
Rice, Anne-Christine. *Cinema for French Conversation*. 3rd edition.

Newburyport, MA: Focus Publishing, 2007. ISBN-13: 978-1-58510-268-6. Pp. 358. Includes a *Cahier du professeur*. ISBN: 978-1-58510-269-3. Pp. 227.

In a teaching career spanning more than two and a half decades, I have used film successfully at every level of the French curriculum, but I have almost always had to rely on my own teaching materials. For some unfathomable reason the foreign language textbook market is overflowing with largely identical first-year language

programs but desperately lacking in such fields as civilization, cinema, and French literature — at least until recently. Cursing the powers that be, I have had to assemble my own course packets, including short introductions on the cinematographic medium or on famous actors and directors, along with study questions, group projects, cultural modules, etc. Not any more. To say that Focus Publishing in Newburyport, MA, fills a void in the market is the understatement of the year; many of their titles in cinema studies (dealing with French, German, and Spanish films) are invaluable contributions to the field and, thanks to their intelligent, pedagogical design, are destined to have a profound impact on the way film is taught in the FL classroom, whether at the high school or college levels. Among the many recent titles worthy of being singled out (most of which already have been reviewed in the pages of *The NECTFL Review*), I must mention Alan Singerman's *Apprentissage du cinéma français* (2004) as well as a panoply of pedagogically sound study packets (*Ciné-Modules* and *Cinéphile*) dealing with major French films (many of them authored by Anne-Christine Rice and Kerry Conditto).

Cinema for French Conversation by Anne-Christine Rice (which comes with a comprehensive Teacher's Manual) is an outstanding text that is unlikely to be equaled anytime soon. This visually attractive, luxurious, 358-page tome is a language text in its own right since it incorporates a great many language-specific activities. Other companies have tried to follow suit, and it remains to be seen what McGraw-Hill can do with its very recent series in the same vein. For right now the standard of excellence is measured by our good friends up in Newburyport, Massachusetts. Rice's text offers an initiation into the cinematographic medium through more than one dozen case studies of French films, many of which have gained enormous international attention and commercial success. The text is divided into eighteen chapters, each presenting a different film, in the following order:

Chapitre 1: *Inch'Allah dimanche* — Yamina Benguigui

Chapitre 2: *Jean de Florette* — Claude Berri

Chapitre 3: *Manon des sources* — Claude Berri

Chapitre 4: *Ressources humaines* — Laurent Cantet

Chapitre 5: *Madame Bovary* — Claude Chabrol

Chapitre 6: *Marius et Jeanette* — Robert Guédiguian

Chapitre 7: *Le Fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain* — Jean-Pierre Jeunet

Chapitre 8: *Lesquive* — Abdellatif Kechiche

Chapitre 9: *Ridicule* — Patrice Leconte

Chapitre 10: *La veuve de Saint-Pierre* — Patrice Leconte

Chapitre 11: *Au revoir les enfants* — Louis Malle

Chapitre 12: *8 Femmes* — François Ozon

Chapitre 13: *Cyrano de Bergerac* — Jean-Paul Rappenu

Chapitre 14: *Le Hussard sur le toit* — Jean-Paul Rappenu

Chapitre 15: *Un dimanche à la campagne* — Bertrand Tavernier

Chapitre 16: *La vie et rien d'autre* — Bertrand Tavernier

Chapitre 17: *Le dernier métro* — François Truffaut

Chapitre 18: *Le dîner de cons* — Francis Veber

Many additions have been made to the third edition. For starters, there are four new films (*Inch'Allah Dimanche*, *Ressources humaines*, *L'esquive*, and *8 Femmes*), two of which anticipate the kinds of questions that suddenly made the headlines following the riots of November 2004 (euphemistically known as the “events of November 2004”) that shook France and forced mainstream society to finally recognize that all was not well in the suburbs of all major cities across the country where problems abound, chief among them double-digit unemployment, crime, drugs, and violence, all of which can be related to immigration and the lack of integration of peoples from around the world who do not look, act, think, or speak “French” quite like everyone else and therefore face a different set of challenges. In the third edition Rice has refined her approach further by adding various sections to each unit, including, among other topics: *contexte* (a film’s historical context), *vocabulaire*, *A savoir avant de visionner le film* (information on actors, directors, budgets, etc.), *Analyse d’une scène* (a close reading of an important scene in the film under study), *le coin du cinéphile* (information on stage set, genre, point of view, subtitles), *Affinez votre esprit critique* (various classroom activities that encourage students, for example, to compare the title of and advertisement for the film in the original French vs. the American version, to consider historical movie reviews, or to look at the reception of the film by the general public and by the critics), and *art* (inviting students to consider paintings related to the films covered). All sections have one basic aim: to further student understanding of French culture through film.

A few of these films are bound to startle students of today’s generation, in terms of content and, especially, style. How many of our students have ever seen a foreign film, much less what people in my generation euphemistically used to call “fine films”? The only French films that students today are likely to have seen are box office hits, such as *Jean de Florette*, *Manon des sources*, and *Le Fabuleux destin d’Amélie Poulain* (henceforth *Amélie*). All of these films finally made it to North American shores where they received critical accolades and enjoyed a brief moment of commercial success (though the reception of *Amélie* by young people was mixed, to say the least). In point of fact, if my students have seen any of the films listed above, it is mainly thanks to the tireless efforts of my colleagues at the secondary level. Therefore, I am wondering if it would not have been wise to include a chapter on the appreciation of fine films, since the ones studied in this text — all of them “fine films” to the nth degree — are bound to have an alienating effect on contemporary American students, who need to understand that a “good” movie does not necessarily have to contain graphic violence and extravagant special effects that deflect from character development and ideas, not to mention cinematographic “poetry.” Until recently, at least, French films (and European cinema in general) have been fundamentally different from much of

American film production, which unfortunately caters to the lowest common denominator (read: inane special effects and big name stars with no brains ... make up for a weak plot). Therefore, the introductory sections titled “Vocabulaire du cinéma” and “Comment exprimer votre opinion” could easily be expanded in a future edition to help students deal with films that are so, well, extraordinary. The overwhelming majority of my freshmen have never seen *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *The Godfather*, or *The Graduate*, to name only a few of the films that marked a generation of students in my time. Most students today have no frame of reference and need to be educated and gently be made aware that film is both an international medium (invented and perfected by foreigners, really, if one thinks about it) and an artistic medium in its own right. There is a whole world outside Hollywood waiting to be discovered by young people everywhere.

In a future edition the author would do well to consider a preface outlining her goals for this volume and, moreover, provide some discussion of how best to use this wonderful book in the classroom. What kind of course is it designed for? How many films can realistically be covered in a one-semester course? What level of language competency is required? To what extent must instructors pay attention to the moral standards of their community? (And, as I am sure everyone reading this understands, I am not talking about anything so banal as graphic depictions of extreme physical violence.) Thus, *Amélie*, discussed below, contains more than one scene of amorous rapture that might be inappropriate for some audiences, especially (but not limited to) the high school audience. In this day and age it is wise to anticipate the objections raised in some quarters...

Thus, the author does not assume that the reader knows anything at all about French cinema or, for that matter, about the medium or period, other than a few commonsensical insights and facts that virtually anyone growing up in today's visually-dominated, image-oriented society would have. Therefore, she takes a step-by-step, eminently practical and pedagogical approach; indeed, it is easy to see how inexperienced instructors in particular could literally “lift” an entire unit into the course syllabus without really having to add anything at all. Rice's book is that good. It goes without saying, of course, that there is more material than any instructor can hope to use in a single course, so instructors will have to pick and choose the films they find most useful for their purposes.

At present I use three films in my second-year intermediate language sequence, among them *Amélie*, so I thought that I would take a closer look at how Anne-Christine Rice presents this film. To date I have had to make up my own materials, borrowing here and there, and creating new activities for my students as I go along. How self-sufficient is this chapter, and what can I take away to use in my own classroom? These are the two questions I set out to answer in this review. Her treatment of this particular film is not markedly different from her presentation of the other seventeen films in this volume, so I think it fair to say that my remarks on the chapter dealing with *Amélie* are representative of the volume as a whole.

By way of introduction to this film Rice provides a short “presentation du film” (summarizing the story), a “Carte d'identité du réalisateur” (presenting the director, Jean-Pierre Jeunet along with a brief bio), followed by “Carte d'identité des acteurs” (introducing students to the actors), and “L'heure de gloire” (discussing

the reception of the film by the public and by critics). The next sections are “Vocabulaire” (providing useful vocabulary from the film along with English translations), “Repères culturels” (containing comments on Amélie’s neighborhood, Montmartre, the *foire du trône*, where Nino has a part-time job, and M. Dufayel’s favorite painter, Renoir). All of these topics will be further developed later on, of course, so this is just meant to give a flavor of what is to come.

Each chapter has five basic components, ranging in difficulty: *Première approche*, *Approfondissement*, *Le coin du cinéophile*, *Affinez votre esprit critique*, and *Pour aller plus loin*. The first consists of *L’histoire*, with straightforward comprehension questions on the plot; *Analyse d’une photo*, which presents a significant photo from the film and asks students for an analysis; and *Analyse de citations*, which typically quotes one of the characters in the film and asks viewers to identify the speaker and explain what he or she means.

Approfondissement starts with a list of additional vocabulary (including translations and a selection of exercises), and the *Réflexion Essais* section asks more probing questions on character and plot, but also includes grammar exercises adapted from the film. *Le Coin du cinéophile* draws attention to the medium of film by asking students to reflect on such things as lighting, color, special effects, and, last but not least, music, which has an extraordinary way of influencing how we perceive the story. This section also includes an intriguing exercise where students are asked to look at the subtitles of various scenes (in the version prepared for the American market, presumably, though this is not clear), underscoring how subtitles never can fully capture the original, which of course reiterates the importance of understanding the French original. *Affinez votre esprit critique* discusses such questions as the title of the film, its reception in the U.S., and comments by critics on both sides of the Atlantic. Many quotes from actual media alert us to the cultural divide between our two countries. For example, a quote from the Communist daily *L’Humanité* suggests that the film was made with an American audience in mind, which explains its hunky-dory, feel-good, picturesque touch. Sadly, students probably are oblivious to the great cultural divide between our two nations but nevertheless are likely to be able to offer their perspective on what made this film such a success. I really like the final section of the chapter, appropriately titled *Pour aller plus loin*, which includes a variety of cultural tidbits, in this case a presentation of painters such as Villeneuve, Lepine, Renoir, Van Gogh, and Utrillo, all of whom have helped render Paris immortal; selections from famous writers on topics such as happiness (remember, this is a film with a happy ending); and extended selections from the Parisian press showing just how the film has given Montmartre a boost; thanks to the “effet Poulain” the *quartier* surrounding the Abbesses metro station, in particular, has experienced somewhat of a renaissance coupled with a new sense of identity (not all for the good, since busloads of tourists do not always find what they came for and, when they do, it is only because certain venues have been “disneyfied”). Many of the businesses shown in the film — cafés, shops, and restaurants — have been only too quick to capitalize on its fame, which brings in hordes of tourists along with their dollars and yen (there exist special tours of the neighborhood, promising visitors a chance to walk in the footsteps of Amélie), but let us hope that it will not destroy what remains of the magic of Montmartre.

Finally, a companion volume, *Cahier du professeur*, covers all the films studied and contains an answer key to all the activities in the text and provides teachers with positively exhaustive answers. The only thing lacking is a lesson plan; in fact, this is the only real weakness of the text as a whole. Instructors will have to sit down and figure this out for themselves, sifting among all the possibilities and finding the activities best suited for their class and then devising a way to incorporate as many of these films into their classroom as possible.

Unfortunately, there is no room in the curriculum at many small schools like my own, which does not even have a foreign language requirement, for a course devoted entirely to film (sadly, most colleges these days are cutting, not adding, courses, so the prospects for the future are grim), and it is at times like these that I especially miss being a student at an institution that values foreign language study enough to be able to offer a broad spectrum of courses. Therefore, I probably could not adopt this text in one of my second-year courses where I teach grammar in a more organized and not so subtle way (unless it were a year-long course) because I would not be able to cover more than half a dozen films, if that, and am loath to have students buy a book (marked up several hundred per cent, as is customary) that we could not cover in its entirety. One solution in a future edition, of course, would be to divide the text into two volumes, making it nearly irresistible for instructors, who have a grammar agenda as well. However, I would still be very keen to use parts of this text in my classroom and interested in discussing copyright arrangements with our college bookstore, which, to its credit, realizes the problem for faculty of having too much material to cover in a single fifteen-week semester and therefore helps them to incorporate copyrighted material by preparing special class packets of relevant excerpts (at significant savings for students). We have done so in the past, and I expect that tailor-made textbooks will become the wave of the future as ever more schools move toward a slimmed-down, "light" curriculum that cannot accommodate too narrow a focus in any one course.

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Publisher's Response

It's been interesting to watch the impact that film has had on foreign language education, coming as it has over the course of the lifetime of our publishing company, and it has been our delight to have been a part of it, and gratifying to think it has been an important part. We don't have the resources of the larger publishers, so like any smaller publisher that survives, we have relied on being innovative in what we do. We appreciate the support we have gotten from language teachers, and especially French language teachers. The comments above are well taken. Much of what we have focused on in the past has been the use of film to serve language learning, and we have been careful not to intrude too deeply into film and film aesthetics. But now film has become an essential part of learning culture and thought and we hope to bear all these thoughts in mind as we develop a new generation of books and revise these to fit evolving needs. Of course I am still guided by a single thought that struck me when Anne-

Christine Rice first brought this manuscript to Focus. “Wow, what a delightful course this would be. What a fascinating way to learn language and culture.” This has been the guiding principle of our acquisition process since the beginning, and I hope it never changes.

Ron Pullins

Focus Publishing