

## Pre-workshop comment

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My interest in cultural memory concerns life-writing, life-filming and collective memory. The area of my research is mainly 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century French life-writing and film and the representation of ageing in contemporary French culture. I am engaging with older autobiographers writing themselves and the collectivity, older film-makers writing of themselves and others, and also how younger artists are narrativising through text and film the lives of the elderly. A key aspect my research is the extent to which cultural memory is forming around the European heatwave of early August 2003, which claimed the lives of 14,800 people in France, 71% of whom were aged over 75. So far only one film by a Kurdish film director has addressed the event directly, although tangential references are being made in science-fiction writing (Houellebecq's *La Possibilité d'une île*) and Ernaux's autobiography, *Les Années*. Ernaux, discussing statistics in *Les Années*, observes: 'The numbers related nothing other than fatality and determinism' (p.146). One rationale for Literary and Cultural Studies addressing CM is to counter this reductive approach.

Literary and Cultural Studies can map out a body of creative work that expresses a particular event in the past or state or phenomenon shaped by the past, analyse the limitations and possibilities of these modes of expression (genre, dissemination, inter-textual force), and foreground what is being represented and how, and, moreover, what is being occluded, and how. Of particular interest in some contemporary cultural products is their self-reflective dimension: for example, Annie Ernaux's *Les Années* (2008) ends with a section that reads like a book project to a publisher about the book we have just read; in this way she exposes her own narrative devices and rationale for using them; in this her work is doubly self-reflective: as autobiography, it reflects on the self, and as literary criticism, it reflects on its expression. LCS can enter into dialogue with this. Raymond Dépardon's work – the cinematic triptych, *Profils paysans: L'Approche* (2001), *Le Quotidien* (2005), *La Vie Moderne* (2008) – may be construed as an antidote to projects concentrating on collective sites of memory and the forging of national identity, as exemplified in Pierre Nora's *Lieux de mémoire*. Dépardon uses voice-over to detail how many years of friendship it took for some of the country-people he was filming to let down barriers and allow him and his camera into their homes. His work is a form of intimate anthropology, in which he himself is implicated on the level of human relations. It also highlights the importance of place – and displacement (by forced moves, or changes in farming subsidies, or technological advance) – to cultural memory.

Regarding life-writing, LCS can interrogate: what precipitates life-writing? (a quest for making sense of one's own life, of capturing evanescent images eg film director Alain Cavalier made *Irène* (2008) on his wife who died in 1974 because he himself felt close to death (he films his damaged body and details how he is wearing his last face) and because his mother's death, which he films, is a catalyst for completing work to be done. How does autobiography – the writing of the individual – function as a site for cultural memory? How is autobiography being generically modified in order that it better represent *collective* memory, ie how can it also be a writing of a community? How is visual and sound culture altering the modes in which the self, and sometimes by extension the community, be narrated? How can the lives of the elderly be represented, when, for example, they are beyond writing themselves, or are living in isolation (alone / made solitary by physical impairment)? Maurice Blanchot's *L'Écriture du désastre* (1980) offers some models for articulating trauma that cannot yet be voiced, such as occurred in the heatwave.

More generally, LCS is an important means of commenting on CM because it contributes to identifying trends in historiography, focuses often on idiosyncratic experiences of the individual which may undermine or nuance received wisdom on certain collective memories, and works towards

detecting and possibly reactivating repressed memories. Moreover, through psychoanalytical techniques, LCS interrogates the dreamwork and hallucination, which shape perception and behaviour. LCS, through its use of a wide range of critical tools, normally be the preserve of discrete domains (such as psychoanalysis in mental health treatment), provides a point from which several discourses may interact to produce broader understanding. Cultural inheritance – and its anxiety – is dependent on CM; cultural production operates in a lineage which LCS identifies, commentates upon, and shapes. Focal points for this transmission of cultural inheritance purveyed by LCS comprise: tracing paths of literary influence and thereby creating links and identifying affinities across space and time; analysing through reception studies and translation studies how texts are altered, renewed, reduced, transformed, recontextualised; analysing through Hauntology theory, how the continuing spectral existence of apparently defunct political realities remain and inflect perception (Derrida, *Spectres de Marx*), or, in psychoanalytical mode, how transgenerational trauma inflects the individual's behaviour (Abraham and Torök; Colin Davis on 'Charlotte Delbo's Ghosts'). Abraham and Torök's work also suggest ways of conceptualizing how CM may be flawed or duplicitous (Hamlet's father as a liar by Abraham's reading), or why certain literary works, such as *Hamlet*, have such longevity (Abraham holds that *Hamlet* is anti-cathartic and so elicits group trauma amongst generations of theatre-goers). LCM also conceptualises how mourning can be worked into creativity (Klein, Kristeva, Anzieu), and the monumentalisation of death and loss is gone beyond as the lost object is transformed into a living consoling artwork.

### **The truth of memory: fact & faction:**

Autobiography: aesthetic construct or historical document (Gide, *Si le grain ne meurt*; Janice Galloway, *This is not about me*). The Autobiographical Pact: we expect the writer to be 'truthful' with us as we are invited into his/her intimate space. But do we define truth in terms: of historical data; of how a memory recollects (holes, gaps, reconstructions etc); of the writer's agenda at the time of writing; of emotions perceived at the time of writing or recalled from the time of experience through a sensual link (Proust's madeleine); of Historical data inflected by imagination? We get retellings and a negotiation of the spaces between aesthetic construction and ostensible history. Gide's narrator: we might get closer to the truth in fiction than in autobiography.

### **Regimes of memory: spaces, texts, objects, bodies:**

Spaces: Evacuated spaces of individual's childhoods revisited but de-familiarised (Varda's *Les Plages d'Agnès* (2008), Cavalier, Nabokov's *Speak, Memory* (1967)). Potent spaces: sites of pilgrimage, of remembering. Photographs and space – transient eternalised. Concrete spaces now transformed, in transformation; history passing through them. Texts: retellings; generic expectation; translation; reception. Texts of writers in exile remembering a place now closed to them: desire to leave a trace  
Objects: transgenerational gifts / intrigues. Evocative shapes (potatoes in Varda). Place and time telescoped through objects (butterflies in Nabokov). Bodies: Being erased or absent: the remembering, resolving dying body; erasure in Nabokov, *The Original of Laura* (2009); in Cavalier's *Irène*, we see a substitute body, and a photograph, and his mother's body, but not his wife Irène; death in Chris Marker's *La Jetée* (1962): body in the future sent back to past and taken away from the past and then from the future; child who sees spectrally his own death in adulthood; obliteration of the dying old in the heatwave. (Role of LCS to redress this through endeavouring to articulate it.) Making bodies present: Varda on Démy as he was dying, close-ups of his skin. The Dreaming Self: psychoanalysand, man in *La Jetée* wired up, the dreaming Israeli soldier in *Waltz with Bachir* (2008), Pontalis, *Le Dormeur éveillé*.

### **Trauma and memory:**

Poets experiencing WW2 and this acting as a catalyst to write on their memories of WW1. Mourning for the dying self or the dying parent or the dying beloved precipitating life-writing. Memory as a

wound (*La Jetée*). Rewriting to forget, to live with an unbearable memory: according to Marker, this occurs in Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, when Scottie recreates the 'dead' Madeleine. Trauma as blockage or stimulant.

### **The politics and ethics of memory:**

This is an imperative in Derrida, *Spectres de Marx: L'Etat de la dette, le travail du deuil et la nouvelle Internationale* (Galilée, 1993), in which Derrida links memory to mourning and posits it as critical to present action. He writes 'cet être-avec les spectres serait [...] une politique de la mémoire, de l'héritage et des générations' (15). 'Si je m'apprête à parler longuement de fantômes, d'héritage et de générations, de générations de fantômes, c'est-à-dire de certains autres qui ne sont pas présents, ni présentement vivants, ni à nous ni en nous ni hors de nous, c'est *au nom de la justice*' (*my italics*). We are duty-bound to acknowledge 'ceux qui ne sont plus ou ne sont pas encore présents et vivants'; accordingly we should open ourselves to 'cette non-contemporanéité à soi du présent vivant' (16).

## **Position paper**

### **Collective Memory and Autobiography: Annie Ernaux's *Les Années***

How can autobiography, the writing of self, transmit collective memory? Collective memory enters André Gide's *Si le grain ne meurt* (1926) momentarily when the narrator remembers as a child having seen the Prussian army march through Rouen in 1870. Chronologically, this is impossible as André was too young at the time to have recalled this. So we have an instance of the individual fabulating his witnessing of a historical event because his memory has been inflected by French collective memory of the Prussian Occupation of 1870-71.<sup>1</sup> (This fabulation could be paralleled to that of the claim of Nicholas Sarkozy on Facebook to have been at the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989.)<sup>2</sup> Collective memory is ushered out of Gide's text through its proximity to false memory, or inauthenticity.

From Augustine to Rousseau to Gide to the present, the autobiographical mode has tended to privilege the individual over the collectivity,<sup>3</sup> and to strive towards what Annie Ernaux in her autobiography *Les Années* describes as 'un temps palimpseste' [a palimpsest time ],<sup>4</sup> whereby the autobiographer uncovers from forgetting past events from his/her life and endeavours to recreate the sensations experienced at these moments. In *Les Paradis artificiels* (1860), Charles Baudelaire, drawing on Thomas De Quincey's essay, 'The Palimpsest of the Human Brain' (1845), elaborates an analogy between the palimpsest and memory. The palimpsest is a parchment upon which earlier texts are covered up by layers of new writing; De Quincey describes it as 'a membrane or roll cleansed of

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1 Jeanette Winterson speaks of this intermingling of fabulation and history: 'I am a fiction writer, and I began by writing a book partly about my own life. What is remembered and what is invented is no longer clear. Was it ever clear? I doubt it' (Rosanna Greenstreet, 'Q&A: Jeanette Winterson', *Guardian*, 5 December 2009, section Weekend).

2 See Arnaud Leparmentier and Nabil Wakim, 'Nicolas Sarkozy n'a pas assisté à la chute du Mur le soir du 9 novembre 1989', *Le Monde*, 11 November 2009.

3 See, for example, in French Studies, the works and strategies discussed in Angelica Goodden, *The Backward Look: Memory and the Writing Self in France 1580-1920* (Oxford: Legenda, 2000) and Claire Boyle, *Consuming Autobiographies: Reading and Writing the Self in Post-War France* (Oxford: Legenda, 2007).

4 Annie Ernaux, *Les Années* (Paris: Gallimard, 2008), p. 237. All translations are my own.

its manuscript by reiterated successions'.<sup>5</sup> His reference to the brain as 'the deep memorial palimpsest' and his mention in a note of the aged concentrating 'the light of their memory upon scenes of early childhood' presage Baudelaire's foregrounding of memory in 'Le Palimpseste':<sup>6</sup> 'le palimpseste de la mémoire [the palimpsest of memory] is divine, immense, complicated and indestructible; 'mémoire' [memory] recurs four times.<sup>7</sup> Baudelaire's context is that of the solipsistic, individualistic Romantic, searching to reanimate all memories at once through near-death moments or drug stimulants or force of memory. He cites De Quincey: 'Like the annual leaves of aboriginal forests, or the undissolving snows on the Himalaya, or light falling upon light, the endless strata have covered up each other in forgetfulness' (p. 215); 'everlasting layers of ideas, images, feelings have fallen upon your brain as softly as light' (p. 213). Although each layer appears to bury the previous one, embalming it in forgetting, in reality, none perish and all are recoverable. An example of the autobiographical palimpsest is when the narrator of Vladimir Nabokov's autobiography *Speak, Memory* recalls vividly a snowscape from the country house outside St Petersburg of his childhood in the early twentieth century, and then zooms out or is transported to the distant place and future time of remembering (1950s America):

Very lovely, very lonesome. But what am I doing in this stereoscopic dreamland? How did I get here? Somehow, the two sleighs have slipped away, leaving behind a passportless spy standing on the blue-white road in his New England snowboots and stormcoat. The vibration in my ears is no longer their receding bells, but only my old blood singing. All is still, spellbound, enthralled by the moon, fancy's rear-vision mirror. The snow is real, though, and as I bend to it and scoop up a handful, sixty years crumble to glittering frost-dust between my fingers.<sup>8</sup>

We readers are invited to spy on this poignant moment of loss following the recreation of a memory by this 'very lonesome' narrator in exile; the 'passportless spy', dwelling for an instant on a past world few people other than his siblings witnessed, is occupying a rare position.

But to render collective memory is by definition to focus on a less solitary, less individualistic experience. In Annie Ernaux's autobiography, *Les Années*, published in 2008, there is a section at the end, which is ferociously intimate and yet quite impersonal (p. 237-41). An acute sense of mortality is conveyed through an autobiographical book project which mainly details literary strategies. The project seems to be for the book we are just finishing reading. The effect is to sensitise the reader to the future-anterior mode that so haunts the autobiographical persona and has been driving her to write. She, we are told in the future tense and the third person, has lost her sense of the future and feels impelled to 'mettre en forme [...] son absence future' [give *form* [...] to her future absence] (pp. 236-37). She will set out to write 'une sorte d'autobiographie impersonnelle' [a kind of impersonal autobiography] counter to that of the palimpsest model (p. 240). Rather than recreate moments of her past, she will reconstruct the collective memory from the period she lived through: how did she record the time that traversed her? What ideologies, politics, films, music, customs, social *mores*, news bulletins and so on shaped her time and herself? She describes her place in history as being like the sensation of driving alone on a motorway, contained in the totality of others present to her, be they close by or far away (p. 239). Despite individual consciousness, her movements are governed by

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5 Thomas De Quincey, 'The Palimpsest of the Human Brain', 1845, in Patrick Madden (ed.), *Quotidiana*, <[http://essays.quotidiana.org/dequincey/palimpsest\\_of\\_the\\_human\\_brain/](http://essays.quotidiana.org/dequincey/palimpsest_of_the_human_brain/)> [accessed 20 February 2010].

6 De Quincey's use of 'membrane' and '*membrana*' as synonyms for parchment or vellum may also have influenced Baudelaire's focus on memory, although according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the two words are etymologically distinct.

7 Charles Baudelaire, 'Le Palimpseste', in *Les Paradis artificiels*, 1860, ed. Claude Pichois (Paris: Le Club du meilleur livre, 1961), pp. 213-15, p. 215.

8 Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak Memory: An Autobiography Revisited*, 1967 (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 78.

the stream of the cars and road networks surrounding her.<sup>9</sup> Rather than rewrite events of her life according to the vagaries of memory of herself as an individual, she will accept that her life and those of others of her time and place are being written on by history. The work will be written with the urgency of a person who wishes to commentate on their times – *les années* – not their self:

She will only look into herself to find others, memory and the imaginary of the past of others, to seize the changing of ideas, beliefs and sensibilities, the transformation of people and of subjects she has known. (p. 239)<sup>10</sup>

She will articulate moments of her life where she felt herself to be 'se fondre dans une totalité indistincte' [melting into an indistinct totality] (p. 238), where she is entirely consumed by 'une sorte de vaste sensation collective' [a kind of vast collective sensation]; she wishes to capture comments on events and objects lifted from the 'la masse des discours flottants' [the mass of floating discussions] (p. 239), the background noise that shapes our thoughts, beliefs, fears and hopes. In place of the 'je' [I] she will substitute 'on/nous' [we], so that the impersonal autobiography will read almost like a fictional narrative (p. 240).<sup>11</sup> But unlike the 'voyante' [visionary] she thought she was as a student, she will refrain from reinventing language and instead write from within common experience and language, which is, after all, her own. Through individual memory she will re-find the memory of collective memory, render the lived dimension of History, and thereby reconstruct not 'a palimpsest time' but 'un temps commun' [a common time]. The reader recognises aspects of the work s/he has just been reading.

Despite this rejection of the palimpsest model, Ernaux nevertheless retains in *Les Années* two key interlinked aspects of De Quincey's and Baudelaire's notion of the palimpsest of memory, namely the importance of images and light in relation to memory (the palimpsest is formed by 'innumerable layers of images',<sup>12</sup> and these layers constitute 'light falling upon light'). Ernaux employs images and light to collective ends, to reveal the multiplicity of her own identities, to capture the collective memory of family and friends, and to record group memories of compatriots of her times in this era of visual culture, mass reproduction and mass diffusion, so different from Baudelaire's. The 'planned

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9 Cf. Agnès Varda's autobiopic, *Les Plages d'Agnès* (2008), in which she re-presents scenes from her documentary, *Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse* (2000), where she herself is being transported along the motorway networks that carry the filming team from the North to the South of France. In the front passenger seat, she whiles away the time by filming with a hand-held camera her other hand playing at 'capturing lorries' ('attraper des camions') (*Les Plages d'Agnès*, dir. by Agnès Varda [Ciné Tamaris, 2008], 67:31-67: 48; *Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse*, dir. by Agnès Varda [Ciné Tamaris, 2000], 41: 12-42:00). The grafting of documentary onto autobiopic, of the the impersonal, generic, opaque lorries onto the personal hand 'capturing' them chimes with Ernaux's project of the 'impersonal autobiography' and its semi-subjective focus on elements that flow through the lives of many people.

10 'Elle ne regardera en elle-même que pour y retrouver le monde, la mémoire et l'imaginaire des jours passés du monde, saisir le changement des idées, des croyances et de la sensibilité, la transformation des personnes et du sujet, qu'elle a connus.'

11 The merging of autobiography, fiction and history / sociology is also – sporadically – the autobiographical strategy in Frédéric Beigbeder's *Un Roman français* (winner of the Prix Renaudot 2009): chapters are entitled 'Divorce à la française' and 'Le rêve français', and the autobiographical narrator describes his book as eight different *histoires* (tales / histories), including the *histoire* 'of an Emma Bovary of the 1970s' (d'une Emma Bovary des seventies), 'of the death of the cultivated bourgeoisie from outside Paris' (de la mort de la grande bourgeoisie cultivée de province), 'of a country that managed to lose two wars while convincing people it had won them' (d'un pays qui a réussi à perdre deux guerres en faisant croire qu'il les avait gagnées); he concludes that his life's experience is 'a French novel' (un roman français) (Beigbeder, *Un Roman français* [Paris: Bernard Grasset, 2009], pp. 256-57).

12 Baudelaire translates De Quincey's 'everlasting layers [...] of images' as 'des couches innombrables [...] d'images' (p. 213).

autobiography' is to be punctuated by still and moving images and consequently it will convey her ever-changing selves. It will be:

a flow held in suspension [...] at regular intervals by photos and film sequences that will capture the successive corporeal forms and social positions of her being [...]. To that 'always other' of the photos will correspond, in mirror image, the 'she' of writing (p. 240).<sup>13</sup>

Light is desired above all, and here evokes memories from the collective histories of families and other close relationships:

more than anything, now, she would like to seize the light that bathes the faces which have already become invisible, the tablecloths covered in food since vanished, that light that was already there during stories on Sundays in her childhood and which has not stopped leaving itself on things just lived, an anterior light. (p. 241)<sup>14</sup>

More broadly, Ernaux conveys social and cultural memory through media of light – family photographs, television or newspaper images, films – which form points of crystallization for the collectivity.

Notably, even when describing the self, Ernaux is describing the collectivity. In keeping with the autobiographical project at the end, the flow of narrative in the work as a whole, mostly in the imperfect, is punctuated by photographic stills, not reproduced but described ekphrastically, as though the narrator were going through a collection of old photographs. These moments are not primarily pretexts for personal reminiscence: the narrator's suppositions about what the girl-child in the photo (whom we take to be the child, 'Annie Ernaux') is thinking are always tentative, prefaced with 'peut-être' [perhaps] or 'sans doute' [no doubt] the girl on the beach could just as well be any girl from that time, in that place, dressed in that way; she is the self and a series of Others. This sensation is magnified when we pass first through a home-cinema film of family life in a garden in the early 1970s – a very personal yet very common home cinema subject – into popular film references. The narrator relates films of the early 1960s that 'on allait voir' [we went to see]: *Cléo de cinq à sept*, *L'Année dernière à Marienbad*, Bergman, Buñuel and Italian cinema (p. 81); she (the impersonal autobiographical protagonist) also relates films banned under De Gaulle and Pompidou, such as Jacques Rivette's *La Religieuse*; a stream of films que tout le monde avait vu' [that everybody had seen] in the 1970s, such as *La Grande Bouffe* (p. 135). Films of 1980 she has seen or plans to see form seams of fiction in her being in which she searches for her own life, and consults to see her future (p. 142); they must have this function for others too. 'Ses "moi"' [Her various egos] she finds as much through 'sensation palimpseste' [palimpsest sensation] – that is, searching back to events buried beneath forgetting – as through book and film characters with whom she, like many others, identifies (pp. 204-5).<sup>15</sup> We are given instances of the individual 'melting into an indistinct totality'.

A major facilitating factor for Ernaux in her project of creating an impersonal autobiography that reconstructs 'a common time' is that she is operating amongst various strong group cultures. The senses of self and nation of the community of television-viewers – more unified before the advent of

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13 'Une coulée suspendue [...] à intervalles réguliers par des photos et des séquences de films qui saisiront les formes corporelles et les positions sociales successives de son être [...]. A cette 'sans cesse autre' des photos correspondra, en miroir, le 'elle' de l'écriture.'

14 'plus que tout, maintenant, elle voudrait saisir la lumière qui baigne des visages désormais invisibles, des nappes chargées de nourritures évanouies, cette lumière qui était déjà là dans les récits des dimanches d'enfance et n'a cessé de se déposer sur les choses aussitôt vécues, une lumière antérieure.'

15 Jean-Luc Godard's *A bout de souffle* (1960) stages the importance of cinema in identity formation through the character of Michel, who strives to imitate through gesture and action the various film personae of Humphrey Bogart.

multiple cable channels – are inflected by the representations of events deemed important to the group, be that in news bulletins, game shows, documentaries etc. In *Les Années*, the most important group culture is the nation, namely Metropolitan Republican France of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Even if they are always contestable, numerous *lieux de mémoire* act to forge French national identity through common memory, as Pierre Nora has shown,<sup>16</sup> and it is unlikely that a more polyglot, more recently formed, less politically stable, less centralised and/or less officially secular nation would be as amenable a setting for this project of impersonal autobiography.

At the end of *Les Années*, the individual, 'Ernaux', and her future disappearance – as narrator, as historical person – is in ascension over the collectivities she will leave. Images of the collectivity have been transmitted to us through 'Ernaux', and they are menaced by her future passing. Despite the references to enduring photos and films, an elegiacal tone hangs over the work. In opposition to the palimpsest model, whereby 'not one' of the 'everlasting layers of ideas, images, feelings' on the brain 'has been extinguished' (De Quincey), Ernaux's book opens with the words: 'Toutes les images disparaîtront' [All images will disappear] (p. 11). At the end of the introductory section, the narrator imagines how the image of herself dead will diminish to a first name around the family dinner table, with an ever-vaguer face until even that disappears into the anonymous mass of a distant generation (p. 19). At the text's close, single images are described and shown to be threatened, paragraphs having fragmented into lines of prose separated by a space, unpunctuated for a page and a half until a final full stop. From this effort of collective memory our awareness of collective forgetting is omnipresent; it is as though the tide were advancing on the images 'Ernaux' can retain – she has already evoked macular degeneration and Alzheimer's which might befall her. Remembering is presented as a life-force, as in Agnès Varda's autobiopic of the same year, *Les Plages d'Agnès*, which closes on the director's words: 'Je me souviens pendant que je vis' [I remember as long as I live],<sup>17</sup> Just as Ernaux displaces the individual from the centre of autobiography, making way for collectivities commuted through the individual, she also displaces the centrality of the living individual by contemplating the world beyond her own passing. Whereas De Quincey and Baudelaire elide our mortality when they compare the human brain and memory to the palimpsest, Ernaux recognises that, unlike vellum, humans die, and memory – individual and collective – dies with them.

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16 Pierre Nora (ed.) *Les Lieux de mémoire*, 3 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1984-92). 'S/he who says *lieu de mémoire* says symbolical conflict and valorisation of symbols; moreover, each person tries to seize these symbols for themselves' (Qui dit lieu de mémoire dit dispute symbolique et mise en valeur de symboles; or, chacun cherche à s'emparer de ce symboles). Pierre Nora, 'Qu'est-ce qu'être français aujourd'hui?', Interview with Pierre Nora and Paul Thibaud, in Alain Finkielkraut (ed.) *Qu'est-ce que la France* (Paris: Gallimard, 2007), p. 270.

17 Varda 2008: 105:29.