

Sébastien  
Fevry

## IMMIGRATION AND MEMORY IN POPULAR CONTEMPORARY FRENCH CINEMA: THE FILM AS 'LIEU D'ENTRE- MEMOIRE'<sup>1</sup>

In March 2009, the release of Philippe Lioret's *Welcome* triggered a heated debate in France. The film was not satisfied with denouncing the treatment reserved for undocumented immigrants during the presidency of Nicolas Sarkozy, but also connected an event from recent history with memories of crimes perpetrated during the Occupation. At around the same time, other films, intended for a wide audience, related the topicality of undocumented immigrants to older memories in a more or less explicit fashion. In addition to *Welcome*, we mention here *Les Mains en l'air* (2010) by Romain Goupil and *Le Havre* (2011) by the Finnish filmmaker Aki Kaurismäki<sup>2</sup>, two films that also related the situation of illegal immigrants to persecutions of which the Jews in France were victims during the Second World War. In the same period, the relationship between immigration and memories was also developed in *Eden à l'Ouest* (2009) by Costa-Gavras and *Le Nom des gens* (2010), a comedy by Michel Leclerc which

---

<sup>1</sup> In this article, we have translated all French quotations into English.

<sup>2</sup> *Le Havre* is the first third of a trilogy on port cities the other two thirds of which are to be filmed in Spain and Germany. After long location scoutings, the filmmaker finally chose the French city as the first port of call: 'I fell in love with Le Havre, with its lights, which already seduced Manet, its working districts, its docks, its port... I thus gave its name to my film and hope I have succeeded in creating its main character'.

Aki Kaurismäki's words, reported by Sophie Walon (2011).

interconnects the recollection of Jewish roundups in the Forties with that of massacres perpetrated by the French Army in Algeria.

In the context of a French society increasingly obsessed with national memory, these films, aimed at a wide public, have considered the question of immigration not so much in geographical as in memorial terms. They call for an enlargement of one's own memory as much as for an opening of other people's. More precisely, because they establish relations between events distant in time, one might say that these films function not as '*lieux de mémoire*' (sites of memory), but as '*lieux d'entre-mémoire*' (sites of inter-memory), invoking what Michael Rothberg (2009) has called a multidirectional memory, that is a memory which is constructed by an interlacing of different events and temporal strata.<sup>3</sup>

However, it is not enough to observe that certain French productions of the late 2000s relate various strata of the past and present. The inter-memory's play should not only be thought on the internal level of the film, but be considered also within a wider perspective which at once combines media, social and political dimensions. As Michael Rothberg (2010) reminds us, 'the sites of memory do not remember by themselves – they require the active agency of individuals and publics' (8).

Hence in the following pages, we will try to understand the memorial dynamics that films like *Welcome* have assumed in French socio-cultural space. To do this, it seems to us that taking the family theme into account is decisive if we are to grasp at once the ambition of these films, their impact on society and how they integrate the contemporary question of undocumented immigrants with more distant memories. In the films dealt with, it is certainly not by chance if the inter-memory emerges in recomposed families who replace the question of filiation by the question of adoption or by relationships to the other which are no longer necessarily those of descent or heredity.

---

<sup>3</sup> 'It is precisely that convoluted, sometimes historically unjustified, back-and-forth movement of seemingly distant collective memories in and out of public consciousness that I qualify as memory's multidirectionality' (Rothberg 2009,17).

## The Righteous and Illegal Immigrants

During his presidential term (2007-2012), Nicolas Sarkozy sought to harden the immigration policy he had already put in place as Minister of the Interior under Jacques Chirac.<sup>4</sup> Very quickly, questions of immigration and national identity came to be closely associated, as the creation of a ministry of National Identity and Immigration in 2007 demonstrates. From the viewpoint of Sarkozian policy and the Interior ministers who succeeded one another in applying it, on the one hand the strategy consisted in drastically clamping down on what those in power called an ‘inflicted immigration’ and, on the other hand, in promoting the national identity, notably by devoting a vast national debate to the question. Launched by the minister Eric Besson in October 2009, the debate proved to be a resounding failure<sup>5</sup>.

In such a context, where immigration ends up being presented as a threat to the national identity, we can best understand the relations of inter-memory activated by certain films, and particularly those films which consist in likening the situation of illegal immigrants to that of the Jewish experience in France during the Second World War.

In this respect, three films are particularly significant: *Welcome*, *Les Mains en l'air* and *Le Havre*.<sup>6</sup> In each case, the narrative is developed around a child or teenager who the French authorities seek to arrest. In *Welcome*, Vincent Lindon plays a swimming instructor who trains a young Kurdish refugee eager to swim

---

<sup>4</sup> For a synthetic outline of Nicolas Sarkozy’s immigration policy, see the article by Xavier Molénat (2012) ‘Immigration, police, justice: Nicolas Sarkozy, président de la fermeté ?’ Consultable on the site: <http://www.scienceshumaines.com> (accessed December 15, 2013).

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, the blog of Vincent Duclert (2010) on *Mediapart* site: <http://blogs.mediapart.fr/blog/vincent-duclert/020210/lehec-de-lidentite-nationale> (accessed December 15, 2013).

<sup>6</sup> Michel Leclerc’s comedy, *Le Nom des gens*, is less explicit on this subject. The narrative is centred around a love affair between Arthur Martin, a peaceable 40-year old who goes to great lengths to hide his Jewish origins and Bahia Benmahmoud, an extroverted young woman asserting her Algerian identity. The relationship between illegal immigrants and the Jews is above all evoked in a sequence where the hero’s mother has had her identity papers stolen. The woman, who was hidden by a French family during the war, finds herself temporarily unable to obtain a new identity card because she cannot prove her French origin in the eyes of a particularly zealous bureaucrat.

the English Channel to Britain. In *Les Mains en l'air*, Milana, a schoolgirl of Chechen origin, is about to be deported, and it is ultimately her classmates who protect and save her. Finally in *Le Havre*, Marcel Marx, a respectable shoeshiner, comes to the assistance of a young African boy who has managed to escape a police raid. Marcel first hides the child and then finances his clandestine trip to England. For the three films, the underlying idea is that the people who help immigrants today might well be compared with 'the Righteous of France' who hid and protected Jews, and particularly children, during the war.<sup>7</sup>

This parallelism between a contemporary situation and the blackest hours of the Occupation constituted the main point of contention in a polemic opposing the filmmaker of *Welcome*, Philippe Lioret, and the Minister of Immigration, Eric Besson. Just before the film's release, in an interview given to *La Voix du Nord*, the filmmaker explicitly compared the situation of the refugees in Calais to that of the Jews in France in 1943. Stated more specifically, Lioret intended to protest against article L622-1 of the Civil code which punishes with five years imprisonment and a 30,000 euro fine 'any person who will have, by direct or indirect aid, facilitated or attempted to facilitate the entry, circulation or irregular stay of a foreigner in France'<sup>8</sup>.

Two days after the publication of Lioret's interview, the Minister of Immigration reacted to the director's remarks on RTL radio. 'That same old tune is unbearable', he declared. 'To suggest that the French police are like the police of Vichy, and that Afghans are hunted down, that they are targets of roundups ... is intolerable'<sup>9</sup>. The Minister's retort provoked in turn a rejoinder on the part of Philippe Lioret who published an open letter in the newspaper *Le Monde* dated

---

<sup>7</sup> In July 2000, the 'Righteous of France' were officially recognized by the French State. In this perspective, the Righteous of France are defined as those who sheltered, protected or defended, at risk to their own lives and without any compensation, one or several people threatened by genocide during the Occupation. This recognition constituted a determinant element in the policy of memory inaugurated by Jacques Chirac, Nicolas Sarkozy's predecessor. On the memory of the Righteous of France, see Sarah Gensburger (2010).

<sup>8</sup> National legislation consultable on the site: <http://www.legifrance.gouv.fr> (accessed December 15, 2013).

<sup>9</sup> Remarks taken from the *Nouvel Observateur* site:

<http://tempsreel.nouvelobs.com/politique/20090307.OBS7740/le-film-welcome-provoque-la-colere-d-eric-besson.html> (accessed December 15, 2013).

March 11th, 2009. 'Be it known that, as it happens, I do not equate the hunting down of Jews and the Shoah with the persecutions that the Calais immigrants and the volunteers who try to come to their assistance are victims of, but with the repressive mechanisms which are strangely similar there, as well as the behaviours of men and women faced with this repression'<sup>10</sup>.

### Metaphors and Comparisons

This polemic, which might also have affected the reception of *Le Havre* and *Les Mains en l'air*, undoubtedly means that the French public of the time was sensitive to the play of resonance engendered by the films, and that behind the staging of a contemporary social reality it could see the evocation of repression mechanisms reminiscent of the Second World War.

The task of comparison was of course facilitated by the films themselves, which predisposed the spectator's gaze to turn to other strata of the past. However, unlike documentary investigations like Henri-François Imbert's *No Pasarán! Album souvenir* (2003)<sup>11</sup>, *Le Havre*, *Welcome* and *Les Mains en l'air* do not make use of a work of editing aimed at matching images from archives with images of contemporary reality. These films are made more in the model of a popular cinema, turned towards fiction and the spectator's immersion in the action and at no time do they resort to a dialectical editing which would serve to explicitly underline the correspondence between periods.

Similarly, allusions to the Occupation are rather rare in the dialogues. There is a sole evocation of the Righteous of France in a dialogue exchange in *Les Mains en l'air*, while a sequence of *Welcome* explicitly traces a parallel between the Thirties

---

<sup>10</sup> Letter consultable in part on the site of the *l'Express*: [http://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/media-people/media/immigration-besson-demande-a-lioret-de-retirer-ses-propos\\_746008.html](http://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/media-people/media/immigration-besson-demande-a-lioret-de-retirer-ses-propos_746008.html) (accessed December 15, 2013).

<sup>11</sup> In this film, the filmmaker goes in search of old postcards showing Spanish republican refugees. In 1939, these people were obliged to flee the Franquists and take refuge in France where most were interned in concentration camps before being deported to Germany during the war. At the film's end, by a leap ahead in time which returns the viewer to the present, the filmmaker shows Iraqi refugees in the Sangatte camp at the edge of the English Channel, and thus relates the plight of the Spanish refugees to that of illegal immigrants who today try to reach the coasts of England.

and the contemporary period, when a character becomes indignant when a supermarket refuses entry to immigrants: 'You know what that means when you start preventing people from going into stores? You want me to buy you a history book?'

Consequently, if the past returns in images of the present, it is more in the form of a metaphorical relationship.<sup>12</sup> Certain sequences evoke others, not visible in the film(s), because there is a more or less strong degree of resemblance between the image present and the image absent. For example, in Romain Goupil's film, the scene showing the children leaving their hiding-place with 'their hands up' (see the French title *Les Mains en l'air*) does not fail to evoke the photograph of a little boy captured during the Warsaw Ghetto's liquidation in 1943.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, in *Welcome*, many sequences may also be perceived according to an analogical logic, such as the images of the brutal repression of illegal immigrants that the hero watches from his car. Lastly, the sequence of denouncement in *Le Havre* harkens back to many films on the Occupation where an 'ordinary' Frenchman reveals the hiding-place of a group of resisters or a Jewish family to the authorities.

In each case, we turn to the idea defended by Andreas Huyssen (2003), namely that the memory of the Shoah has for many become a key element in understanding other deportations or genocides. 'In the transnational movement of memory discourses, the Holocaust loses its quality as index of the specific historical event and begins to function as metaphor for other traumatic histories and memories' (14). If Huyssen does not dissimulate the risks of such an approach, which may result in ignorance of the specificity of the events

---

<sup>12</sup> In a preceding article, I showed that this metaphorical logic must be supplemented by taking the temporal dimension of the films into account. For the reminiscence to take place not only in terms of visual perception, but also of lived sensation, it is essential that the present relax its grasp on current headline status somewhat, that it provide a glimpse at other temporal possibilities coexisting with it. If *Welcome*, *Le Havre* and *Les Mains en l'air* can be placed in resonance with another time than their own, it is because they filter their topicality via a certain dephasing which distances them from the present's brutal immanence and which leads them to bring back certain memories of the past.

On this subject, see my article in *Image & Narrative* (2013).

<sup>13</sup> On the rapprochement with that photograph, see Fonck Vinciane (2010).

juxtaposed, he nevertheless points out as an unavoidable fact that ‘the global and the local aspects of Holocaust memory have entered into new constellations that beg to be analyzed case by case’ (14).

### Memorial Foyer and Family Mediation

If the metaphorical logic allows us to understand the development of new constellations, it is nonetheless insufficient to account for the memorial dynamics animating films like *Welcome* and *Le Havre*. What we still have to determine is a point of anchorage from which the play of inter-memory can develop.

This question is that much more important when one considers that it is not just a question of linking the Jew to the illegal immigrant across time or the figure of the Righteous to the volunteer who opposes the immigration policy of Nicolas Sarkozy’s government. The work of memory, even open and multidirectional, does not rely on a simple rapprochement of contents. If we can talk about memory, it is because these contents go beyond mere knowledge. As the Egyptologist Jan Assmann (2010) underlined, ‘knowledge about the past acquires the properties and functions of memory if it is related to a concept of identity’ (113). For her part, Marianne Hirsch (2012) rightly points out that memory is distinguished from history by the fact that it relies on a transmission process which is intimately lived and felt. ‘Memory signals an affective link to the past (...) and it is powerfully mediated by technologies like literature, photography, and testimony’ (33).

To speak about a work of remembrance, the play of the inter-memory must have an emotional impact on the viewer. The spectators must not simply observe the rapprochement of events, they must also recognize as their own events that are bound together; as *their own*, meaning that the events come to form an integral part of their own history.

This question of identity and relation to self is inescapable in a reflection on a memory which tries to open itself to the other. For the true difficulty is not so much the rapprochement of contents scattered over time, but the appropriation

that results from such a rapprochement. In other words, how are we to integrate an experience which is a priori foreign to us within a reference framework that we regard as our own? Or, again, how are we to attune to the other's experience on the vibrating cord of a personal memory? This is a very delicate operation because it must be done without reducing the alterity to the level of one's own experience. In such an operation, the risk is to diminish, or even ignore, the singularity of the experience lived by the other by assimilating it and bringing it around to one's own reference frames.

Posing the problem in these terms focuses our attention on what might be called the *memorial foyer* of representations. The word *Foyer* should be understood in the two senses of the term; first of all in a physical sense inasmuch as the term refers to a familiar place which, in the case of a memory open to the other, makes it function as a zone of greeting and mediation too; and, secondly, in a narrative sense indicating the memorial perspective, the focusing through which the juxtaposed events will be perceived, and which thus determines the memory's point of anchoring. As soon as we begin to reflect in this way we realize that the family context constitutes a *memorial foyer* particularly suitable for reflecting on the rapprochement and appropriation of certain memorial contents.

In her work *The Generation of Postmemory* (2012), Marianne Hirsch has shown the determining role of forms of familial mediation in the context of the reappropriation of historic traumas by people, often the victims' descendants, who are sometimes left with a remote and distorted knowledge of the events their parents lived through. In the event of war or genocide, the intergenerational transmission may be broken and, in that case, the survivors' children are cut off from any direct transmission. So that an affective bond might be restored with the past, artists of the post-memorial generation often reinvest images from archives in the public domain by communicating them in particularized familial configurations such as photo albums, for example. We may think here of Art Spiegelman's work in *Maus*, the illustrated works of W.G. Sebald or the photographs of Lorie Novak. As Marianne Hirsch points out, 'postmemorial work (...) strives to reactivate and *re-embod*y more distant political and cultural memorial structures by reinvesting them with resonant individual and familial forms of mediation and aesthetic expression' (33).



For Hirsch, the idea is to create a living bond with the past by restoring the emotional charge linked to structures and images of family memory. 'Family life, even in its most intimate moments, is entrenched in a collective imaginary shaped by public, generational structures of fantasy and projection and by a shared archive of stories and images that inflect the broader transfer and availability of individual and familial remembrance' (35).

Clearly, for Hirsch, family memory fulfils the *memorial foyer* function we mentioned above. It defines at once the perspective and place from which a community or an individual can most maximally appropriate events he/she did not necessarily live through. As a reserve of images and stories, family memory is a relatively common structure facilitating the interlacing of memories; as an eminently personal substrate, it also makes for a strong emotional involvement in the past.

Having said that, let us note with Hirsch that cultivating family memory in no way guarantees that the experience of the other will be preserved as such. We might even fear that this investment may banalize the singularity of the event by bringing it back into a space which is purely intimate, with the result that the social, political and historic context in which it occurred is forgotten. Lastly, we might also ask ourselves whether recourse to the familial configuration in the processes of recollection might not result in focusing attention on 'a fundamentally oedipal hetero-normative, reproductive form of social organization' (39).

### **Adoption Rather than Descent**

With these considerations in mind, we again turn our attention to films like *Le Havre*, *Les Mains en l'air* and *Welcome*. These films do not content themselves with merely connecting different temporal strata in an eminently sensitive political context. Their purpose is more focused, for they anchor those connections in the context of a family memory, a memory whose conditions of transmission are themselves widened and challenged. To answer the questions

raised earlier, we can already suggest the hypothesis that memory of the other only fully emerges in familial contexts which open themselves up towards the exterior.

In the three films considered, the assistance provided to illegal immigrants is carried out on a purely private basis and goes on mainly in domestic situations: houses or apartments. At issue is withdrawing undocumented immigrants from the threat that public space represents for them. Even if Philippe Lioret, in his open letter to *Le Monde*, stated that he wanted to pay homage to the courage of volunteers and associations, it must be noted that *Welcome* takes place in an intimate and familiar environment and that the work of associations-in-the-field is relegated to the periphery of the main story. Obviously, such a bias amplifies the narrative's dramaturgy and helps reinforce the parallel with the situation of the Righteous of France, who could only manage to help Jews by working in a clandestine manner, outside of official institutions and organizations.

But what really stands out in these narratives is not so much the domestic context as the relationship established between the protagonists there. This is the level where we can most clearly observe the appearance of types of relations with the other which, while taking place in a family setting, escape the norms of a downward transmission whereby the elder's knowledge is transmitted to succeeding generations.

As we shall see, the three films place the question of adoption at the centre of their narrative and envisage the family project on the basis of a radical alterity. What comes to the fore is not so much relations of kinship, even if complicated, but the slow progression which consists in making the other a member of one's own family, of one's own history. The family is no longer defined by laws of blood, but by solidarities which are bound beyond hereditary ties. In other words, family becomes a place which integrates difference and not a place which reproduces likeness.

This situation is quite visible in *Welcome* and *Le Havre*. The character Simon, played by Vincent Lindon, is a lonely man going through a divorce and it is his meeting Bilal that enables him to form an ephemeral family core. In *Le Havre*,

Marcel Marx is also alone and, while his wife is hospitalized, he recreates a family with the child. In both films, one might interpret the relationship established between the adult and the child as a relationship of filiation. The two adults each maintain paternal relationships with their protégés: they are not simply in charge of their protection, but also transmit a particular know-how, a trade, or skill to them. Simon coaches Bilal's swimming, while Marcel Marx teaches Idrissa the art of shining shoes. In parallel, one might also consider that the children find in the person of their protector a foster father, or at least a benevolent authority in reference to whom they may find their way.

Yet such an interpretation leaves aside the dynamics of an adoption process not relying on a one way transmission, but rather a reciprocal exchange. In *Le Havre*, *Welcome* and *Les Mains en l'air*, the adults receive and learn just as much as the young people. The films insist on the fact that the adult must open himself to the other's culture if the relationship is going to truly function. For this reason, the family unit is not presented as a place of duplication witnessing the elder's wisdom being straightforwardly transferred to younger generations. On the contrary, the family becomes a structure with flexible borders, open to the outside, capable of going beyond the limits of the blood-relative ties of traditional family units.

A reply in *Havre* illustrates this process marvellously. Marcel Marx goes to a confinement centre where the child's grandfather is being held. To be able to gain access to him, he claims to be the brother of a prisoner and in response to the prison warden, who is astonished by the difference in their skin colour, he answers placidly: 'I'm the albino of the family'. One could not be more explicit. At that moment, Marcel Marx slips into another family structure; he enters the child's real family in order to help him. Similarly, Simon, in *Welcome*, will end up leaving his habitual social environment, for, after Bilal's death, he crosses the English Channel to speak to the young boy's fiancée. Here again, the manners of adoption do not suppose a turning inward on oneself and one's descendants, but a broadening outward to the culture of the other.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> When the film was released in France, some saw Simon's involvement as an attempt at reconciliation with his former wife who had in fact reproached him precisely for his lack of engagement.

With *Les Mains en l'air*, the dislocation of the traditional family is even more radical than in the preceding films. If Milana is taken in by a French family for a while, she subsequently returns to clandestinity, helped by a band of children who become true brothers and sisters for her. Here, the family yields to the band in a sense very close to that which Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari confer on the term in *Mille Plateaux* (1980 295), namely that the band, unlike the family, does not rely on relations of filiation, but proceeds through contagion and epidemic. In the film, the band indeed involves a hard core, but around that core gravitate other children who equally participate in the mission's success. The epidemic of solidarity first affects several children, Milana's best friends, the contagion subsequently spreads to the class before affecting the whole school, and perhaps other children who see the news about Milana on television. Once the children have decided to hide Milana, they are the ones who really behave like adults, while the parents, closely watched by the police and media, appear to be indecisive beings.

In the three films, the phenomenon of adoption presupposes an overture to the memory of the other on the part of the main characters which is not necessarily an historic memory referring to genocides or past exactions. To take up one of Jan Assmann's (2010) concepts<sup>15</sup>, the memory of which the children of *Havre*, *Welcome* and *Les Mains en l'air* are bearers is above all a communicative memory, a memory incarnated through gestures, born by a relationship to language and linked to an immediate past which is not their host's.

### Family Cinema, Popular Cinema

This concept of a more open familial structure, capable of establishing itself on the basis of a radical alterity, is worth expanding because, as a side effect, it will help us to evaluate the forces at work in the popular French cinema of the 2000s.

---

<sup>15</sup> The distinction established by Jan Assmann (2010) between cultural memory and communicative memory is very important in the field of Memory Studies. Cultural memory is an external memory, an institutionalized memory, transmitted by relatively stable and formatted symbolic shapes, while communicative memory is an internal memory, an embodied and social memory, transmitted by a system of daily interactions.

We should at this point insist on the fact that the films mentioned are films intended for a 'popular audience' or, more accurately, family films, which is of course coherent given the types of characters staged. In avoiding an overly blatant representation of violence and because they are also centred on relationships of complicity between an adult and a child, *Le Havre* and *Les Mains en l'air* can be addressed to a relatively young audience, whereas *Welcome*, harder in certain aspects, is for its part likely to have an effect on many teenagers. The films' access to a wider public is reinforced by their educational merits, as indicated by the fact that *Welcome* and *Les Mains en l'air* have been the subjects of teaching dossiers allowing their use in class.

Additionally, in terms of repercussions, if Romain Goupil's film has been more narrowly distributed, the other two films have been a clear public success. Awarded the prestigious Louis-Delluc prize in 2011, *Le Havre* reached over 500,000 spectators during its distribution in France, whereas *Welcome* climbed very high at the box office, attracting 1,205,000 spectators.<sup>16</sup>

Alongside these films, which we might describe as popular or family-oriented, another popular cinema tendency exists in France which some critics have called a sepia cinema, and wherein the family also plays a very important role. Following the 2004 success of *Les Choristes* (Barratier) a certain type of film, that includes titles such as *Faubourg 36* (Barratier, 2008), *Le Petit Nicolas* (Tirard, 2009), *La Nouvelle Guerre des boutons* (Barratier, 2011) very rapidly gained popularity, taking obvious pleasure in the on-screen revival of a bygone France centred around immutable values. In these productions, the reconstruction of an idealized past goes hand in hand with the restoration of a traditional model of the family above all based on paternal supremacy and perpetuating the stereotypical roles assigned to the wife and child.

Even if a film like *Les Choristes*, whose action is in the immediate post-war period, shows an orphanage supervisor adopting one of his former students, it in no way deals with the alterity that this child bears. Only his first name (Pépinot) could make us think that his parents were republican Spanish refugees, but the

---

<sup>16</sup> For these figures, see [cinefeed.com](http://cinefeed.com).

film stops there in its evocation of a story which might well go beyond the boundaries of the institution where the children are sheltered.

Underlining these two concurrent conceptions of the family that have emerged in popular French cinema of the 2000s of course involves paying attention to the identitary logics which appear on the screens of a cinema that may be too readily and too uniformly described as popular cinema. To films extolling a memory of self correspond films constructing a memory of the other.

### Adopting the memory of a child of the Shoah

In the context of Sarkozy's policy of the late 2000s, terms like 'family' and 'adoption' are not neutral, whether employed in the arena of immigration or national identity. Aside from immigration, successive ministers of the Interior toughened up the conditions favouring family reunification on French territory, even envisaging DNA tests to establish bonds of kinship for families of immigrant workers.<sup>17</sup> In parallel, if the government did not go so far as to sing the praises of the French family, many initiatives sought to re-enchant the national past, such as that of wanting to inform teachers that the resistant Guy Môquet's last letter should be read at the beginning of the year to all high school students in France (May 16th, 2007) or the idea of building a museum of the History of France (January 13th, 2009).<sup>18</sup>

Among these measures, the one most directly of interest to us is Nicolas Sarkozy's February 2008 proposal to confide to schoolchildren the memory of a Jewish child deceased during the Shoah. For the President, it was a means of maintaining the teaching of the Shoah in schools and, more generally, of promoting the fight

---

<sup>17</sup> For a synthetic outline on the DNA tests, see the Wikipedia page devoting to the Immigration Law in 2007 :

[http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Loi\\_fran%C3%A7aise\\_du\\_20\\_novembre\\_2007\\_relative\\_%C3%A0\\_la\\_ma%C3%A9trise\\_de\\_l'immigration\\_%C3%A0\\_l'int%C3%A9gration\\_et\\_%C3%A0\\_l'asile](http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Loi_fran%C3%A7aise_du_20_novembre_2007_relative_%C3%A0_la_ma%C3%A9trise_de_l'immigration_%C3%A0_l'int%C3%A9gration_et_%C3%A0_l'asile) (accessed December 15, 2013).

<sup>18</sup> On these initiatives, see Garcia Patrick. 'Nos présidents face à l'histoire', entretien avec Thomas Wieder. *Le Monde* 2 mars 2009. Consultable on the site:

[http://www.ihtp.cnrs.fr/sites/ihtp/IMG/pdf/Garcia\\_Nos\\_presidents\\_face\\_a\\_l\\_histoire\\_2009\\_\(](http://www.ihtp.cnrs.fr/sites/ihtp/IMG/pdf/Garcia_Nos_presidents_face_a_l_histoire_2009_() accessed December 15, 2013).

against racism. ‘That’s why, he explained, I have asked the government and, more particularly, the Minister for State Education, Xavier Darcos, to ensure that, each year, beginning with the start of school year 2008, all CM2 children will be entrusted with the memory of one of the 11,000 French children, victims of the Shoah (...). At that age children are often more serious than their elders. They are attentive to beings, to the intimacy of names and first names, to the importance of the most detailed elements of their daily environment. How could they then be insensitive to the history of these children who had the same games, the same joys and the same sorrows as them, and who were gradually excluded from their schools, separated from their families and loaded onto trains for a voyage with no return?’<sup>19</sup>

Although this initiative gave rise to varied reactions, with some seeing the proposal as a salutary effort, the proposal to adopt the memory of a child of the Shoah was finally abandoned, both because it betrayed too great a presidential interventionism in school matters and, above all, because its impact on the mental health of children was subject to caution. Auschwitz Survivor and honorary president of the Foundation for the Memory of the Shoah, Simone Veil, expressed her views on the subject very clearly: ‘The second I heard those words, my blood ran cold. It is inconceivable, unbearable, dramatic and, above all, unjust to inflict that on little 10 year olds! One cannot ask a child to identify himself with a dead child. That memory is much too heavy to bear’<sup>20</sup>. A few days later, the historian Annette Wieviorka adopted a similar position: ‘What do we want to do? Twin a living child with a dead child? Give the living the burden of a phantom, introduce him to death? Weigh down his life with the death of another? It’s unbearable’<sup>21</sup>.

These political and memorial debates help us to gain an insight into the issues involved in the films discussed and how these films prolong and reconfigure the polemics present in the public space of Sarkozy France. Thus it is striking to observe that these films respond to the toughening of conditions surrounding family reunifications by showing French men and women who

---

<sup>19</sup> For the complete declarations surrounding this problematic, see the site: [http://www.cndp.fr/crdp-reims/memoire/enseigner/memoire\\_vichy/14shoah\\_cm2.htm](http://www.cndp.fr/crdp-reims/memoire/enseigner/memoire_vichy/14shoah_cm2.htm) (accessed December 15, 2013).

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

widen their family circle to accommodate foreign children. By doing this, the films take the opposite stance to Nicolas Sarkozy's educational initiative, for instead of representing the adoption of the memory of a dead child they rather represent the assumption of care for a living child, whose situation does not fail to evoke that of the Jewish children arrested by the French police.

Thus through the prism of a family setting, the films clearly illustrate an internal contradiction of power which, on the one hand, would like to promote the transmission of a national past where the values of solidarity and generosity are extolled and which, on the other hand, develops a harsh policy in the area of immigration, particularly by encouraging the denunciation and capture of the weakest people – like children. In others words, films such as *Welcome* and *Le Havre* work the familial space on a double temporal register, which allows them to provoke a memory short circuit, showing the incoherence of Sarkozian policy. These films suggest, for example, that present-day laws in the area of immigration would have punished the action of 'the Righteous of France', whose national recognition had been established by Jacques Chirac a few years earlier.

### Giving the present an historic legitimacy

In this way, we see clearly how the open and flexible familial structure allows us to tie the present to the past, to include the history of immigrants in a family memory which establishes a bond with the darkest hours of the Occupation. Thus the task accomplished by these films conveys the sense of a veritable memorial appropriation. Once again, the idea is not merely to juxtapose different temporal strata, but to support a living and effective bond between these different strata.

At this point we turn again to Marianne Hirsch's work, for an important divergence should be noted between the work of the artists of the post-memorial generation like Art Spiegelman and W.G. Sebald and the films we have analysed. Whereas the artists studied by Marianne Hirsch sought to bring the past back to the present by means of forms of familar mediations, films like *Le Havre* or *Welcome* seem to proceed more in a reverse direction which consists in lending



the present historic depth by investing today's media issues with a memorial tonality which attaches them to certain combats of the past.

Romain Goupil's film, *Les Mains en l'air*, provides the clearest look at this process. From the outset, the hunt for undocumented immigrants is told from the future, in 2067. The film opens like a science fiction narrative. Milana, the former schoolgirl threatened with deportation, remembers the events of her childhood: 'It was in France. In 2008 or 2009. I don't remember any more who was president. I was ten years old. Exactly ten in 2009'.

By transforming the present into a potential memory, the film makes for a better circulation between the time of current issues and times past. Current events acquire an historic depth which places them on an equal footing with other events of the past, and particularly with the deportations committed during the Occupation. All at once, the neighbouring is that much stronger and every action undertaken in the narrative, like the clandestine combat waged by the children, will be more readily able to resonate with actions achieved earlier, for those actions, past and present, now dialogue on the same circuit.

In parallel, in an inverse movement, it is worth noting that the filmmaker's goal does not simply consist in burying contemporary issues in deeper or shallower layers of the past. The past itself becomes more contemporaneous for it is brought closer to an event which we spontaneously associate with our immediate universe. Such a movement is to be seen in one of the film's last sequences when the children leave their hiding-place with their hands up (*les mains en l'air*). Although this sequence presents similarities with the photograph of the Warsaw ghetto child, it does not rely on the simple effect of resemblance. If the past lends its historic legitimacy to the present, the present works in a complementary manner in bringing certain images of the Second World War up to present times. Thus, the Jewish child's photograph is not simply evoked, but rather literally re-enacted in another space and another location, which puts the original image back into movement by coupling it with the driving force of the present.

The same process is at work in *Le Havre* and *Welcome*, where the issue at stake there too is conferring historic depth on the actualities of undocumented

immigrants by linking them with a memory shared by a majority of Western spectators. In *Le Havre*, Kaurismäki does not resort to a science-fiction narrative, but instead constructs a filmic universe composed of obvious references to other periods of cinema history. Thus, the reconstitution of the working-class street where Marcel Marx lives, with its bakery and grocery store, cannot help but remind us of pre-war films like *La Belle équipe* (1936) by Julien Duvivier and *Quai des brumes* (1938) by Marcel Carné and, on the rebound, the Popular front period, with forces of the Left rallying in the face of rising totalitarianisms. Another constant allusion is that made to burlesque cinema: the film establishes a filiation between the narrative of the pursued child and Charlie Chaplin's *The Kid* (1921), which contributes further in anchoring the history of undocumented immigrants in an imaginary and memorial space shared by a broad section of the public.

In this recomposed universe, the veritable clash arises when television news images depicting the dismantling of the 'Jungle' of Calais appear. The filmmaker chose not to harmonize these images' composition with the rest of the film, undoubtedly because it was paramount that this sequence preserve its indexical dimension and that it succeed in recalling the incredible violence surrounding the treatment of illegal immigrants in France. In a certain way, these images remain inassimilable; they are unattached to other recollections and thus, at the film's core, preserve the singularity of the treatment inflicted on illegal immigrants.

Whereas *Les Mains en l'air* and *Le Havre* end somewhat optimistically, *Welcome* concludes with the drowning of the young illegal immigrant. In one of the last sequences, accompanied by several volunteers, Vincent Lindon is at the cemetery attending the burial of his protégé. By such sequences, Lioret inserts the work of memory into the heart of his film. Bilal has died, but his memory will not be forgotten. It will be borne by Simon, a character who in all likelihood most clearly invokes the memory of the Righteous of France in the minds of spectators, be it only because of the recent polemic opposing Philippe Lioret and Eric Besson. With the sequence in the cemetery, the film brings its work of appropriation to its term. The young man's memory is taken in charge by a character who establishes the connection between the immediate reality and memories of combats waged by anonymous Frenchmen.

Thus, in the three films, a long-range memory develops a dialogue with a more immediate memory, a short-term memory we might say, connected to actuality. The principal benefit of such a rapprochement is the way that it short-circuits the poles of long- and short-term memory: the current event reaches deeper zones of memory, thus acquiring a certain form of historic legitimacy (the question of undocumented immigrants has its place in time; it will not be forgotten), whereas recollections of the Occupation are brought up to date in time by being seen to match our present day reality.

### The Cinema as “lieu d’entre-mémoire”

In concluding, perhaps it would be well to reconsider the notion of the ‘lieu d’entre-mémoire’ we referred to earlier in the article. This concept can easily be applied to *Welcome, Le Havre, Les Mains en l’air* and still other films (*Le Nom des gens*, for example) insofar as these productions tie different temporal strata together and open up a slack space, allowing us to shed light on the present through the past, and the past through the present, yet without having these two dimensions fold in on one another.

Now, we may well ask ourselves whether the concept of a site of inter-memory would gain by being developed further on the conceptual level and, more particularly, through its affinities with the cinematographic medium. This is a delicate question, for we would not want to add gratuitously a supplementary concept in an already rich semantic field, and in particular since the concept of ‘lieux de mémoire’ (sites of memory) was introduced by Pierre Nora in the early 80s. In the article *Monument and Melancholia* (2008), Victor Burgin uses the concept of ‘non-lieux de mémoire’ (memory’s non-sites) to describe sites engendering not a feeling of mourning, but of melancholy, for the memory’s object has been erased with time; the ruins offering up no more than a glimpse into what the place was used for in earlier times. Within the perspective opened up by the concept of multidirectional memory, Michael Rothberg, Debarati Sanyal and Max Silverman (2010) have recently used the concept of ‘noeuds de mémoire’ (knots of memory) to propose a new model of recollection which

would be less restricted to the Nation-State context than is the model developed by Pierre Nora.

Given this extremely rich semantic field, why then talk about sites of inter-memory and what would its specific link to the cinematographic medium be?

In our view, the answer should first of all be sought in the dialectic which establishes itself between the unicity of a place and the plurality of the temporal strata networked. While it is true that today we may think of the media universe as a vast constellation of medias responding to one another and supplementing one another and that, within this context, memorial work is accomplished within a 'global space of remembrance' (Hirsch 230), the fact remains that, in this continually expanding universe, certain sites play the role of crossroads by gathering together the memorial strands which are strewn about in various media. For the time of a showing or exhibition an intersection of memorial contents which had hitherto never been brought together in such a way becomes condensed and assembled in one spot.

Of course, cinema is not the only media with the vocation of tying together strands that would otherwise remain strewn. Photography, certain works of contemporary artists and comic strips can also fulfil that role in facilitating a condensation of various temporal strata. Yet if we linger on the question of medium, we come to realize that cinema has not so much an advantage – but more a particular affinity – for the task of interlacing memories, inasmuch as, like photography, it is the art of time par excellence. And in fact, if resemblances can be established between certain past events and recent events, the cinema, already noted by Deleuze (1985), has an enormous ability to lend form to time and hence also lend form to the intersecting of past and recent events. Thus, the place we associate with the concept of inter-memory is not a simple receptacle where different temporal strata would pile themselves up pell-mell. Film has the unique property of assembling various memorial contents in a temporal experience of a particular kind which is neither altogether an experience of the past nor of the present, but of a time specific to film, favouring the intersection of memories.

At the same time, it would be reductive to restrict cinema's place to film alone. The cinema is not to be reduced to images projected on a screen; more generally, it refers to the projection process into which those images fit. Without going into a phenomenological description of the cinematographic process, we can readily agree with the position of Jacques Aumont (2011), noting that the cinema as a specific form of spectacle has an unequalled capacity to fascinate. 'What continues to benefit the cinema, and makes it last, is the original alliance of a fiction, a visual emotion and reception conditions conducive to a psychic absorption in a mode that is both individual and collective, what no other device has accomplished to the same extent' (99).

This idea of psychic absorption should be seen in juxtaposition with what we mentioned on the subject of memory, namely that one can only talk about a memorial work provided that the contents relating to the past touch our sensitivity, that they are connected to our history – both collective and personal. In this perspective, cinematography's place – broadly speaking - is paramount in allowing a maximum appropriation of the intersection of memories. The movie theatre is a *memorial foyer* intensifying our ability to recall and to link stories belonging to different times.

More concretely, and to return one last time to the films we have scrutinized, let us end on an aspect that is often neglected in film studies, but which fully justifies the idea of cinema as a site of inter-memory. Before their official release, films like *Welcome* and *Le Havre* were shown in 'avant-première' in the cities where they had been filmed, Calais for Philippe Lioret, *Le Havre* for Kaurismaki. This amounted to an apparently marginal phenomenon, simply connected with a promotional projection. And yet, given the context, it appears obvious that such projections amplify the work of the inter-memory. On the screen, past and present crisscrossed one another, in a city which was the same as the one where the film was being shown. In the audience, spectators, persons of note, and many film extras too, were there to see well-known places and familiar faces, but they suddenly distinguished another aspect of their city, another temporality than the one they were used to. Alterity, they discovered, is engraved at the heart of their daily experience.

So this would be the sense of a term like ‘site of inter-memory’ as applied to the cinema: to think at once the singularity of an aesthetic experience and the multiplicity of the times linked within that framework, in asserting the importance of a site of recollection, as much from the viewpoint of its configuration as from its geographical location, in the ability it offers the spectator to assimilate the living and sensitive connector that binds one memory to another.

Translated by Thomas Patrick.

## References

- Assmann Jan. 'Communicative and Cultural Memory'. *A Companion to Cultural Memory Studies*. Eds. Astrid Erll, Ansgar Nünning. Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 2010. 109-118.
- Aumont Jacques. 'Que reste-t-il du cinéma?'. *Trafic* 79 (2011). 95-106.
- Burgin Victor. 'Monument and Melancholia (2008)'. *Situational Aesthetics. Selected Writings by Victor Burgin*. Ed. Alexander Streitberger. Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2009. 314-329.
- Deleuze Gilles, Guattari Felix. *Mille Plateaux*. Paris : Editions de Minuit, 1980.
- Deleuze Gilles. *Cinéma 2. L'image-temps*. Paris : Editions de Minuit, 1985.
- Duclert Vincent. 'L'échec de 'l'identité nationale''', February 2010, blog on *Mediapart* site: <http://blogs.mediapart.fr/blog/vincent-duclert/020210/lechec-de-lidentite-nationale>.
- Fevry Sébastien. 'Mémoires en dialogue : Shoah et sans-papier dans le cinéma français contemporain'. *Image [&] Narrative*. Scholarly Journal on Web, 2013.
- Fonck Vinciane. *Les mains en l'air. Dossier pédagogique*. Liège : Les Grignoux, 2010.
- Garcia Patrick. 'Nos présidents face à l'histoire', entretien avec Thomas Wieder. *Le Monde* 2 March 2009. Consultable on the site: [http://www.ihtp.cnrs.fr/sites/ihtp/IMG/pdf\\_Garcia\\_Nos\\_presidents\\_face\\_a\\_l\\_histoire\\_2009\\_](http://www.ihtp.cnrs.fr/sites/ihtp/IMG/pdf_Garcia_Nos_presidents_face_a_l_histoire_2009_).
- Gensburger Sarah. *Les Justes de France. Politiques publiques de la mémoire*. Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2010.
- Hirsch Marianne. *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2012.
- Huyssen Andreas. *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003.

Molénat Xavier. 'Immigration, police, justice : Nicolas Sarkozy, président de la fermeté?'. Dossier Web "Quel bilan du quinquennat de Nicolas Sarkozy ? ", April 2012. Consultable on the site: <http://www.scienceshumaines.com>.

Rothberg Michael. *Multidirectional Memory. Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009.

Rothberg Michael, Sanyal Debarati, Silverman Max (eds). 'Noeuds de mémoire: Multidirectional Memory in Postwar French and Francophone Culture'. *Yale French Studies* numbers 118 & 119 (2010).

Walon Sophie. 'Au Havre, Aki Kaurismäki a trouvé un port d'attache'. *Le Monde*, December 2011. Consultable on the site: <http://www.lemonde.fr>.

## Filmography

*Welcome* (Lioret, 2009, France)

*Les mains en l'air* (Goupil, 2010, France)

*Le Havre* (Kaurismäki, 2011, France-Finland-Germany)

*Eden à l'Ouest* (Costa-Gavras, 2009, France-Italy-Greece)

*Le nom des gens* (Leclerc, 2010, France)

*No Pasarán! Album souvenir* (Imbert, 2003, France)

*La belle équipe* (Duvivier, 1936, France)

*Quai des brumes* (Carné, 1938, France)

*The Kid* (Chaplin, 1921, USA)

*Les Choristes* (Barratier, 2004, France)

*Faubourg 36* (Barratier, 2008, France)



*Le petit Nicolas* (Tirard, 2009, France)

*La nouvelle guerre des boutons* (Barratier, 2011, France)