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French Culture Through Film

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Ethnocentrism is a powerful, if misunderstood, phenomenon that affects many individuals, some without their knowledge. Ethnocentrism is largely, and generally, based on culture, and two key ways to look into another culture are watching films from other countries, traveling, and experiencing other cultures directly. Traveling is not always a viable option, and so watching movies, or listening to music becomes the portal through which we experience other cultures and can begin to understand ethnocentrism in ourselves and in others. The French film *La fille du puisatier*, or, *The Well-Digger's Daughter*, was released in France in 2011. Based on a novel written by Marcel Pagnol, this adaptation by Daniel Auteuil represents well the culture of southern France before and during the First World War. Because of the different setting, in that the film does not take place in Paris, this film is the focus of my cultural experience.

I used to think of myself as strong, educated individual who would not be affected by ethnocentrism, and as I understood the definition, I was not and still am not. However, the definition provided by Barger adds a level of complexity to the issue. I do not judge other cultures, having explored and travelled abroad many times to experience different cultures, but I still make assumptions, based on my own culture.

The film, *la fille du puisatier*, presents a different part of French society and culture. Not only is there a difference in time, since it is set around 1914, but there is a difference in setting and culture. The eldest of six daughters, Patricia, the pure, angelic, saint-like daughter of the well digger falls in love

with one of the wealthiest young men, Jacques, and finds herself pregnant and unmarried, to a pilot fighting in the war. After being denied any rights from Jacques' parents, her own father disavows her and sends her away. His honor drives him to reaccept the young boy, because he shares legally his name. Jacques' parents, thinking him to be dead in the war finally want a part with the boy, which Pascal, the father, denies. In a happy conclusion, Jacques returns from the war, proposes to Patricia and everything ends well. The first obstacle for me was the language. Even if I understand French, there was the accent of the region of Provence, which made some of the characters more difficult to understand. The film immediately focuses on the accent as well, as Jacques comments on Patricia's Parisian accent. Even within the film, thus, regional differences are important. My first reaction upon hearing two men speak with the accent of Provence was that they were uneducated and poor, even for that region. Throughout the film, Pascal, the well digger, confronts these stereotypes and shows himself to be rich in spirit and family as well as clever and filled with honor. As the movie continued, I saw his reactions, which were more focused on honor than love or family, as antiquated and rural. Upon reflection, I see that this is, in fact, ethnocentric and anachronistic. I mistook his desire for honor in sending away his eldest daughter as being a selfish act, but I now understand that this man only had his honor, and culturally for the French, honor is very important, dating at least as far back as the seventeenth-century.

Ethnocentrism is at the heart of many misunderstandings between nations and between cultures within nation boundaries. Barger (2011) lists some extreme examples of ethnocentrism: " racism, colonialism, and ethnic

cleansing” but he also comments that “ ethnocentrism is often exploited to foster conflict and to promote the power of a particular group” (n. p.). This film is but a small example of how ethnocentrism exists in each of us, and yet, experiencing other cultures more, either by travelling, by reading, by watching films, is an excellent way to understand that we cannot know everything. My reactions to the language, accent and morals represented in the film made it evident that I am always making assumptions, many of which are false and support ethnocentric attitudes. On a larger scale, then, what assumptions do other people make about me, or what do companies assume about international companies?

References

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