something they have both heard and seen, a film.

Vocabulary is just one important area to which the paper has not devoted much attention. The term “laid back” from *The Big Lebowski* was just one of many new words and phrases that students were able to pick up through discussion of the films shown. In one of the presentations the instructor focused on the etymology of and development of the word “dude” as well. Moreover, the film introduction/background sheets, the mid-film quizzes, and the relevant reading material presented in the course afford students the opportunity to expand their vocabulary levels and read to understand the film and its background more extensively.

Such an evening course is an attractive and “laid back” way for students to approach language maintenance and development. Extensive outside preparation is unnecessary; a student with a particularly busy schedule can easily use the course as a refresher course for review, or as a class to build upon both receptive and productive language skills.

Above all, the course is truly global. It aims at instilling in students the skills and abilities to engage in discussions of various subjects with non-Japanese people. It aims to widen their understanding of issues and problems that exist in other parts of the world. The emphasis of the course is not only on *kokusaika*, but *ningenka* as well.

As people retreat further and further into cyberspace with a plethora of devices that detach them from society, this course aims at pulling them together to better understand one another and all of humanity. Above all, it combines the enjoyable pastime of film viewing and discussion, peppered with activities to help hone and develop language skills. Looking over the Course of Study for Foreign Languages issued by the Japanese Ministry of Education, one might surmise that this would be the logical extension of that document in terms of content and skill-building for adults. Given the encouraging and motivational wording of that document, more universities ought to be promoting it to as great an extent as possible, and extension courses/community college courses are ideal places for such extension to occur. Some call the objectives set forth by the Japanese Ministry of Education overly idealistic; perhaps there is nothing wrong with setting high objectives that learners can strive to achieve even after completing compulsory education.

As the number of students in compulsory education declines and institutions consider offering courses for alternative students, a course such as this might be one to think about adding to any curriculum or university extension center.

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