

Demystifying the Past: The Evolution of Jewish Memory in French Film

Ana M. González

College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, University of Florida

Even sixty years after the conclusion of World War II, France continues to grapple with the guilt surrounding its participation in Nazi Germany's "Final Solution," that is, the extermination of European Jewry. This article investigates the role of film at different stages of France's confrontation with its World War II past. By analyzing over fifty years of French cinematic productions concerning the Holocaust, this research provides a survey of the progressive evolution of a Jewish identity in postwar French society.

FILM: A GAUGE OF MORAL AND POLITICAL ACCOUNTABILITY

In his controversial 1955 documentary *Nuit et Brouillard*, director Alain Resnais constructs a provocative work that calls for defiance in the face of receding memories of World War II. More than half a century has passed since the film's debut, and yet French society is still struggling with the question "*Alors, qui est responsable?*" ("Who is responsible?"). As historian Henry Rousso notes in his seminal work *Le Syndrome de Vichy* (1987), France's "obsessive" preoccupation with *les zones d'ombre* ("gray areas") of its collaborationist past has come to dominate public and private discourse after decades of silence. Due to the level of esteem accorded to the cinema in France, the "Seventh Art" has played a formative role in the way this particular past is remembered.¹ French filmmakers, from Jean Renoir (1930s) to Marcel Ophüls (1970–80s), have served as political and social barometers of their time, producing re-readings of history that are permeated by the present *vécu* ("experience"). In France, film serves as an agent of history and remains an especially sensitive "*lieu de mémoire*" ("place of memory") from which the plunge into the recesses of memory can be performed.²

Resnais's unique approach in dealing with the issues of memory inhibition and the reconstruction of the past inspired me to examine the shifts in French Jewish cultural memory through an examination of landmark cinematic pieces. To track the shifts in cultural memory, my analysis is divided into three phases: post-war repression of the 1950s, the cultural reawakening of the 1970s, and modern-day demystification of France's struggle with the past. Because the medium of film has served as a vehicle for French memory debates and has a more far-reaching effect than other types of art, my analysis will focus on one representative cinematic work per memory phase. The central works in each memory phase are Alain Resnais's *Nuit et Brouillard* (1955), Louis Malle's *Lacombe Lucien* (1974), and Amos Gitai's *Plus tard tu comprendras* (2008) because these films advance particular images and

narratives that embody the characteristics of the different stages of the evolution of Jewish memory in France.

THE DREYFUSARD DEBATE: HISTORICAL ANTI-SEMITISM IN FRANCE

At the birth of French cinema at the turn of the 20th century, whimsical cinematographer Georges Méliès crafted the first "personnage juif" ("Jewish character"). Celebrated for bringing "magic" to the movies with his avant-garde special effects, Méliès's *L'affaire Dreyfus* (1899) marked an anomalous departure into the realm of political docu-fiction.³ The film was shot at the same time as the polemical *affaire* surrounding the treason allegedly committed by Captain Alfred Dreyfus, French Jew of Alsatian extraction, divided the nation into Dreyfusards and Antidreyfusards.⁴ The fact that the first Jewish character to be depicted in a film was one tied to national betrayal and crime undoubtedly contributed to an anti-Semitic cinematic Jewish figure that would dominate mainstream movies for the next three decades following the conclusion of the *affaire*. In his famous address *J'accuse* to then President Félix Faure, realist writer Émile Zola states: "My duty is to speak, I do not want to be an accomplice to the persecution '*aux sales juifs*' ('of dirty Jews') that dishonors and stains our epoch."⁵ In effect, Zola explicitly attacks the engines of nationalist propaganda and the perpetrators of right-wing extremist discourse, revealing to the anachronistic reader the degree to which anti-Semitism had cleft French society.

Another suggestive text is Irène Némirovsky's 1929 novel, *David Golder*, which was subsequently turned into a film by Julien Duvivier in 1930. The protagonist, Golder, embodies several of the negative physical and moral traits assigned to Jews during this era.⁶ For example, he is an *apatride* (a "wandering Jew" type figure, meaning he does not belong to the French national community); a shrewd businessman obsessed with gold, money and power; and finally a secular Jew that is ashamed not only of his own Jewishness, but of Jewishness in others as well. The

portrait of the inassimilable, socially excluded Jew was echoed throughout the cinematic production of the 1930s through films such as André Hugon's *Lévy et Cie* (1931), *Les Galeries Lévy et Cie* (1932), *Moïse et Salomon parfumeurs* (1935), Jean Grémillon's *La petite Lise* (1930), and Pierre Billon's *L'argent* (1936).⁷ It is interesting to note that although orthodox rabbis made up a certain percentage of the roles deemed "Jewish," many of the Jewish characters were typecast as non-religious businessmen whose only relation to Judaism was their link to money and their physical appearance (that is, exaggerated noses, round-framed glasses, greasy hair and moustaches, etc.).⁸ In his article "Le juif à l'écran pendant les années trente," Rémy Pithon explains how prewar cinematic anti-Semitism was "vague" and "implicit," rather than forwardly expressed.⁹ He says "One barely ever states in the dialogue that a character is Jewish or has Jewish ancestors; one does not allude to Hebraic religious practices nor does one ever show ritual ceremonies."¹⁰

It was not until after the Shoah that Jewish signifiers would include religious connotations. None of the 1930s films showed Jews within their community, engaging in religious and cultural practices such as bar/bat mitzvahs, marriages, or circumcisions.¹¹ On the contrary, the majority of the cinematic works depicted the Jew as a capitalizing banker, financier, tailor, jeweler and so forth, thus scrutinizing their oftentimes-profitteering relationships with non-Jewish French citizens.¹² Evidently, this negative configuration did not do much to enhance the average French spectator's perception of Jews, which could arguably have led to their complicity in the Nazis' persecution of Jews during Occupation.

Deafening Silence: Résistancialisme

Following the war, General Charles De Gaulle reinforced the emotional attachment to "*une certaine idée de la France*" ("a certain idea of France"—Napoleonic glory, baroque grandeur, imperialist xenophobia, etc.) by centering collective identity and national pride on "*Résistancialisme*," or the myth of a united France that fought the Nazis.¹³ Any trace of a culpable past was concealed behind the national tapestry and any challenge raised to the grand image of France was censored. Reflecting the mental paralysis of the traumatized *déportés*, postwar cinema dealt with the Occupation in political terms while remaining numb on "La question juive."¹⁴ With *Night and Fog* (1955) and *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959), Resnais confronts *le devoir de mémoire* ("the duty of memory"), underscoring the futility of active forgetting by showing how the past permeates the present. Although *Night and Fog* directly tackles issues of postwar memory inhibition, Resnais focuses primarily on questions of politics while remaining mute on Jewish persecution. The spectator sees the Stars of David and hears "Stern, a Jewish

student from Amsterdam," mixed in with a list of other prisoners.¹⁵ However, the glaring omission of the specificity of the Jewish experience, for reasons of incommunicability or *l'oubli actif* ("active forgetting"), dominates as the emblematic characteristic of the political and social discourse of the postwar era.¹⁶

In addition to cinema, the literary works of Patrick Modiano (*La Place de L'Étoile*, *La Ronde de Nuit*), Marguerite Duras (*La Douleur*, *Hiroshima mon amour*) and Jean Cayrol (*Poèmes de la Nuit et Brouillard*) also present a haunted meditation of the past and the dilemma surrounding *l'indicible*—"the inexpressible." During the 1945-46 Nuremberg Trials, Hannah Arendt observed that the Nazi crimes had "exploded the limits of the law."¹⁷ That is to say, the legal apparatus was not equipped to deal with the magnitude and scope of the unprecedented Nazi atrocities, thus rendering any existing punishment gravely inadequate. Similarly, it seems that the concentration camp experience had "exploded" the capacities of postwar language and communication, resulting in the literal/figurative use of *points de suspension* ("gaps" or "ellipsis") because direct confrontation was not yet an option.¹⁸

Cinema d'éveil: A Jewish Reawakening and the Generation of Insurrection

It was not until after *les événements* (i.e. May '68 student demonstrations) that the second generation would tear open the windows and "let in the air, the wind that finally whirled away the dust that society had permitted to settle over the horrors of the past."¹⁹ Struggling to fill the lacunae left by the "official (Hi)story," a new generation of filmmakers began tackling taboo subjects, such as the voluntary deportation of foreign and French Jews, that had remained a *point aveugle* ("blind spot") of the national past for decades after the war. Characterized by the *enquête poussée* ("probative inquiry") of directors like Marcel Ophüls and Claude Lanzmann, the "*cinéma d'éveil*" ("revival cinema") of the seventies and eighties embodied the Jewish cultural reawakening and represented the belated indictment of French complicity vis-à-vis the extermination of European Jewry.²⁰ The militant, unyielding approach of filmmakers during this period set the tone for the *retour sur soi* or "introspection via retrospection."²¹ The mirror held up by the Fourth Republic reflected an idyllic image of a united French monolith, a false veneer that would be peeled back to show the traumatic fissures left by *la guerre franco-française* ("the French civil war"—the name given to the immediate postwar social conflicts).²² Directors like François Truffaut (*Le Dernier Métro*, 1980), Joseph Losey (*M. Klein*, 1976), Louis Malle (*Lacombe Lucien*, 1974), and Marcel Ophüls (*Le Chagrin et la Pitié*, 1971) reevaluated the Resistance and exposed "The Jewish Question," which at the time had been cinematically neglected.²³

Within this phase's filmic production, one sees rival approaches to documenting "truth," either through mimesis (imitation of reality or *la mode rétro*) or via documentary (framing reality through testimony and buttressing archival footage with the oral communication of the experiences).²⁴ The two cinematic forms raise different social, political, and historical questions, thus leaving it to the spectator to interpret the "evidence." For example, critics of Louis Malle's much heralded *Lacombe Lucien* argue that the film paints a relativist tableau of collaboration, meaning that any adolescent during the Occupation could have "fallen" into the role of *milicien* ("militiaman")—that the line between resistance and collaboration was ambiguously and nonchalantly drawn.²⁵ However, as Marcel Ophüls retorts, not just any boy could have "stumbled" into the role of fascist agitator and not just any average Lucien would have seamlessly (and remorselessly) waded between the two distant banks of participatory persecution and pronounced protest.²⁶

Another facet of this cinematic dichotomy is the fact that documentary, although inherently assuming veracity, is never neutral. From *Le chagrin et la pitié* to *Shoah*, to *Hôtel Terminus*, it is clear that the authors have a particular agenda and message to transmit to the viewers. The stressed militancy of the interviews in this era's documentaries also provides insight into the urgency and impatience surrounding a "prohibited truth"—that of French national collaboration with the Nazis and the persecution of not only foreign Jews but French Jewish citizens.²⁷ Raised in a secular manner and removed from Judaism, many writers and filmmakers, such as Alain Finkielkraut and Guy Konopnicki, initially adopted a "Jew-as-victim" identity in their childhood.²⁸ Then, through their memory work and political engagement as adults, they welcomed a renewed cultural Jewish self. The second generation claimed that what defined a Jew was his inherited Jewish blood and heritage, not his religious practice, thus ironically treating Jews as a race as did the Nazis.²⁹

This newfound emphasis on Jewish education and religious observance, along with the development of a new legal memory of the Shoah, undoubtedly influenced the last and current memory phase. Essentially, once the second generation had come to terms with their inherited past, it was time to turn the focus onto the future, or the third generation children who would be the carriers of the memory of injustice and persecution, as well as the keepers of cultural and religious tradition.

Memory Trials and Tribulations: Testimony for the Future

Today, "the grandchildren of the Holocaust" continue to struggle with the image of a World War II French dystopia.³⁰ France lagged more than other countries in

coming to terms with its past. In 1945, the Nuremberg Trials indicted the crimes of National Socialism, and in 1947 Germany once again faced the atrocities of extermination with the Auschwitz Trials (continued in 1963–65).³¹ Likewise, in 1961, Israel tried Adolf Eichmann, the architect of the "Final Solution." However, it was not until 1994 that the first Frenchman, Paul Touvier, was convicted of crimes against humanity for involvement in the deportation of Jews.³² Under the direction of notorious Gestapo chief Klaus Barbie, Touvier headed Lyon's section of *la Milice*—a paramilitary death squad responsible for roundups/executions of Jews and *résistants*.³³ The Touvier trial was an aftershock of the seismic 1987 Klaus Barbie trial. As Ophüls demonstrates in *Hôtel Terminus*, the indictment of the "*Boucher de Lyon*," ("The Butcher of Lyon") was a televised spectacle, yet it represented the first time French Jewish victims were allowed to give testimony on a national stage.³⁴

In 1995, fifty-six years after the Liberation of France, Jacques Chirac became the first president to acknowledge the culpability of the French government in the persecution of not only foreign Jews, but of its own Jewish citizens.³⁵ The age of demystification began anew after these monumental trials and works like *Un héros très discret* (Jacques Audiard) and *Delicatessen* (Jean-Pierre Jeunet and Marc Caro), which challenged accepted historical narratives and traditional methods of cinematic representation. While some recent films fall prey to the *tire-larme* ("tear-jerker") Spielberg effect (*La Rafle*, 2010 and *L'Armée du crime*, 2009), others like *Plus tard tu comprendras* (Amos Gitai, 2008) explore the intergenerational struggles linked to working through the past. In *Le Chagrin et La Pitié*, former *Ministre d'État* Pierre Mendès-France states, "I learned that when certain tendencies or demagogies are nourished and whipped up, they revive, and we must always prepare young people... we have to talk to them about it, maybe more than we did one or two generations ago."³⁶ Amidst the growing popularity of extreme right-wing blogs and Célinesque writers like Michel Houellebecq, his message is as relevant today as it was in 1969.³⁷ As the light of the last survivors of the *Shoah* extinguishes, the question is raised as to how French Jewish cultural heritage is to be transmitted to current/future generations. How will the story and the History be told? One thing is certain, however: films will continue to play a pivotal role in the way the French national and personal past is remembered.

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ENDNOTES

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