

NONVERBAL FILMS: GUIDELINES FOR THEIR UTILIZATION WITH DEAF LEARNERS

by Salvatore J. Parlato, Jr.

*In 1980, Salvatore J. Parlato was National Coordinator of the BEH/CEASD Captioned Educational Films Selection Program located at the Rochester School for the Deaf. He is a graduate of Holy Cross College, with a Master's degree in Communications from Syracuse University. After 8 ½ years with Encyclopedia Britannica Films, he became NTID's first media coordinator, leading to the publication of his reference book, *Films—Too Good for Words*. Since affiliating with Captioned Films, he published another reference book, *Superfilms*, along with feature articles for 12 national journals. *Films Ex Libris*, a correlation of print-based productions, is soon to be released. He also served as production consultant to the World Health Organization.*

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The continuing popularity of nonverbal films holds great promise for deaf Americans. But, ironic as it may seem, nonverbal films are not automatically understandable to hearing-impaired viewers. Reason: audio/cultural elements such as music, sound effects, animation, length, and country of origin. To find out which of those factors hinder and help utilization, a diversity of titles was compared and analyzed. The resulting conclusions provide specific criteria for predicting which nonverbal films are most likely to be functional in reaching deaf students. The same materials should be equally valid for other language-impaired children and would be doubly useful within mainstreamed classrooms. This study is preliminary only, but believed worthy of further research.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Whatever happened to film's potential as a universal language? In the early stages of its evolution (1909-1929), motion pictures promised to become a truly global medium. Even during their primitive silent era, "movies" combined the best elements of still photography and realistic action. The results were high levels of drama, comedy, and—more important to educators—documentary illustration of social/scientific/literary concepts. Even with the intrusion of text-frames (explanatory language) between scenes, the old-time picture-shows were truly image-based . . . so much so that they were almost interchangeable among members of the Western community of nations. And—further proof of silent films' relative freedom from lingual chauvinism—deaf viewers in days past could enjoy the same cinematic services as their hearing peers . . . at least within the neighborhood theater if not inside their schools. Again the question: What *did* happen to the power of pictures to cross those invisible barriers? Answer: the introduction of sound-on-film, that is, the "improvement" of adding narration or dialogue to a film's pictorial message.

This 1929 innovation was, in itself, a breakthrough in mankind's efforts at recreating reality. Unfortunately, this invention eventually led to "audio over-kill." Words that once were supplemental to pictures now became dominant. Verbiage gradually overpowered image. Onscreen speech, intended as a means to media enhancement, evolved as an end in itself. What had originated as "audio-visual" degenerated into "verbal-visual." And so, theatrical film producers of the 1930s, '40s, and '50s made the mistake of filling their newly found soundtracks with talk-talk-talk instead of using the magic of recording to capture the sounds of nature, the moods of music, or the ambient noise that gives dimension to an otherwise artificial art.

But then, Hollywood was not the only institution guilty of this excessive verbalism. Educational film-makers of that period fell into the same tempting trap, relying less and less on pictures and more and more on words, whether describing the Egyptian pyramids, reenacting the rigors of Valley Forge, demonstrating the expansion of gases, or creating the fanciful Land of Oz. As a result, deaf students and adults of that era became victims of a new technology that only left them further behind in their struggle for socio/cultural/academic equality. The outlook was pretty bleak for deaf Americans until two forces came to their rescue. One was USOE's Captioned Films for the Deaf (CFD) program in the late 1950's. The other (about ten years later) was the upsurge in the quality and quantity of nonverbal films.

CAPTIONED FILMS FOR THE DEAF

CFD's successes are so well known that they hardly need retelling here. Since its inception in 1958, this federal program has acquired, captioned, and distributed hundreds of film treasures that deaf Americans would otherwise be unable to enjoy either in their schools or their theaters. Under the latter-day leadership of Dr. Malcolm J. Norwood, the techniques that were perfected in the captioning of films are now finding a parallel place in network TV, again opening up to deaf citizens a previously restricted world of daily information and entertainment. Suffice it to say that in its two short decades of existence, Captioned Films has proved to be the principal influence in helping deaf citizens attain "media equity" in our increasingly visual environment. Computerized statistics will attest to CFD's widening circle of viewers. As for the quality of its "end product," there is esthetic but nonetheless objective evidence in the form of praise from teachers, administrators, parents, and—yes—students too. Responsiveness to that clientele along with the willingness to experiment is the basic CFD formula for progress within the ever fluctuating field of instructional technology.

In line with Captioned Films' mission of responding to expressed needs, its catalog includes 33 nonverbal productions within its library of almost 1,000 school films. Though only a fraction (3%) of its total collection, these materials serve a dual purpose: (a) they allow direct access to popular materials that are either too expensive or too heavily scheduled to be accessible from other sources, and (b) they serve as models to help deaf educators to select similarly suitable titles from the estimated 1,500-2,000 nonverbal films on the market.

But all those nonverbals, plentiful as they are, not always "work" with deaf students . . . a fact that may be not only disappointing but also surprising. For if, by definition, a nonverbal film is essentially visual, should not its message be instantly obvious to a deaf person? No, because deaf individuals—just as anyone else—must learn how to interpret pictures also. The problem (if it can be called that) is the fact that most nonverbal films are made for hearing audiences. For that reason, they incorporate audio and musical cues that are not much help to deaf viewers.

Another barrier to the use of nonverbals is, unfortunately, a specious one. It goes something like this: “Deaf children need to acquire *language* skills. How can *nonverbal* materials help them to develop these skills?” The answer: by exposing them to concepts that stimulate student reaction. Then that stimulus can provide film-inspired, teacher-directed, child-created *expression*. And that expression—depending on objectives and age/grade levels—can take the form of reenactments, speech, writing, or a combination of them all. Putting it another way, Maxwell (1979) suggests another cogent argument for occasionally suspending the steady flow of words-words-words within the teaching/learning process:

“The more students already know about the subject that they are reading, the more they will be able to concentrate on the reading process instead of on the information. Then they are gleaning propositions they understand, i.e., the information and the modalities, and the language in which the information is couched, without becoming confused by the facts.”

Norwood and Hairston (1974) provide still another rationale, one that takes into account the limitations both of medium and audience:

“This (policy) does not mean that non-verbal films are to be rejected completely, but rather that they be selected only for a specific purpose, i.e., providing concepts for young deaf children who have not yet acquired language or reading skills.”

ELEMENTS ANALYZED

Even with these guidelines at our disposal, it is not always apparent why some nonverbals are more comprehensible to deaf viewers while others are less so. But can not those “better” films provide us with a clue? Yes, I believe they can, by supplying us with the opportunity of finding what production characteristics show up in the most successful nonverbals, specifically those relatively few that Captioned Films have evaluated and acquired over the years.

To isolate those positive characteristics is the main objective of this study, thereby enabling teachers of the deaf to look for the same elements when seeking out instructional nonverbals. To identify those elements, it seems logical to turn again to Captioned Films. By examining CFD’s nonverbal choices, we should be able to trace useful criteria within its selected pattern. Then, given that data base, we should have a good starting point for preevaluating the validity of nonverbal materials from other (non-CFD) sources.

With CFD’s models before us, here are the measurable film elements analyzed:

1. Subject matter: What curricular concept does the film deal with?
2. Grade-level: Coded as per CFD: P = K-3, I =4-6, A = 7-12.
3. Production technique: Live-action (reality-based) or animated (artwork)?
4. Film length: expressed in minutes.
5. Color vs. black-and-white (B&W).
6. Copyright: Year of production.
7. Film-makers: Big company or small? U.S. firm or foreign?

However, before proceeding any further, we should back up and define a nonverbal film while taking a close-up look (on paper, at least) at some representative releases. First of all, a nonverbal film is not just

a silent one. In fact, the typical nonverbal does have sound and plenty of it. But its audio consists mostly of sound effects or music. A nonverbal film, then, is one that conveys its message visually without reliance on spoken or written language. Occasionally its soundtrack includes a smattering of speech but so fragmentary as to be incidental to the screen action. A prime example of nonverbal technique is the international favorite, *THE RED BALLOON* (Macmillan, 34 min., Color, 1956), a live-action fantasy about a Parisian boy and his inflatable toy. This classic is part of CFD's General Interest/Entertainment catalog. From its educational collection, you will probably recognize one or more of the follow: *A FABLE* (Xerox, 20 min., Color, 1968), a Marcel Marceau pantomime with a moral; *RAINSHOWER* (Churchill, 16 min., Color, 1965), a "mood piece" to create awareness of nature's ways; *THE UGLY DUCKLING* (Disney, 9 min., Color, 1972), animated proof that even Hans Christian Andersen does not need words; *A ROCK IN THE ROAD* (BFA, 6 min., color, 1968), a Yugoslavian fable open to many moral interpretations; and—so new it may not be in your library yet—*ME AND YOU, KANGAROO* (LCA, 19 min., Color, 1974), about an Australian boy who has to part with his pet.

For a more generous sampling of the 33 nonverbal titles examined, 7 of them are outlined in Table 1 in the same tabular format employed for the overall analysis and resultant criteria.

DATA SUMMARY

Using the categories shown in Table 1 but without detailing each and every film involved, a profile of 33 model items are included in Table 2.

CONCLUSIONS

Balancing these facts and figures with a few insights by the author these are the points that stand out:

Curriculum: Guidance and Language Arts are the conceptual areas most compatible with a nonverbal structure. Regardless of subject matter (which is sometimes hard to classify in nonverbal materials), story-lines lend themselves best to this technique, as do open-ended "discussion" type formats.

Grade/Age Levels: Elementary grade children make the best audience for nonverbals—a logical reflection of the limited language skill usually found at that level. But, better than any other media, nonverbals can span the grade/age spectrum between preschool and adult use.

Production: Live-action outranks animation—which may surprise cultists of the cartoon who, every Saturday morning, have been bombarding our children with comic-book-art-in-motion on network TV.

Film Length: "Shorter is better." The typical nonverbal lasts just under 11 minutes compared with 17½ minutes for the rest of CFD's holdings.

Color vs. BW: Color is the overwhelming—in fact, exclusive—preference. Nonetheless, black and white can be an effective alternative and should not be ruled out, especially for offbeat subjects or historical topics.

Copyright Date: "New" is a relative term. This is why the median 1971 copyright year ought not be interpreted as a firm criterion in itself. Many other excellent nonverbals (*NEIGHBORS*, *CRY OF THE MARSH*, *SOMEDAY*, and *THE THREE GIFTS*) predate 1970 and, if history is any precedent, will still be in demand well into the 1980s.

Companies: "Size" is another relative word, especially when describing film companies. Do not use that factor when judging potential utility, because it does not seem to make any difference. Anyway, amid the changing forces of contemporary business, today's small firm can become tomorrow's giant while a current Goliath can become extinct.

Nationality: CFD is apparently more comfortable with the U.S./Canadian idiom, even in visual form. Only a handful of CFD's nonverbals come from Europe, home of the RED BALLOON. But, this factor, too, may (like company size) be a matter of happenstance. Much of the world's nonverbal production originates abroad, especially in France, Yugoslavia, and Sweden. Adhering to CFD criteria, there is no reason to believe that foreign-made films would not be just as effective as "home grown."

So, by applying these several factors, here is one way of predicting potential validity: reduce the above findings to the scope of a nonexistent specimen. That exercise would mean that the most suitable nonverbal film for the deaf is one that: (a) deals with elementary but high interest concepts, (b) has a recognizable story-line structure, (c) features live actors in real-life settings, (d) lasts between 6-19 minutes, (e) was photographed in color, (f) has been copyrighted any year between 1954 and the present, (g) is being distributed by a medium-sized company, and (h) was produced in North America, Europe, or Japan.

This composite profile may help you find nonverbals for your own teaching priorities. And, whether or not your needs conform to the "ideal" suggested, seek out your own prospects either within Captioned Films' continuously growing collection or from other good centers of media distribution.

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Table 1. Analysis of a Few of CFD's Nonverbal Titles.

Title, co., and summary	Subj.	Gr.	Min.	C/BW	Prod.	Yr.	Nation
BOARDED WINDOW (Perspective) Enactment of A. Bierce short story.	Lang.		A	18	C	Live	'74 US
BLUE DASHIKI (Encyc. Brit.) Inner-city boy's pride in his race.	Soc.		P-I	14	C	Live	'69 US
COURTESY: WHO NEED IT (Higgins) Examples of everyday etiquette.	Guid.		P	11	C	Live	'76 US
END OF ONE (Learn Corp.) Seagull poisoned by man's pollution.	Sci.		PIA	7	C	Live	'70 US
THE HOARDER (Benchmark). Loneliness of a greedy blue jay.	Guid.		PIA	8	C	Anim	'70 Can
THE HUNTER (Paramount) Boy's remorse over killing a bird.	Guid.		I-A	15	C	Live	'72 US
SEA LION (Films Inc.) Amphibians on their island							

Table 2. Profile of 33 Model Items.

Film and co. information	Subject and grade information
No. of nonverbal productions: 33	Guidance: 12 nonverbal films
No. of companies represented: 19	Language Arts: 10 nonverbal films
No. of production in color: 33	Science: 6 nonverbal films
Median length: 10% min.	Social Studies: 4 nonverbal films
Produced in live-action: 25	Theatre: 1 nonverbal film
Produced in animation: 8	P (K-3): 3 nonverbal films
Median production date: 1971	P-I (K-6): 10 nonverbal films
Produced in U.S. or Canada: 29	I (4-6): 1 nonverbal film
	I-A (4-12): 6 nonverbal films
	A (7-12): 4 nonverbal films
	PIA (K-12): 9 nonverbal films