
Conditto, Kerri. *Cinéphile. French Language and Culture Through Film.*

Newburyport, MA: Focus Publishing, 2007. ISBN-10: 1-58510-258-X.

I have used film successfully at every level of the French curriculum, but usually I have had to develop suitable teaching materials on my own to help students understand not only a particular film itself but also various cultural topics reflected in it. For some unfathomable reason, the foreign language textbook market is overflowing with largely identical first- and second-year language programs but still lacking in such fields as civilization, cinema, and French literature. The need is especially severe when it comes to film. Cursing the powers that be, I have had to assemble my own course packets, including introductory texts on the medium itself and on famous French actors and directors, along with study questions, vocabulary lists, writing assignments, group projects, cultural modules, etc. Not any more. Thanks to the good folks at Focus Publishing in Newburyport, Massachusetts, teachers at the high school and college levels suddenly have somewhere to turn if they choose to implement film into the curriculum in a more structured fashion. To say that Kerry Conditto's *Cinéphile* fills a void in the market is the understatement of the year; it is a most valuable contribution to the field and will have a profound impact on the way film is taught in the college classroom. In recent years Focus Publishing has produced a wide array of cinema texts such as Alan Singerman's *Apprentissage au cinéma français* and *Cinema for French Conversation* by Anne-Christine Rice, along with a series of manuals presenting specific films titled *Ciné-Modules* and *Cinéphile*. Focus has also published (and is planning to bring out) volumes dealing with Spanish, German, and Russian film, and so it is the uncontested leader in implementing film into the FL curriculum.

As the term "cinéphile" in Conditto's title suggests, this text is a fiesta for film buffs (and, as such, is a pleasure to read for anyone interested in recent French cinema); what is more, it is a valuable tool for learning French language and culture through film. According to the author, "*Cinéphile: French Language and Culture Through Film* is a second-year college-level textbook which fully integrates the study of second-year French language and culture with the study of French feature films. The method presents vocabulary and grammar structures and exercises, cultural points, reading selections and writing activities designed to maximize the development of the linguistic proficiency of second-year language students while viewing and analyzing films" (*Manuel du Professeur* vii). To the best of my knowledge, it is the only program of its kind anywhere to offer such extensive treatment of so many first-rate French films in one single volume. Sure, there are many short texts dealing with a single film (many brought out by Focus Publishing in their series *Ciné-Modules*); however, no one has yet tried to create a comprehensive two-semester second-year language text based exclusively on film that reinforces the four language skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing in such an exemplary fashion. Rice's book *Cinema for French Conversation* is similar in scope but does not offer the same in-depth study of grammar.

The program consists of a very attractive and visually appealing text (full of HD color pictures), a fully integrated Workbook, a resource bank titled *Compositions and Exams*, and a *Manuel du Professeur* that includes useful teaching tips as well as an answer key for most of the exercises in the main text, including, incredibly, comprehension and essay questions. In addition, the Teacher's Edition of the Workbook provides a complete answer key. All units have been authored by Kerri Conditto single-handedly, and one can only imagine the hard work that went into producing a complete program of such high caliber.

The main text consists of nine chapters, each presenting a different film, most of them recent box office hits in France; why, a few even made it to North American shores, where they enjoyed their fifteen minutes of fame. These nine films vary in "cultural content and genre (animated film, dramatic comedy, farce, romantic comedy, thriller, drama, adventure)" (*Manuel du Professeur* vii) and gradually become "more sophisticated in language and cultural content" as "students acquire a solid vocabulary base and the ability to easily and accurately manipulate grammar structures they are learning in their discussions and composition about the films" (*Manuel du Professeur* vii). All films can be purchased online from any one of the many American companies that specialize in foreign films; teachers can also purchase the films on their own in France provided they have access to a multi-standard DVD player in their classroom.

The films studied are as follows:

Chapter 1: *Les Triplettes de Belleville*

Chapter 2: *Le Papillon*

Chapter 3: *Être et avoir*

Chapter 4: *Les Visiteurs*

Chapter 5: *L'Auberge espagnole*

Chapter 6: *Sur mes lèvres*

Chapter 7: *Comme une image*

Chapter 8: *Métisse*

Chapter 9: *Bon voyage*

Most, if not all, of these films are bound to startle students of today's generation, as much because of their content as because of their artistic 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 in France such as *Jean de Florette* and *Manon des sources*, or maybe *Le Fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain*, all of which finally made it to our shores, where they received critical accolades and enjoyed a brief moment of commercial success; a surprising number of my language students have seen all three of the films just mentioned (and a few more), 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 film, since the ones studied in this text — all of them "fine films" to the nth degree — are bound to have an alienating effect on a contemporary American audience, which needs to understand that a "good" movie does

not necessarily have to contain graphic violence and extravagant special effects that distract from character development and the “story,” not to mention the “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 by serving up a generous helping of extreme violence and mediocre sex. Thus, studying these films will be an eye-opener to many students who, sad to say, might not otherwise have had the chance to view a foreign film; it might also bring down the wrath of the local school board if the film can be perceived to violate so-called community standards, so teachers need to be prudent and ponder Descartes’s exhortation: “he lives well who hides well.”

The presentation of each film follows the same basic order and is evenly divided between language and content, in keeping with the objective of the author, which, as stated above, is to teach language and culture through film. Conditto does not assume that the reader knows anything at all about French cinema or, for that matter, about the medium, period, other than a few commonsensical insights and facts that virtually anyone growing up in today’s visually-dominated, image-oriented society would have. Her approach is practical and pedagogical almost to a fault. Each chapter contains the same subsections, each with clearly defined parameters, which isn’t to say that teachers cannot pick and choose among subsections as indeed they do with any text. Very rarely can teachers cover all the material contained in first- and second-year language texts, and *Cinéphile* is no exception. There is simply too much good “stuff” here to cover in the time allotted, so most teachers will have to pick and choose. The text is billed as appropriate for a two-semester course but could also be repackaged for a one-semester course on the assumption that only four or maybe five films would be covered. Presumably undergraduates should also be exposed to literature in their second year of study. Film is important, but so too are literature and the history of French civilization.

For the purposes of this review, just to give readers a sense of what to expect, I will look at chapter 5, *L’Auberge espagnole*. Although I have not yet used this film in class, I’m tempted to after seeing how well Conditto uses it in the classroom to teach language and culture. This extraordinary film, which tells the story of a French exchange student in Barcelona, is educational in its own right (especially for college-age students), thanks to its plot and main characters, but has the added benefit of teaching American students about the educational system in France and the many educational exchange programs available to residents of the European Union, in particular the ERASMUS program, which, at last count, has enrolled more than one million students from all over Europe since its inception in 1987. The chapter also contains a longer unit on the European Union (EU).

The chapter on *L’Auberge espagnole* is divided into three sections, written entirely in French, whose titles are largely self-explanatory: *Avant le visionnement*, *Après avoir visionné* and *Aller plus loin*. The first part presents cultural notes, credits (including a biographical and professional profile of the director), a film summary, a cast list, and useful vocabulary. The second part features general comprehension exercises, vocabulary exercises, grammar points and exercises, translation exercises, photos, open-ended exercises, and classroom activities. Part

Three offers a variety of readings, cultural topics, and documents, all of which are accompanied by a generous assortment of exercises. As anyone can see, there is plenty here to keep students busy for the three weeks or so recommended for each film (in a fifteen-week semester with class meeting three class meetings a week in seventy-minute periods). In the *Manuel du Professeur* Conditto provides a useful grid for implementing the program, which teachers are free to adapt as they see fit.

The only quarrel I have with this text is the presentation of grammar, which strikes me as just a bit elementary for a second-year text. Thus the chapter on the first film *Les Triplettes de Belleville*, reviews very basic grammar topics such as the present tense. No doubt most second-year students will already have been exposed to its mysteries. On the other hand, how many of our students, who are *faux débutants* anyway, can spell very well? Not very many, in my experience. So I have started to rethink my initial reservations and have realized that a review of basic grammar serves an important purpose: it helps students move from a passive understanding of grammar to confident and correct use of it in context to discuss, for example, a film. If your students are all *la crème de la crème* (which I doubt), you can always skip ahead or, just for laughs, ask them to conjugate the verb *accueillir* or *s'asseoir* (including its variations in *français méridional*). I think you get the point. Teachers are free to skip ahead and adjust the presentation of grammar to the level of their class. I do it all the time, sometimes without realizing it. Rest assured that Conditto kicks up the grammar a notch or two in subsequent chapters. The grammar lesson in the chapter on *L'Auberge espagnole* features the *incontournables* prepositions used with cities and countries (*je vais à Paris; nous allons en France*), as well as all the commonly used past tenses: *passé composé*, *imparfait*, *plus-que-parfait*, including some mention of the *futur antérieur*, the *passé antérieur*, the *passé du subjonctif* but not, surprisingly, the *passé simple*. Thus the presentation of grammar in *Cinéphile* corresponds, roughly speaking, to the “structures and concepts studied in traditional second-year French courses” (*Manuel du Professeur* viii), though the presentation of grammar typically is highly condensed. I should add that all grammar explanations and exercises are written entirely in French, forcing students to develop survival skills that will serve them well the day they have to fend for themselves in a French-speaking country.

The strength of this program lies, I think, in the presentation of the films, and here I am referring not only to the exemplary study of each one but also to the plethora of accompanying exercises: vocabulary, comprehension, culture, you name it, they are all here, language exercises in every incarnation known to the profession: multiple choice, fill-in-the-blank, definition, pairing, translation, short answer, compositions. In addition, the *Compositions and Exam* test bank which provides many ways of testing students' understanding and stimulate their creativity and critical thinking. And the Workbook offers even more exercises for reinforcement, though, naturally, many of them overlap, so teachers will want to exercise caution in assigning homework. Finally, I need to stress once again the visually appealing character of each component of this program. For example, the correct answers to all exercises are given in red, making grading homework a breeze for the busy teacher. Finally, the quality of the paper is excellent through-

out; at a time when many other companies are moving to low-grade paper (perhaps to justify new editions every three years or so?), Focus still relies on high-grade paper that will survive the rigors of frequent use.

In a future edition, perhaps Conditto might include a short section on the cinematographic medium, featuring a short history of film (it has strong French connections) and technical vocabulary, including definitions, in French, of many of the most commonly used terms that students are likely to encounter in film criticism and that they need in order to speak critically about a film. What is the difference between a “court and a long métrage,” terms that can be found in each edition of the weekly Parisian activities guide *Pariscope*? How do you say “full shot” in French? An English-language translation of the most commonly used terms would be useful to help students become more articulate film critics. Many students would probably also welcome a list of useful vocabulary to speak about characters, plot, point of view, and style, or at least a “lexique” at the end of the text including all the terms used in it. My own students are fairly typical in this regard, and I for one still struggle to make them understand cognates and remember the difference between “caractère” and “personnage” or between “intrigue” and “action.” But these are minor points and could easily be corrected by teachers who sense that their students need reinforcement in a particular area and then provide a handout of their own.

I like this text immensely and decided to use the chapter on *L'Auberge espagnole* in my intermediate language course, eliminating the film I had originally selected. My colleagues in the field will be impressed by the richness of the program and the ease with which it can be readily implemented even by the novice instructor. Bravo!

Tom Conner
Professor of Modern Languages and Literatures
St. Norbert College
De Pere, WI

Publisher's Response

I believe it is still a challenge for many instructors to envision a course at the second- or even third-year level with so much time devoted to film. We recognize that it is a big investment in time and effort to explore such a non-conventional pedagogy. But we know the excitement that can come from such an approach and are convinced that feature films remain a wonderful way to provide immersion in real culture and language. Conditto's book is ideally suited for the second year, with its focus on grammar and culture; moreover, it complements nicely (without duplicating films) Anne Christine Rice's *Cinema for French Conversation* (now in its third edition) which focuses on culture and fluency, and is more appropriate for third-year French. This year we are adding Portuguese to our *Cinema for Conversation* series and we have recently published *Animation for Russian Conversation*, which draws on highly provocative Russian animation films as sources for language and culture.

Ron Pullins
Focus Publishing