

Reviews: French Studies

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David DRAKE. 2005. *French Intellectuals and Politics from the Dreyfus Affair to the Occupation*. New York: Palgrave/MacMillan. 214 pp. £ 45, ISBN 0-333-77812-X.

As Jean Guéhenno noted, “it is only in France that writers have been able to believe that they were Wise Men and Women.” Since at least the time of Voltaire, French intellectuals have taken it upon themselves, in Jean-Paul Sartre’s words, “to get involved in things that don’t concern” them and take a position on important social issues. Drake offers a succinct, comprehensive, and crisply written synthesis of the committed left- and right-wing French intellectual in the period 1898-1940, from the Dreyfus affair and the emergence of public intellectuals as a stratum of the educated elite (by contrast, when Voltaire set out to rehabilitate Calas, he acted alone) to the ignominy of the Collaboration, when right-wing intellectuals not only supported Nazism but also called for the outright annihilation of the Jews. The book is divided into five parts. The first examines Zola’s *J’accuse* and the birth of the French public intellectual. Part Two shows how, in the aftermath of the affair, many *dreyfusard* intellectuals first joined the ranks of government and then “sold out” to the *Union sacrée* during World War I when all but Romain Rolland rallied to the defense of France rather than question the folly of war. In Part Three Drake looks at the postwar period in which intellectuals on the Left embraced pacifism and Communism and intellectuals on the Right became ever more obsessed with Germany. Part Four, on the 1930s, studies the tensions between pacifism and anti-fascism on the Left and the transformation of the reactionary Right into proto-fascist leagues, which would soon evolve into regular political parties that would play a role during the Occupation, covered in the fifth and final part of the book.

Well-known intellectual historian Richard Wolin once quipped that ferreting out left-wing intellectuals naïve about the repressive nature of Communism was like shooting goldfish in a fishbowl. Thankfully Drake does not indulge in a goldfish safari. On the other hand, there is no attempt, either, to judge the merits of intellectuals’ interventions or to situate them in an overall evolution. Beginning with World War I the French intellectual became increasingly bogged down in ideology and party politics, which debased the supposedly noble, that is to say, universal nature of his calling. Therefore it might have been tempting, by way of conclusion, to explore further the argument in Julien Benda’s famous essay *La trahison des clercs* (1927), which argued that intellectuals ought to forsake political commitment and instead espouse the defense of eternal values such as freedom, justice, and truth. Might it not be that the French intellectual, in fact, has suffered a steep decline ever since the Dreyfus affair?

Moreover, it might have been appropriate to remind the reader of the distinguished, if not brilliant, history of the intellectual in the postwar period. Instead, the book ends rather abruptly with the Liberation, which, rather than closing the history of the committed French intellectual, opened a new golden age during the *trente glorieuses*.

**Alan SINGERMAN. 2004. *Apprentissage du cinéma français*
Livre de l'étudiant. Newburyport, MA: Focus Publishing. 388 pp.
ISBN 9-781585-101047.**

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. The need is especially severe in cinema studies. Cursing the powers that be, I have had to assemble my own course packets, including introductory texts on the medium itself or on famous actors and directors, along with study questions, group projects, cultural modules, etc. Not any more. To say that Alan Singerman's book fills a void in the market is the understatement of the year; it is the single most valuable contribution to the field in years and is destined to have a profound impact on the way film is taught in the college classroom. Fortunately, his publisher, Focus Publishing in Newburyport, Massachusetts, is going even further by bringing out various works in cinema studies. One outstanding example is ***Cinema for French Conversation*** by Anne-Christine Rice, which comes with an excellent Teacher's Manual. The same publisher also has plans to make available a great number of booklets, each on a different film, for French language courses; the first volumes in these series (*Ciné-Modules* and *Cinéphile*) have already appeared.

As the term "apprentissage" in Singerman's title suggests, this text is an initiation into the cinematographic medium by way of more than one dozen case studies of French film classics by iconic directors: Jean Vigo's *Zéro de conduite*, Jean Renoir's *Partie de campagne* and *La grande illusion*, Marcel Carné's *Le jour se lève* and *Les enfants du paradis*, Jean Cocteau's *La belle et la bête*, René Clément's *Jeux interdits*, Jacques Tati's *Les vacances de M. Hulot*, Robert Bresson's *Un condamné à mort s'est échappé*, François Truffaut's *Les 400 coups* and *Jules et Jim*, Alain Resnais's *Hiroshima mon amour*, Jean-Luc Godard's *A bout de souffle*, François Truffaut's *Jules et Jim*, Eric Rohmer's *Ma nuit chez Maud*, and Agnès Varda's *Sans toit ni loi*. Most, if not all, of these films are bound to startle students of today's generation, as much with their content as with 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* that 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 both of the films just mentioned, 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 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 deflect from character development and ideas, not to mention “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.

Singerman 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. His approach is practical and pedagogical almost to a fault. There is more material than any instructor can hope to use in a single course, even a course just on French cinema, so instructors will have to pick and choose what they find most useful for their purposes. As Singerman himself says, quoting the Abbaye de Thélème: “fais ce que voudras.”

The text proper opens with a most useful list of technical vocabulary, which includes definitions, in French, of many of the most commonly used terms that students are likely to encounter in film criticism and which they need in order to speak critically about a film. Singerman expands upon the definitions given, providing a plethora of examples and illustrations in a short primer that follows in a later chapter: *La lecture du film* (27-44). Curiously, a number of common terms such as “court” and “long” “métrage” are not included in the *Lexique technique du cinéma*. Perhaps an English-language translation of the most commonly used terms would have been appropriate to help students quickly assimilate useful vocabulary and more readily understand the seventeen case studies of cinematic masterpieces that make up the bulk of the text. 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 Singerman has used. 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 no doubt irrelevant in an upper-level course, in which students have already mastered the basics of discourse about narratives. And, of course, a bilingual vocabulary list would have altered the French-only character of the book, which is precisely what sets it apart from other, considerably more basic texts on the same subject. There is a spate of single-film study guides on the market today, but with the exception of the new *Ciné-Module* and *Cinéphile* series published by Focus (which do not yet include any of the films studied by Singerman), many of these are of a rather rudimentary kind, putting the burden on the instructor to develop anything

more complex than comprehension questions, vocabulary, and cultural tidbits. Let's face it: Singerman's book is a highly sophisticated educational tool that caters to advanced-level undergraduate and graduate students. In fact, it is rather like the English-language text I once used in a film appreciation course taught in the General Education program in college. Except that it is in French.

The first two chapters (*Histoire du cinéma: les débuts*, and *Histoire du cinéma I: les années vingt*) outline the various technological innovations that made the new medium possible and provide an accessible historical overview of the early decades of cinema, reminding the reader of the important place that France has always held in the history of what the French call the *septième art*. Important names appear in bold face and help the neophyte navigate the murky waters of early French cinema. From the time of the Lumière brothers and Georges Méliès, who quickly realized the import of technological advances in photography that led to the first movie camera and soon began producing a series of *courts métrages*, France has played an important role in the production and distribution of film. Many of these early films showed scenes from everyday life, for example, *Arrivée d'un train en gare de La Ciotat*; and Louis Lumière created the first movie house in 1895, when he charged a group of thirty-five guests one franc each to watch a series of ten shorts in the basement of the Grand Café in Paris. It would not be long before this new medium lent itself to the creation of fiction. Méliès' sixteen-minute *Voyage dans la lune* (1902) possibly is the best-known early example of a feature film and an ancestor of the modern science fiction adventure. Moreover, Méliès is arguably the first *metteur en scène* because he imposed his imprimatur on every aspect of his work, technical and narrative. He also is commonly regarded as the inventor of special effects. However, the French cannot lay claim to the invention of modern cinema, and Singerman dutifully includes all the major contributions to the new medium by innovators in America, England, Germany, and Russia. The only notable omission is Scandinavia, whose contributions in all domains of movie production were considerable.

The bulk of the text consists of seventeen case studies of famous French films. They are divided into two main sections: *Le réalisme poétique* and *La nouvelle vague*. These terms refer to the historical genres of the films under study, and both are discussed in an excellent introductory essay. Most teachers of French are probably familiar with the great majority of the films selected. They are all classics and in many cases huge box office hits. To give the reader a sense of how each chapter is organized I decided to select a film I am familiar with and then examine Singerman's pedagogical approach in detail. The film I finally decided on is Francois Truffaut's 1962 masterpiece *Jules et Jim*, which I taught in the Yale second-year language sequence for many years (where its technique, style, and poetry unfortunately were entirely overlooked in favor of the study of language) and which I have occasionally used since (with varying degrees of success, I may add). Each case study consists of approximately twenty dense pages of text and follows a similar format divided into three parts. Part I contains a variety of

information about the film: an exhaustive plot summary (*synopsis*); a discussion of the film's reception by the public and by critics (*reception*); the idea behind the film or its gestation (*La genèse et l'adaptation*) [*Jules et Jim* is based on a little-known novel by Henri-Pierre Roché that attracted little attention when it was published in 1953]; the actors (*La distribution*); the making of the film (*Le tournage*); its style (*Le montage et le style*); its structure (*La structure*); and its themes (*thèmes*).

Part II, *Fiche pédagogique*, provides a variety of discussion topics based on the film, including quotes from the actors, particular scenes, and ten or so general discussion topics (such as “les rapports entre Jules et Jim,” “le rôle du feu et de l'eau dans le film,” or “le ménage à trois” [298]). This is perhaps the weakest part of the text: topics are too general to provide much structure for a student discussion in French; and, after all, how is a beginning film student to know how to critique a scene? The instructor will have to be prepared to step in and offer more specific guidelines. Moreover, the *Fiche pédagogique* would be as good a place as any in the text to include cultural and historical analysis, thus enhancing students' understanding of the film under study. We cannot assume that students know enough about the *résistance*, for example, to appreciate the subtlety of a film like Alain Resnais's *Hiroshima mon amour*.

Part III, *Dossier critique*, offers a broad array of quotes from famous critics, directors, actors, et al on various aspects of the film (its adaptation to the screen, the image of women, morality, poetry) and contains some of the most insightful observations that have ever been made about the film. But again, I wonder if significant passages could not have been highlighted or accompanied by a few short questions or comments. It is awfully hard to expect an undergraduate to immediately pick up on all the subtleties of French film criticism or to possess an adequate degree of cultural sensitivity to understand the issues under discussion.

I like this text immensely and have already decided to use portions of it in an intermediate level language course in which I show three or four feature films. I know that I will have to create a few complementary activities to compensate for certain weaknesses in my students' preparation. Specifically, I will need to produce exercises focused on language, since Singerman does not provide for acquisition and practice of intermediate or advanced French. Students using his text will naturally improve their French immensely, but its primary place obviously is not in the language classroom. Still, all the extra work on my part will be worth it because the critical apparatus provided by Singerman as a whole is nothing short of spectacular. By way of conclusion I would nevertheless like to suggest publishing an accompanying teacher's manual, which would point out the difficulties hampering students' appreciation of “fine films.”

Unfortunately there is no room in the curriculum at many small schools like my own that do 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 which values foreign language study enough to be able to offer a broad spectrum of courses. I am left to meditate on Jules and Jim's lady friend Catherine's (Jeanne Moreau) song *Le tourbillon de la vie*: "tous deux on est reparti dans le tourbillon de la vie. On a continué à tourner Tous les deux enlacés, Tous les deux enlacés." May the instruction of foreign languages in the United States prosper, so that Singerman's wonderfully refreshing and intelligent book finds its rightful place in our classrooms.

Brian MORTON and Donald C. SPINELLI. 2003. *Beaumarchais and the American Revolution*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books. ISBN 0-7391-0468-3. 363pp. \$84.

The clock has often been considered a metaphor for the eighteenth century, associated with everything from deism to the diddling Louis XVI, who much preferred tinkering with a precious timepiece, instead of dealing with urgent business of state. Its predictability and the regularity of its workings provided reassurance in an unpredictable and ever-changing world. The fact that so many famous eighteenth-century personalities--from Rousseau to Beaumarchais--were the sons of clockmakers perhaps also explains why the clock undeniably looms large in the eighteenth-century imagination. Whereas the king would have been content to tinker in relative obscurity, a rebel like Beaumarchais would have been happy to exchange places with him. Indeed, one sometimes wonders if this is not what drove him in the first place, the desire not only to succeed in the world but also, like his most famous character, Figaro, to one-up his staid aristocratic master and take center stage himself. In the theatre such a move might have been comical; however, in real life, Beaumarchais ended up on a tragic, downward spiral, and he would have done well to conduct his business with the attention to detail and the discipline of a clockmaker.

This fascinating and meticulously researched account of the French dramatist Pierre Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais (1732-1799) focuses on his activities as a maverick gunrunner during the American Revolution, a role most readers do not associate with the well-known author who inspired Mozart's opera *The Marriage of Figaro* (1784). After reading this exciting book one wonders how he found time to write at all, consumed as he was by his business dealings in America and by his efforts to avoid bankruptcy in France.

It would be difficult, if not impossible, to summarize Beaumarchais's life in a few sentences. From the time he was a young man until the day he died, Beaumarchais struggled to redeem himself, to regain the civil rights he had lost as the result of a scandal he had been only tangentially involved in and to secure a return on his

investments in the gun trade with the American revolutionaries. Figaro's desire to "combine public interest and private advantage" is emblematic of Beaumarchais's urge to succeed. As the authors of this study explain, three main reasons motivated Beaumarchais: he sought, first, regaining his civil rights by making himself useful to the French court as an undercover special envoy and spy; second, earning money for himself; and third, aiding the American cause, in which he fervently believed (327). Historically speaking, the best spies have been idealists (e.g., Kim Philby) who never asked for money; for Beaumarchais to think that he could make a profit by supporting an idealistic cause no doubt was a big mistake. The Americans naturally assumed that his company (carrying the romantic or, at least, unlikely name of Roderigue Hortalez and Co.) was a front for the French government, which could very well not openly support the American Revolution (at least, not until war between France and Great Britain had broken out), and therefore thought that they owed Beaumarchais nothing. Although the Americans would later admit a debt to Beaumarchais, there is no evidence to suggest that he ever made any money doing business with them. In point of fact, his heirs fought in the American courts for generations to no avail. It is a conspicuous injustice that there is not so much as a street named in honor of Beaumarchais in the U.S. (which lavished all its praise on Lafayette); his six ships of arms and other badly needed equipment, by all accounts, made a small but significant contribution to the American Revolution.

Just as in his dramas, Beaumarchais tried a little too hard to be both successful and credible. His machinations were clever to a fault but too intricate to bear fruit in real life. Although this study is not a biography as such (Maurice Lever's recently completed three-volume biography of Beaumarchais seems destined to become the standard against which all subsequent studies of Beaumarchais will be judged), the reader does miss the personal dimension of the story: why did Beaumarchais become involved in the gun trade at all? No doubt the answer lies in his ambition to succeed in the world and "make a buck" into the bargain. Still, it would have been gratifying to hear more about what made this unusual person, who grew up in modest circumstances, the son of a clockmaker, "tick" in the first place.

Nicholas HEWITT. 2003. *The Cambridge Companion to Modern French Culture*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. Hardback ISBN 0-521-79123-5. 353pp. \$65. Paperback ISBN 0-521-79465-X. 353pp. \$23.

A hundred years ago, in the aftermath of the Dreyfus affair, France appeared to have reached a "republican consensus" (23) but still remained a country of "deep divisions" (17): between republicans and anti-republicans, between the urban working class and bourgeoisie, on the one hand, and the peasantry, on the other, between *la France métropolitaine* and its worldwide empire. Add to this mix a demographic crisis, which runs like a red thread through much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The

population of France increased by only 3.5 million in the period 1871-1911 or 9.7 per cent (21), whereas the increase for Germany in the same period was 23 million or 57.8 per cent. In 1918 the French population had actually declined even though the provinces of Alsace and Lorraine had been returned to France. By 1970, France was a transformed country, the result of cathartic experiences such as World War I, the Great Depression, the debacle of 1940 followed by four years of Occupation and then the Liberation (10,000 collaborators were summarily executed before de Gaulle could assert full control over the country [38]), decolonization and wars of liberation in Indochina and Algeria, and efforts at economic and political reconstruction after World War II during the *trente glorieuses* (the period of economic prosperity and industrial renewal, 1945-1968) and the early years of the Fifth Republic. However, there is much to suggest that over the last few decades France has been undergoing another *mutation sociale* (41) of the same magnitude. The empire is no more; neither is rural France (the primary sector of agriculture employed 36 per cent of the labor force in 1946 and only 8 per cent in 2000 [42]). In the wake of the events of May 1968, the great rift between the Left and the Right appears to have been transcended by something else, by globalization and the concomitant inundation of American culture, the English language and consumerism, the rise of ecology, feminism and multiculturalism, the liberalization of the mass media, the reorganization of work and labor relations, relentless urbanization coupled with the ghettoization of the *cités*, a growing population (due in large part to immigration) that can enjoy the fruits of increased leisure and life expectancy but that rightly also worries about health care in its old age, as the scandal during last year's *canicule* showed. Today it would appear that the French republic is no longer one and indivisible (to the extent that it ever was), and idealism is in short supply in all walks of life. In fact, there is much to suggest that the French are experiencing a certain angst or fin-de-siècle malaise. Asked in a SOFRES poll if they felt that ordinary people live less well today than before, 60 per cent of respondents in 1993 answered yes, up from 26 per cent in 1966 (58).

The 15 essays in this volume, all by authorities in their respective fields (Steven Ungar, Michael Bishop, and Mireille Rosello, to name only a few), examine aspects of the topics mentioned above in the context of history, culture and national identity, architecture, planning and design, the mass media, consumer culture (food, drink, and fashion), the evolution of the French language, the role of public intellectuals, religion and politics, the relationships among literature, philosophy and critical theory, narrative fiction (including Francophone literature), poetry, theatre, music, the visual arts, and cinema. The only topic not covered in any great depth is education. An excellent introduction by the editor sketches the intimate role the French government (in particular strong ministers of culture such as André Malraux and Jack Lang) has had in implementing cultural policy, specifically through its longtime and still substantial support in the form of subsidies, policies and a host of state-sponsored initiatives, such as the organization of world fairs and colonial exhibitions in the first half of the last century, the negotiation of a French *exception culturelle* in GATT, the

bicentennial celebration of the French Revolution, and the construction in the last decades of the twentieth century of impressive public monuments known as *grands travaux*, all intended to safeguard the French heritage and foster a sense of national purpose. Most contributors to this volume discuss the state's strategic interventions in the cultural domain in context and bear out the quintessentially French notion that culture is far too important for the future of the nation to evolve on its own and that the state has the responsibility to provide "increased order and structure to the industries and professions engaged in cultural activity" (180) whenever possible. Historically speaking, governmental involvement in the arts and humanities has been a constant in French history since at least the time of Louis XIV and received special attention during the Popular Front in the 1930s and the Mitterrand presidency (1981-1995). Thanks in no small part to state intervention, France today still has that greatest of assets, a rich national culture. In the final analysis the future of France is not any more uncertain than the future of any other great nation; France has changed, to be sure, and will continue to change as it embraces globalization and European construction, but seems destined to remain a power to be reckoned with in the century to come.

These essays repackage well-known facts but do so in a well-organized, nearly jargon-free, almost pedagogical manner. Moreover, they are very up-to-date (discussing among other things Le Pen's routing of Jospin in the 2002 presidential election and the debate on the status of the Islamic headscarf in the public sphere). Also useful is the chronology of events in France during the last century. This volume will remain an authority in the field for many years to come because its essays are clearly written, accessible to a general audience, and delightful to read. The editor is to be commended for assembling so many brilliant contributions on all the significant aspects of that intangible object we call "French civilization."