

DRANCY: History, Memory, Representation

By Inez Hedges*

The enthusiastic reception granted to *Suite française*, Irène Némirovsky's recently discovered novellas of the French experience of defeat and occupation, and Jonathan Littell's recounting of WWII through the eyes of an SS officer in *Les Bienveillantes* (a work for which this American writer won France's highest literary prize, the Prix Goncourt) is evidence of continued interest - in France, and even worldwide - in imaginative engagement with a historical period that now lies more than half a century in the past. Yet in French literary fiction and fiction film, there is, for the most part, silence on one topic, despite numerous official commemorations and days of remembrance: the arrest and deportation of more than 75,000 Jews, including 11,400 children, during the Occupation of France by Germany - most of whom passed through the camp of Drancy, just outside Paris. *Suite française* does not mention Jews at all¹, and *Les Bienveillantes* focuses on the protagonist's participation in Hitler's eastern campaign. France appears mainly as a backdrop to his personal life². While there are several films that depict the roundups as well as the role of the French police (Rose Bosch's remarkable 2009 film *La Rafle*, as well as the 1974 film *Les Guichets du Louvre* by Michel Mitrani), the Drancy camp remains on the margins of cinematic and literary representation³.

* Inez Hedges is Professor of French, German, and Cinema Studies at Northeastern University where she held the title of Stotsky Professor of Jewish Historical and Cultural Studies, 2006-9. She is the author of several books, including *Framing Faust: Twentieth-Century Cultural Struggles* (Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 2005), and *Breaking the Frame: Film Language and the Experience of Limits* (Indiana Univ. Press, 1991). In the fall of 2007 her play "Children of Drancy", a montage of voices from letters and documents surrounding the deportation of Jews from France, was performed by the Department of Theatre at Northeastern University (<http://www.northeastern.edu/drancy>).

¹ Némirovsky was the daughter of Jewish-Russian émigrés who had moved to France after the revolution. At the time of France's defeat by Germany, Némirovsky had already made a name for herself in French literary circles. However, she was unable to obtain French citizenship and was deported to Auschwitz, where she perished. See the review by Alice Kaplan, "Love in the Ruins", *The Nation* (May 29, 2006): 16-20.

² There is, however, one short exchange between the protagonist and his mother about the deportations. To her son's claim that Jews are being sent to the East to work, the skeptical mother responds: "Are you sending children to construct roads as well? Because you're also taking children, aren't you?" The protagonist responds that it is the French police who have carried out the roundups. See Jonathan Littell, *Les Bienveillantes* (Paris: Gallimard, 2006), 484 (my translation).

³ It should be acknowledged, however, that *La Rafle*, which reenacts the roundup and arrest in Paris on July 16-17, 1942, of over 10,000 Jewish men, women and children, has reinvigorated the debate around the Jewish deportations and the camps. In an interview accompanying the published DVD, the director Rose Bosch asserts that she has made the film "for the future", so that these events will not be forgotten. An accompanying DVD to the film records a French TV program from March 9, 2010, one day before the film's official release. The TV program featured several survivors of the roundup and the camps, as well as historians, political figures, and Serge Klarsfeld. Drancy is only mentioned in passing in *La Rafle*, whose culminating emotional scene is that of the separation of young children from their parents at the camp of Beaune-la-Rolande in the Loiret. These children were actually sent to Drancy, where further horrors awaited them, before they were deported to death camps. For reasons of narrative economy, perhaps, the film skips this phase, which documentary filmmaker Cécile Clairval-Milhaud correctly calls "the last stage before the abyss".

This silence brings up several questions: has French society reached a saturation point in its willingness to revisit the trauma of the period 1940-44? Should one even try to represent the experience of the victims in fiction or does respect demand that one remain silent? If fictional representations are to be avoided, what is the value in relation to fiction of documentary and eyewitness accounts and how should these be presented? Is the Jewish experience of the Shoah in France solely a French concern or does it concern the world at large, including non-Jews? These are all important questions that are still debated both in France and elsewhere.

The French debate about historical memory

Over the past two decades, there has been a remarkable shift in the French public discussion of the years of the WWII years in France, when the northern part of the country was occupied by German forces and the southern French State (as opposed to “The French Republic”) was governed out of the resort town of Vichy by French collaborators with Germany. In 1987 the French historian Henry Rousso, in his book *The Vichy Syndrome*, had broken down French historical memory of this period into successive psychological phases that he characterized as “repressed memory” (the immediate post-war period and the Gaullist myth of *résistancialisme*, according to which the French population as a whole resisted the Germans), “the broken mirror” (the period after 1968 when a new generation challenged this version of the past), and finally “obsessive memory” (characterized by the increasing willingness of survivors to tell their stories, by the creation of new commemorative ceremonies, and by changes in educational curricula).

Six years later, in 1994, Rousso, along with journalist Éric Conan, warned of what they considered a dangerous new phase – what they called a “sanctification” of Jewish memory of the Vichy years. The new insistence on “the duty to remember”, they argued, was leading to an impasse, an inability to get beyond the experience of the Shoah in France. According to the authors, the country had now come full circle, from an earlier claim that everyone had resisted to the new, and equally false claim that most French people had willingly collaborated and that resistance was exceptional and sparse. Above all they insisted that some of the new commemoration ceremonies were based on incomplete knowledge and a misreading of the facts. They deplored, for instance, the creation of a national day of commemoration on July 16 to honor the memory of Jews rounded up at the Vélodrome d’Hiver (an indoor bicycle track) in Paris on July 16-17 1942, arguing that this roundup, although carried out by French gendarmes, had actually been ordered by the German authorities. The authors suggested that a more significant date, one that would involve a more honest recognition of French anti-Semitism, would have been October 3, when the Vichy government promulgated the first Jewish Statute in 1940 on its own initiative and with no prodding from the occupying forces⁴. Recently that moment has once more re-entered public debate with the discovery of the draft of those statutes as amended by the hand of Pétain himself⁵.

⁴ Éric Conan and Henry Rousso, *Vichy: An Ever-Present Past*, trans. Nathan Bracher, (Hanover, NH: Univ. Press of New England, 1998), 39.

⁵ See, for instance, the interview with Serge Klarsfeld in *Le Monde*, “Pétain n’a pas hésité à s’aligner sur l’idéologie raciale nazie”, <http://www.lemonde.fr/imprimer/article/2010/10/04/1420144.html>

Pierre Nora, the author of the influential *Lieux de mémoire* (“memory sites”) offered his sympathetic support to Rousso, adding that his own work had also had the unintended consequence of leading to the use of commemorations and memorializing for political ends. Nora characterized the shift in the national temper as a change in emphasis: where people had previously been concerned with France under Vichy, the emphasis was now Vichy and *the French* – at every level, the behavior of average French people was examined and criticized⁶. Rousso’s work, Nora argued, suffered from what he called a “boomerang effect”:

“In the same way that the idea of a ‘place of memory’, a tool forged for creating a critical distance, a counter-commemorative type of instrument, was recuperated, digested, and transformed by commemorative bulimia into becoming, against my will, the instrument par excellence of commemoration; in this same way, the rising tide of Vichy memory, whose irresistible ascent was described by Rousso, carried him off in its flood-waters to give to the *Syndrome* something he probably didn’t anticipate and probably wouldn’t have wished⁷.”

At the same time, Nora wondered whether what Rousso and Conan describe as a “clinical aggravation of the syndrome” might not already have run its course, noting that the revelations (in Pierre Péan’s 1994 *Une jeunesse française*) about President François Mitterrand’s youthful connections with Vichy as well as his friendship with René Bousquet had had little effect on Mitterrand’s public reputation and persona⁸.

Now more than ten additional years have passed since the opening of this new phase, and still the matter of Vichy, and in particular the arrest and deportation of Jews from France to Auschwitz and other death camps⁹, remains current. One symptom of this was the decision in 2002 to create a traveling exhibit of the children who were deported. Organized by Serge Klarsfeld and the Sons and Daughters of the Jewish Deportees from France (FFDJF) with the aid of the SNCF (the French National railroad company), it was shown in major train stations throughout France¹⁰ before being installed in the Hôtel de Ville, the governmental seat of Paris,

⁶ Pierre Nora, “Le Syndrome, son passé, son avenir”, *French Historical Studies* 19, no. 2 (Autumn 1995): 488 (my translation).

⁷ Nora, 489.

⁸ Nora, 492.

⁹ Serge Klarsfeld has established the chronological table of deportations in *Vichy-Auschwitz: la solution “finale” de la question juive en France* (1983; Paris: Fayard, 2001). In addition to those deported from Drancy, additional deportations from Lyon and other locations brings the total to 75,721. Of the more than 73,000 deportees from Drancy (which included 11,400 children), there were fewer than 3,000 survivors. Approximately one-third of those deported were French citizens. The total number of Jews in France was 270,000 at the time of the deportations; one half of these were foreign. In other words, one-fifth of the total Jewish population was deported. The French government officially admits to 120,000 racial deportees, which includes Roma and other groups. In addition, over 2,000 Jews died while interned on French soil. See Henry Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France since 1944* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1991); Susan Zuccotti, *The Holocaust, the French, and the Jews* (New York: Basic Books, 1993); and Michael Marrus and Robert O. Paxton, *Vichy France and the Jews* (Stanford: Stanford Univ., Press, 1995).

¹⁰ The exhibit went to the train stations of Paris Saint-Lazare, Lyon Part-Dieu, Limoges, Clermont-Ferrand, Marseille Saint-Charles, Rennes, Lille-Flandre, Strasbourg, Nice, Nancy, Bordeaux, Grenoble, Metz, and Paris Nord. See *Les 11 400 enfants juifs déportés de France, juin 1942-août 1944* (Paris: Mairie de Paris, 2007). The website is at http://www.paris.fr/publications/brochures-a-caractere-historique/les-11-400-enfants-juifs-deportees-de-france/rub_6444_stand_27787_port_14531

during the spring of 2007. Subsequently, the exhibit traveled to Germany. In addition, between March 27, 2002 and August 18, 2004, commemorative ceremonies were held on the 60th anniversary of each deportation. Sixty-three of the seventy-seven ceremonies were held at Drancy, which served as a collecting place for Jews (adults and children alike, though the children were almost invariably separated from their parents) before they were loaded onto the trains that took them across the border to an “unknown destination”¹¹. Surfeit of memory or necessary corrective to the French social and historical imaginary?

In February 2008 the memory controversy became the subject of acrimonious debate in France after President Sarkozy announced that each fifth-grade French schoolchild in France should be required to learn about the fate of one child-victim of the deportations. In an interview, Klarsfeld explained that since the FFDJF has now published the birthplace of each child-victim, along with the address from which each child was deported, it is now possible for schoolchildren to visit those addresses in their own neighborhoods. Thus, he states, the lives of the victims will have served some purpose and their memory will be rescued from the “night and fog” into which it would otherwise disappear¹². Counter-arguments were made by Simone Veil (herself a holocaust survivor and honorary president of the Foundation for the Memory of the Holocaust) who claimed that young children would be traumatized; by groups who felt that the Jewish victims were being privileged over others; and by those who objected to the religious overtones of Sarkozy’s project¹³. Clearly, the debate in France about the right way to commemorate the victims of the deportations is far from over.

Klarsfeld acknowledges the role played by French non-Jews who resisted the Vichy policies against Jews. The online catalogue to his exhibition of the child-victims gives ample credit to average people and members of the clergy who saved, or tried to save, Jewish children often at great danger to themselves. Yet the message is clear: *despite* this, 11,400 children died. In looking at the catalogue published by the mayor’s office in Paris, the reader cannot help but be struck by the importance of narrative in recounting both the history of the events and also the individual histories of the victims, to the extent that they could be found and told. Each child becomes an unfinished story – what might have been. A similar effect arises from reading the letters, published by Antoine Sabbagh in 2002, that young children and young adults wrote from Drancy¹⁴.

The forcefulness of the Hôtel de Ville exhibition, and of the collections of letters, comes from the fact that these are not exercises in assigning culpability – they do not lend themselves to the political uses of memory that are excoriated by Rousso and others. Simply and eloquently, they are testimonials to tragedy. And they are needed because an understanding of the human experience of the Shoah in France is still not widespread, cannot be comprehended until the vastness of that tragedy is brought down to the individual experiential level. In a trauma that encompasses such large numbers, the particularity of experience is precious – otherwise those

¹¹ Serge Klarsfeld, *Le Camp de Drancy et ses gares de déportation: Bourget-Drancy et Bobigny, 20 août 1941-20 août 1944. 60^e anniversaire de la déportation des juifs de France*. Paris: FFDJF, 2004.

¹² The Klarsfeld interview is online at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U2FqdJE7U9I>

¹³ See Elaine Sciolino, “By Making Holocaust Personal to Pupils, Sarkozy Stirs Anger”, *The New York Times* (Feb. 16, 2008): A1 and A6.

¹⁴ Antoine Sabbagh, *Lettres de Drancy* (Paris: Tallandier, 2002).

who are born generations later cannot identify with the victims or even imagine what it might have been like to be in their place.

Psychoanalyst Donald Spence has introduced the useful distinction between “narrative truth” and “historical truth”. He argues that in helping patients overcome trauma, his goal is to help them find a “narrative truth” that offers them a version of the past they can live with – this is more important than finding out what actually happened (as in Freud’s “archeological” model, which focused on retrieving buried memories of past experiences). Yet narrative truth is not a papering over of trauma. It must fit with the remembered facts:

“Narrative truth can be defined as the criterion we use to decide when a certain experience has been captured to our satisfaction; it depends on continuity and closure and the extent to which the fit of the pieces takes on an aesthetic finality... Once a given construction has acquired narrative truth, it becomes just as real as any other kind of truth; this new reality becomes a significant part of the psychoanalytic cure¹⁵.”

In Rousso’s framework, the French nation as a whole is regarded as a patient, at first victim of the “Vichy Syndrome”, and later suffering from memory obsession. In place of this, I want to argue for the place of literature and film/video – both documentary and fiction – as vehicles for thinking people to reach their own “narrative truth” about what happened in France during the occupation. Rather than saying that there is too much memory, I would argue that we need more memory. In particular, we should look to those few works that have attempted to contribute to the narrative of the Jewish genocide in France. There are countless stories that remain to be told, and that may some day play a greater role in the French social imaginary, or indeed the world’s. As Dominick La Capra has so eloquently stated, “the study of the Holocaust has now passed beyond the confines of Jewish Studies or a sector of German Studies and has become a problem of general concern¹⁶.”

Fiction film and spectator identification

At the height of what Rousso termed an “obsession” with memory, in 1996, Marcel Bluwal directed a film called *Le plus beau pays du monde* (“The most beautiful place on earth”). This was the first, and to date last, full-length fiction feature film to include a scene that takes place in the camp of Drancy. The film represents the workings of the German-owned Continental Film Company, which employed French directors to produce some 30 films during the Occupation. The particular film being made is *Mermoz* (directed by Louis Cuny in 1942) about the famous aviator who never returned from a flight over the Atlantic in 1936. In the film’s last scene, the crew drives to Drancy in order to pass a microphone over the barbed wire surrounding the camp so they can record the voice of the star, Henri Hughes Lambert, who has been interned, speaking the final words of the film. After the crew has completed its work, Lambert suddenly breaks free of the French police guards and bursts out with the truth about conditions at the camp in Drancy. He shouts that “there are men, women, and even children here being treated

¹⁵ Donald Spence, *Narrative Truth and Historical Truth: Meaning and Interpretation in Psychoanalysis* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1982), 31.

¹⁶ Dominick La Capra, *History and Memory after Auschwitz* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1998), 22.

worse than animals.” This scene was filmed on location at Drancy, which in the present day is a low-income housing complex.

Le plus beau pays du monde was shown at the Boston Jewish Film Festival in 1998. In France, it was shown on television but did not enjoy a theatrical release. There are at present no copies in distribution. In an interview, Bluwal told me that in fact Robert Hughes Lambert was not interned at Drancy but at another camp, so that the film has taken a few liberties with the facts. As a French Jew who was 17 years old at the time of the roundups in 1942, and as someone who lost family members to the deportations, Bluwal explained that he felt it incumbent upon him to portray Drancy in a film, but that he felt the story of Lambert, who was not Jewish, had more intrinsic dramatic interest for the French public than the actual Jewish deportations (the reasons for Lambert’s disappearance are obscure; the film suggests that he was arrested for his homosexual relationship with a German officer)¹⁷. A rolling credit at the end explains that the film *Mermoz* was premiered at the Paris opera but that the authorities forbade any mention of the film’s star.

Le Plus beau pays du monde allows Bluwal to dramatize episodes of censorship, to portray the curfews, the professional restrictions affecting Jews, and the threat of conscription to work camps. The historical Mermoz and Antoine de St. Exupéry were fellow aviators, but the filmmakers of *Mermoz* were not allowed to mention the name of St. Exupéry in the film, since by that time he was fighting on the side of the Allies. They are informed by the censors – French officials collaborating with the Germans – that they can only refer to him as “the poet”. Like Truffaut’s better-known *Le Dernier métro* (1980), *Le Plus beau pays du monde* is steeped in the atmosphere of Paris under the occupation.

As a film about filmmaking, Bluwal’s film implicitly addresses the limits of what can be shown/said about the Shoah. It is significant that even as late as 1996, the producer and director, both Jewish, felt that the representation of Drancy would be more compelling for audiences if the victim was not Jewish. In the end, the film’s representation of censorship during the Occupation translates into a commentary about today’s potent economic censorship, which also affects what kinds of images and stories can be produced for public consumption. It should be noted that Bluwal’s portrayal in the film of the indifference of the average French citizen toward the internments at Drancy meshes perfectly with the statement by Emmanuel Levinas that “what was unique between 1940 and 1945 was the abandonment”. As Alain Finkielkraut notes, “Between the dying and the other side was an insurmountable wall made of hostility, detachment, skepticism, or ignorance¹⁸.”

There is only one other fiction film that mentions Drancy. It is notable because it portrays a man who, many years after the historical events, identifies with the victims. *Gare de la douleur* (“Train Station of Sorrows”) by Henri Jou is a 24-minute film made in 1984 about a new stationmaster who assumes his post at Bobigny, the station nearest Drancy where the wagons were loaded with victims on their way to the death camps. During the night, the stationmaster’s

¹⁷ Interview, June 16, 2007. Marcel Bluwal’s grandmother was deported from Drancy. Bluwal hid for 26 months with his mother in a small room in Paris. His compelling story, in which he also relates his involvement in the birth of the French TV industry after the war, is told in *Un aller* (Paris: Stock, 1975).

¹⁸ Alain Finkielkraut, “From the Novelistic to Memory,” in Lawrence D. Kritzman, ed., *Auschwitz and After* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 95.

sleep is torn apart by screams. Looking down on the platform, he sees ghostly reenactments of the terrible scenes that the station has witnessed. In the end, he asks for a transfer since he cannot continue to work in a place haunted by so much suffering.

Documentary film/video and the argument over representation

Dominick La Capra reminds us that Claude Lanzmann, the director of *Shoah*, not only avoids any recreation of the past in his film, but flatly states that it is wrong to attempt any representation of the Holocaust¹⁹. For example, during a seminar held at Yale University on April 11, 1990, Lanzmann commented on the non-representational way that he staged a scene with the barber Abraham Bomba. For the interview, the filmmaker rented a barbershop and conducted the interview while Bomba was serving some male customers. In the course of that scene, Bomba breaks down when he tells of a friend forced to cut the hair of his wife and sister just before they were sent to the gas chamber. Lanzmann explains that it would have been unthinkable to have Bomba cutting women's hair in that scene – hence the distance of the film from any attempt at representation or recreation of the past through images. These things, he states, cannot be seen, are not *visible*, any more than one could ever show a film (if it existed) of victims being gassed, or reenact such a scene²⁰.

Against this injunction the art critic and essayist Georges Didi-Huberman offers the solution of the dialectical image. Taking his cue from Sergei Eisenstein's concept of montage as collision between images that instigates a cognitive apprehension in the spectator, Didi-Huberman argues that cinema can actually *convey* that which is not *visible* (in Lanzmann's sense of the word): "What cannot be seen, this has to be *suggested through montage*, so that, if possible, the differences between a few visual singularities – separate and shot through with holes – can be given over to thought – in such a way that one conveys *in spite of everything* that very thing that it is impossible to see entirely, the thing that remains inaccessible as a *totality*²¹."

Documentary video and film on Drancy has made effective use of the dialectical image through montage. The circumstances surrounding the roundups and deportations are conveyed in a stunning one-hour documentary from 2002 by Cécile Clairval, *Drancy, Last Stage before the Abyss*, which was partially funded by the towns of Drancy and Bobigny, by the French railroad company (SNCF), and the French Ministry of Defense (the video received a special mention by the jury at the International Festival of Historical Films in Pessac, France, in 2002).

In Clairval's work, first-hand testimony by some of the rare survivors is balanced through the montage technique with documents and newspaper clippings from the period. There are interviews with Samuel Radzynski, who was 18 years old at the time of his arrest in 1941, and who weighed less than 90 pounds upon his release ten weeks after his internment; with Yvette Lévy, whose family had lived in Alsace Lorraine since the 19th century – a French family that was surprised to find itself identified and persecuted as Jewish – and others. The stories recount the near-starvation conditions of the camp (desperate people foraging for food in the garbage dumps) as well as the arrival and subsequent deportation to the death camps of over 1000

¹⁹ La Capra, 8; see pages 95-138 for a discussion of Lanzmann's *Shoah*.

²⁰ Claude Lanzmann, "Seminar with Claude Lanzmann," *Yale French Studies* 79 (1991): 82-99.

²¹ Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images malgré tout* (Paris: Les Éditions de minuit, 2003), 172 (my translation).

infants, toddlers, and young children without their parents. The eight survivor interviews are staggered, so that each one tells a piece of the chronological account of the camp. Survivor Francine Christophe describes the arrival of hundreds of children, many of whom had forgotten their names – and recalls that the inclusion of children in the roundups had not even been envisaged by the German authorities. Alongside these personal stories, newspaper clippings and photographs explain the historical progression of the persecution of Jews. When Clairval uses German photographs, she zooms in on the detail that contradicts the picture of order and contentment that these propaganda pictures were meant to document. Aided by an effective and often moving use of the music of Gustav Mahler’s Third Symphony and Darius Milhaud’s “Le Château de Feu” along with compositions by Jean-Marc Zelner, the rhythm of the film itself re-enacts the inexorable rhythm of the deportations to the death camps in the East; the documentary is regularly punctuated by the image of a departing train car representing an individual convoy. In each case the number of deportees and the infinitesimal number of survivors is given.

The technology of DVD format makes it possible for Clairval to allow additional elaborations and juxtapositions through useful “extras” in the form of maps and statistics detailing all the French concentration camps (in both the occupied and Vichy zones), biographical notes about the major historical players, and the video of a commemorative ceremony and Kaddish spoken at Drancy by the descendants of some of the survivors. There is an interview with the director, made on the occasion of a screening that took place in a French prison. Clairval has included a list of non-Jewish French citizens who were interned for the crime of having expressed sympathy with their Jewish compatriots, as well as information about the attitude of both the Catholic and Protestant churches toward the deportations. To date, this is the most compelling and informative visual document on the subject, and the most widely distributed both on television and in schools²².

One of the most intellectually ambitious attempts to address historical memory through film is the 1996 film *Drancy avenir* (79 min.) by Arnaud des Pallières. The film has been favorably received by critics, warranting both a notice in the prestigious French journal *Cahiers du cinéma* and a showing in March 2006 at the Walter Reade Theater in New York²³. The filmmaker has tried to contextualize the historical fact of Drancy within the traditions of Western culture and philosophy, using montage to make associations with Conrad (*Heart of Darkness*), Kafka, Georges Perec, Walter Benjamin, and the writings of survivor Robert Antelme (*L’Espèce humaine*) as well as the account by his spouse Marguerite Duras, in *La Douleur*, of Antelme’s survival and rehabilitation. There are additional quotations from eyewitness accounts, such as Annette Muller’s *La Petite fille du vél d’hiv* and from Noël Calef’s autobiographical novel *Drancy la faim* (about which more later).

²² Clairval’s video has been shown on the French television network France II as well as on the channel of the French Parliament and the cable channel Odysée. It is often broadcast on the last Sunday in April, which was designated in 1954 by the French government as “Journée nationale du souvenir de la déportation,” a day memorializing the deportations. Copies have also been deposited with French schools and with municipal councils. The video is commercially available at <http://www.scren.com>.

²³ *La Shoah à l’écran: crimes contre l’humanité et représentation* (Strasbourg : Conseil d’Europe, 2004), 37-8. The showing at Lincoln Center was sponsored by the Film Society of Lincoln Center, the French Cultural Services, and the *Cahiers du cinéma*.

The video can be described as a montage of discontinuous scenes that, taken together, constitute a philosophical meditation on the Shoah and the nature of violence, including the violence done to memory. In the course of the film, a young woman visits Drancy and interviews some of the current inhabitants; as she looks at today's children playing in the yard, a voice-over reminds us of the thousands of children that were deported from there. A professor gives a lecture on the nature of time, and argues that the memory of the Holocaust needs to exist in an eternal present since it is, in his words, "the fundamental experience of our time". A typist gives an account of how the records of the victims were established; a series of trains bear down in rhythmical succession.

Drancy avenir might best be viewed as a work in the tradition of Alain Resnais's *Night and Fog*, in the sense that it tries to understand what the Shoah means for Western culture. Like Resnais, the director has made use of cinematic effects, not only the montage of disparate narrative threads but also shadow and darkness as a metaphor. The trains are photographed in a somber palette, perhaps at dusk, and images of a river voyage (accompanying the passages from *Heart of Darkness*) are shown in deep shadow. For those viewers who are familiar with the cultural signposts that are skillfully woven into this work, seeing the video can be a thought-provoking experience in that it attempts to integrate the experience of Drancy into other narratives of Western culture (Conrad, Kafka) and other first-hand accounts – in other words, to approximate narrative truth.

The juxtaposition of texts and scenes in *Drancy avenir* resembles Walter Benjamin's dialectical image (for instance in the unfinished *Arcades Project*) more than Eisenstein's, since it joins together fragments and heterogeneous elements, leaving the viewer with the task of sifting through them. In her study of Benjamin, Susan Buck-Morss writes that "His aim was to destroy the mythic immediacy of the present, not by inserting it into a cultural continuum that affirms the present as its culmination, but by discovering that constellation of historical origins which has the power to explode history's 'continuum'.²⁴" *Drancy avenir's* dialectical images suggest that unless this continuum is broken we are bound to create other holocausts.

Literary fiction and fragmentary form

Benjamin's concept of the dialectical image is one that carries more easily over into literary works than Eisenstein's practice of montage as conflict and confrontation. Many works of fiction that touch on the French Shoah are notable for the way that many of them privilege the theme of research into memory by juxtaposing past and present, image and text. Strangely, most of them avoid creating fictional worlds in which the reader is invited to identify with the victims.

The experimental writer Georges Perec's *W, or a Memory of Childhood* is the most autobiographical of his novels in that eighteen of the thirty-seven chapters recount the narrator's attempt to recover his childhood memories. Those memories, he relates, are blocked by the trauma of his father's death on the day after the armistice in 1940 and his separation from his mother, who was deported from Drancy to Auschwitz in 1943 (facts that correspond to Perec's own experience). The other 19 chapters (which appear in italic type rather than roman

²⁴ Susan Buck-Morss, "Preface", in *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), x.

type) relate the story of a fictional island of “W” off the Tierra del Fuego. The narrator of the story of “W” is named Gaspard Winckler, but we learn in the early chapters that this was an assumed name that allowed him, as a Jewish child, to hide from the Germans during the occupation of France. The child whose identity papers he bears is said to have disappeared in a shipwreck off the island of “W”. This sets the stage for Winckler’s voyage to the island. It seems that the settlers had created four villages that compete through sports. Gradually the story turns ugly, as the depicted world turns more and more into the arbitrary injustice of a concentration camp²⁵.

In Perec’s novel, the reader is placed in the position of dispassionate observer, whether of the one narrator’s attempts at piecing together his childhood memories, or the other’s voyage to the imaginary island. The revelations about the island of W are rendered more horrifying by the juxtaposition between the descriptions of the gradually deteriorating “games” and the gaps in the other narrator’s childhood memories. In the end, the imagined concentration camp at W comes in to fill the missing traumatic memory of the child.

In Patrick Modiano’s *Dora Bruder*, the reader is also invited to follow the narrator’s investigative activities. The protagonist of this work has set himself the task to find the last traces of an actual sixteen-year-old Jewish girl who ran away in 1942 from the Catholic boarding school where she had been sent to safety by her parents. The real Dora eventually wound up with her father in Drancy and was deported with him on September 18, 1942. Modiano’s narrator is trying to conjure up the past by revisiting the sites of Dora’s birth, the places she lived, the convent school she escaped from – in effect turning these into what Pierre Nora calls “memory sites”²⁶. Maps of Paris neighborhoods and photographs give this detective work a sense of immediacy and realism. In pursuing his quest, the memory of that time comes alive for him; he writes, “I feel as though I am alone in making the link between Paris then and Paris now... there are moments when... the city of yesterday appears to me in fleeting gleams behind that of today”²⁷.

Both Perec’s and Modiano’s works create a distance between the reader and the Jewish victims. Henry Raczymow’s *Un cri sans voix* (1985; translated into English as *Writing the Book of Esther* in 1995) is one exception. It is notable for its portrayal of Holocaust memory as an impasse for one of the characters. The narrator, Mathieu Litvak, writes the imaginary diary of his sister Esther who committed suicide in the spring of 1975 after passing several years identifying with Jewish victims of the Holocaust. Her brother writes that when she learned that the date of her birth, August 2, 1943, was the precise date of the rebellion in Treblinka, Esther, who was born in France and never experienced the Shoah directly, comes to identify with the Jewish victims and decides that she cannot go on living. Mathieu’s project to reimagine her life in the ghetto in his own search for “narrative truth”. He writes her “diary” as though she had actually lived through the experiences she identified with²⁸. There are multiple displacements of identity in this novel –

²⁵ Georges Perec, *W or the Memory of Childhood*, trans. David Bebelos (Boston: David R. Godine, 1988). For a good discussion of Perec’s novel, see Susan Suleiman, *Crises of Memory and the Second World War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006).

²⁶ Pierre Nora, *Les Lieux de mémoire*, 3 vols. (1984-92; Paris: Gallimard, 1997).

²⁷ Patrick Modiano, *Dora Bruder*, trans. Joanna Kilmartin (Berkeley: Univ. California Press, 1999), 41.

²⁸ As many commentators on the Holocaust have noted, “it is a common source of guilt for survivors that their good fortune could only have been bought at the cost of another’s loss.” See Froma I. Zeitlin, “The Vicarious Witness: Belated Memory and Authorial Presence in Recent Holocaust Literature”, in Julia Epstein and Lori Hope Lefkowitz, eds. *Shaping Losses: Cultural Memory and the Holocaust* (Urbana, IL:

Mathieu writes in place of his sister, who imagines herself back in the Warsaw ghetto of 1942 and deported to Treblinka. But Esther also identifies with her aunt Esther for whom she was named, and who was deported to Drancy in 1943 in place of the Esther's mother, Fanny.... as Mathieu writes, "someone is always deported in place of someone else"²⁹.

Raczymow's novel is divided into two parts: the first contains the fictional diary of Esther as written by Mathieu, while the second relates Mathieu's investigations into the circumstances surrounding his parents' meeting during the German occupation of France, the deportation of family members, and Esther's life up to the time of her suicide at the age of 32. The narrative strategy is one of multiple breaks and discontinuities. Esther's "diary" often refers to her in the third person; Mathieu's investigations in the novel's section alternate between a first-person and third-person narrative. This oscillation reflects the narrator Mathieu's own deep ambivalence about any representation of the Holocaust, an ambivalence expressed in the French title of the novel, "Un cri sans voix" – a voiceless scream. This refers to the screams of the dying in the gas chambers, screams which could not be heard by those who observed them through glass peepholes. The thoughts of the narrator Mathieu echo the statements of Lanzmann that the Holocaust cannot be made *visible*:

"I don't see anything. I cannot see anything. I don't want to see anything. I must not see anything. Wanting to see would place me alongside that SS man assigned to look through the peephole of the gas chamber at those being gassed (176)".

In his essay "Memory Shot Through With Holes", Henri Raczymow writes about the way new narrative strategies need to be devised to repair Jewish memory while doing justice to the violence that has been done to it: "The memory has burst, as a balloon bursts, but we spend our time sewing it back up... in fact, sewing scraps together is every writer's task, a hypothetically endless task, and impossible task. That is why my work consists in presenting the scraps in all their diversity, in their disorder, in their dispersion, in a kind of diaspora"³⁰.

Raymond Federman's *Double or Nothing* is an experimental work that responds to this call for a radical strategy of dispersion. The reader is presented with three levels of narration³¹. The first narrator is telling the story of a man who is said to have produced a typescript created during the man's self-imposed confinement to a single room in New York City for the period of one year. The aim of this second narrator, in turn, is to tell the story of a boy who escaped the roundups of the Jews in France and later came to America at the age of 19. Here it is significant that, just as the boy's survival depended on luck – his mother was able to hide him in a closet while the rest of his family was deported – the second narrator's project is financed by some winnings at the gambling table, winnings that are reflected in the book's title, "double or nothing". Behind all three narrators there is of course, "Federman," the author, who has included some autobiographical material at all three narrative levels. It is Raymond Federman,

Univ. of Illinois Press, 2001), 149. For an analysis of *Writing the Book of Esther*, see Zeitlin in *Shaping Losses*, 128-160.

²⁹ Henri Raczymow, *Writing the Book of Esther*, trans. Dori Katz (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1995), 133. The novel was first published in France with the title *Un cri sans voix* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985).

³⁰ Henri Raczymow, "Memory Shot Through With Holes," *Yale French Studies*, 85 (1994): 103.

³¹ Raymond Federman, *Double or Nothing: a real fictitious discourse* (Chicago: Swallow Press, 1971). For a discussion of this work, see Suleiman, *Crises of Memory and the Second World War*, 196-208.

the author, who has produced the pages with their artful arrangement of type, with pages that sometimes read backwards, from bottom to top, or that create pictures and designs; it is Federman, again, who returns again and again in his other works to that moment of being hidden in the closet³². The text is replete with lists, numbers, and typographical “games” that reveal an obsession with numbers. The theme of the Holocaust reveals itself little by little, as the reader realizes that the text is in fact “tattooed” with numbers, as were the Auschwitz victims; and that the interminable typewritten lists have their counterpart in the typewritten lists of deportees and victims established by the infernal bureaucracies of WWII.

As the discussion of these four novels has shown, it has been characteristic of much Holocaust fiction to use the devices of fragmentation, linguistic disjunction, self-questioning, and indirectness that successfully break the frame of the narration and thus circumvent the traps of a naïve realism that could never be adequate to the almost unimaginable facts. This helps to avoid what Dominick La Capra calls “the nostalgic, sentimental turn to a partly fictionalized past that is conveyed in a congenially ingratiating, safely conventionalized form.” And yet, the most compelling account of Drancy is a work of fiction by survivor Noël (Nissim) Calef whose forcefulness relies precisely on its realism. This shows that in the matter of “narrative truth”, no approach should be discarded out of hand.

Calef’s novel is the semi-autobiographical account of his internment in Drancy in 1941, six months before the major roundups on July 16 and 17 in Paris. On August 20 1941, in response to communist protests and demonstrations in France against the German invasion of the Soviet Union, the French police, under orders from the German Gestapo, sealed off the Jewish Quarters in the 11th arrondissement interned at Drancy 4,230 Jewish men between the ages of 18 and 50. After three months, the hunger at the camp was so great that massive deaths occurred. As a result, a German military medical Commission ordered the release of 1000 internees (although many of them were rearrested in July 1942). Calef himself was freed in December 1941 due to the honorary Italian citizenship bestowed upon his grandfather (and transferred to descendants) which led to interventions of the Italian consulate on his behalf. After his release he moved to Italy, and an Italian translation of his first-hand account was published in 1943. It was not until 1991 – the 50th anniversary of his release – that Serge Klarsfeld was able to track down the only existing copy of the original French manuscript and to publish it³³.

In the novel Calef relates aspects of his own story through the character Raymond Alcalá. The protagonist is at first confident that he will soon be released because of his Italian citizenship. But this does not happen. What follows is a remarkable account of the hunger and deprivation of the camp, told in excruciating detail. Calef is a gifted writer – he later went on to a successful screenwriting career (for instance, after the war he was the screenwriter for Louis Malle’s *L’Ascenseur pour l’échafaud*). He is the master of finely observed detail, as well as dialogue. The

³² In a lecture at Harvard University in April 2006, Raymond Federman read from a forthcoming work, *Chut* (“Shhh”). This was, he writes, the last sound he heard from his mother as she hid him in the closet – the injunction to survive by remaining silent and hidden. This was the moment, he says, that eventually turned him into a writer.

³³ Noël (Nissim) Calef, *Drancy 1941, Camp de Représailles, Drancy la faim* (Paris: FFDJF, 1991). A subsequent edition with the title of *Camp de Représailles* was published by Éditions de l’Olivier (Paris, 1997).

reader is made to understand how hunger pervaded every aspect of life in the camp, and how it led to the degradation of relations between people who were tempted to compete against one another for food, medicine, and slender privileges rather than band together in solidarity. Alcalá is a communist who tries to create a group awareness that will counter the arbitrary rules of the camp administrators. This leads to his imprisonment within the camp – a prison within the prison, and the breakdown of his spirit. He is psychologically destroyed, and yet many of the other camp inmates retain their respect for his failed attempt at demanding more just conditions.

Serge Klarsfeld, in his preface to the book, writes that Calef's novel is unsurpassed in its forceful and penetrating portrayal of the fate of Jews in France during the Shoah³⁴. Although ostensibly a "novel", this is in fact a first-person account of the conditions in the camp, shot through with illuminating and brilliant passages, as, for instance, the conversation among internees from several countries who argue about the meaning and nature of Jewish identity³⁵. To date it is the only literary work in any language that can give the reader a sense of what Drancy meant to the thousands of victims who passed through it. In addition, it tells a story of resistance within the camp (Alcalá's attempt to organize the prisoners against their oppressors) that makes this novel a French companion to Peter Weiss's better-known *Aesthetics of Resistance*. Like that novel, Calef's includes a poignant "last letter" written just before the protagonist is executed. Calef's character Alcalá is executed as a hostage in reprisal for resistance activities against the Germans carried out elsewhere in France, while Weiss's character Horst Heilmann (based on a historical person) is executed for resistance against the Nazi regime inside Germany³⁶.

Drancy today

Drancy today has been reconverted to its original purpose – an apartment complex. The same buildings that were used as makeshift shelters for thousands of children and adults are now inhabited by working-class renters. All the same, several memorials at Drancy attest to the ongoing controversy about the complicity of the French themselves in the roundups and deportations. As a place where the memory battles are still being fought, the site of Drancy is a contested "lieu de mémoire", or in Nora's words, a site "where cultural memory crystallizes and secretes itself"³⁷. This is one of the only former French camps where the physical buildings are still standing³⁸. Today, as already happened just after the war, the families of survivors still visit the site for commemorative ceremonies³⁹.

³⁴ Serge Klarsfeld, "Preface", in Calef, ix.

³⁵ See Calef, 205 ff.

³⁶ See Inez Hedges, "The Aesthetics of Resistance: Thoughts on Peter Weiss", in *Socialism and Democracy* 20, no. 2 (2006), 69-77.

³⁷ Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire", *Representations* 26 (Spring 1989): 7.

³⁸ I would like to thank an (anonymous) reader of this article who pointed out that a number of camps (Rivesaltes in Pyrénées Orientales, Thil in the North of France, and the camp of Struthof in Alsace) are preserved in part and can be visited today as sites of memory.

³⁹ See, for instance, the six commemorative volumes published by Mireille Abramovici and Eve Line, *Nous sommes 900 Français à la mémoire des déportés du convoi numéro 73 ayant quitté Drancy le 15 mai 1944* (1999-2000). The volumes can be consulted in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The families hold a kaddish at the Selinger monument annually on the Sunday after May 15 in memory of the

A sculptural memorial designed by the artist Shelomo Selinger stands at the open end of the U-shaped apartment complex. Selinger's memorial was the winning design in an international nongovernmental competition in 1973 which was sponsored by the French Association of Jewish Deportees (AADJF) with the backing of the communist mayor of Drancy, Maurice Nilès. In *The Claims of Memory*, her painstakingly documented study on memorials and commemorations of the Holocaust in Germany and France, Caroline Weidmer comments both on the Jewish symbolism that Selinger worked into the monument, and on the politics of denial still in evidence in the comments of the French government's representative at the unveiling on May 9, 1976. The then minister for veterans, André Bord, still refused to acknowledge the complicity of Vichy and glossed over the fact that the victims were Jews, stating instead that "they confessed France as their faith."⁴⁰ Weidmer notes that this is a particularly strange statement since 80 per cent of the deported Jews were foreign or French children born to foreign Jews, while 20 per cent were French. In all, 45 per cent of the foreign Jews in France were deported and perished, compared with less than 9 per cent of French Jews⁴¹.

In 1988 a solitary train car of the type used in the deportations was added in the center of the U-shaped complex, with a rail leading down from Selinger's memorial. This car attests to Drancy's place, in the words of filmmaker Cécile Clairval, as "the last stage before the abyss". Inside the car are informational exhibits about the deportations. The car is not normally open to the public, but can be visited by school groups and others by appointment. Within the U complex, a door opens into a small room that functions as a makeshift museum which is only open to visitors by special arrangement.

In the 1990s, commemorative plaques were installed that finally mentioned the complicity of the French State; in 1993, a plaque was installed by the Union of Jewish Students in France (UEJF) that names "the French State of Vichy" as responsible for the deportations of "thousands of Jews, Gypsies, and foreigners". In July 1993 another plaque commemorated the first celebration of "the National Day of Commemoration of the Racist and Anti-Semitic Persecutions Committed under the de facto Authority called 'Government of the French State' (1940-1944)"⁴².

Selinger's sculpture illustrates both the strengths and the weaknesses inherent in the project of creating memorials in order to bring awareness of the Holocaust forward into the present as a "living memory", one that has some of the freshness of lived experience, even though it is not a personal recollection. The work itself is impressive and evokes a strong emotional response. However, there is no documentation at the site explaining the profound symbolism of Selinger's work. For instance, the three granite columns represent the Hebrew letter *shin* with its multiple meanings – it can stand for the name of God, "shaddai", and for the flame of divine revelation; it is the symbol used in the mezuzah that is affixed next to the doors of Jewish homes. The seven steps leading up to the columns represent the elevation of the souls of the victims, and also the

deportees. The volumes document the life stories of each deportee who had surviving family members, and of the rare survivors themselves.

⁴⁰ Caroline Weidmer, *The Claims of Memory: Representations of the Holocaust in Contemporary Germany and France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 63.

⁴¹ Susan Zuccotti, *The Holocaust, the French, and the Jews* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 207.

⁴² Weidmer, 71.

seven degrees of hell that they had to undergo before they can pass through the gates of death, which are symbolized by the two lateral columns. In the center column, the tortured human figures number exactly 10 – the number required for a *minyan*, or quorum for prayer, while the head, coif, and beard on the two frontal figures are meant to make up the Hebrew letters *lamed* (thirty) and *vav* (six). These numbers make up the number 36, which Jewish tradition associates with the number of just people necessary for the continued existence of the world. A figure in the center wears a special accoutrement for prayer (Tefilin) on his forehead (Fig. 1)⁴³.



Figure 1: The Selinger memorial at Drancy. Photo by Inez Hedges, 2005

Unfortunately much of this symbolism, with its power to educate and to inspire reflection, is lost on the visitor. When I visited the site in June 2005, the concierge had no information about the monument or the museum. When I made a precise appointment in 2007 with the curator to view the inside of the train car and the museum, it made a disappointing impression. In the surrounding city of Drancy itself, there are few signposts that would guide a visitor to the site. Fortunately, as Serge Klarsfeld told me in June 2007, there are plans now for a large museum, which will be designed by an international architecture firm, opposite the apartment complex; if completed, this could do a lot to fill in the gaps in the memory and memorializing of Drancy.

The circumstance that this part of the French past remains, in Weidmer's words, "undigested" is attested to by Maurice Rajsfus, who in 1995 interviewed people presently living in the apartment complex as well as inhabitants of the town in order to see how the monument has affected historical memory in the region. He notes that only a small minority remembers the period when the complex functioned as an internment camp, and that most of the current inhabitants are unmoved by accounts of the terrible events that took place there. Still, there are exceptions. Rajsfus argues that it is important that these small memory traces not be

⁴³ Felipe Ferré, "Mémorial national du camp de Drancy," 5 (based on comments by the sculptor). Consulted in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Library. See also Weidmer 64-68. For a good explanation of the symbolism associated with the Hebrew alphabet, see Rabbi Yitzchak Ginsburgh, *The Hebrew Letters: Channels of Creative Consciousness* (Rehovot, Israel: Linda Pinsky Publications, 1992).

extinguished: “This small and fragile flame must not go out, because it constitutes a certain guarantee, if not against the return of barbarism, then at least against the silence that covered the abjection that took place at Drancy⁴⁴.”

Drancy and Representation: some concluding thoughts

Memorials such as the one at Drancy cannot themselves create the “narrative truth” that needs to be an ongoing process in each generation’s, and each individual’s, attempt to understand the Holocaust. Here fiction and film/video can play a significant role. Yet to date there has been no fiction film and only a small number of literary works that tell the story of the Jewish victims from their point of view, despite the vast archives that put many stories at the disposal of filmmakers and writers.

To cite just one example, the physician Georges Wellers, who survived Auschwitz after being deported there from Drancy, has written compelling memoirs in which he tells story after inspiring story of heroism and self-sacrifice in the camps, from the young woman Ketty who voluntarily chooses to accompany her mother into deportation to the selfless behavior of René Blum, former director of the Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo and brother of former prime minister Léon Blum. René Blum was deported from Drancy to Auschwitz in convoy 36 on September 23, 1942. As one friend wrote, “René was truly, in the best sense of the word, a man of good will... He had the capacity to comprehend and to sympathize with others that is the mark of an elevated mind. We saw how, during the Occupation, before and then after his arrest, he knew how to spread confidence around him, even against all hope⁴⁵.” This is one of many stories that deserve to be better known so that they can gain their place in the social imaginary and allow individual readers and viewers to embark on their individual search for their own sense of “narrative truth” about this period. As Raymond Federman writes in his essay “On the Necessity and Impossibility of Being a Jewish Writer”:

“When the historians close their books, when the statisticians stop counting, the memorialists and witnesses can no longer remember, then the poet, the novelist, the artist comes and surveys the devastated landscape left by the fire – the ashes. He rummages through the debris

⁴⁴ Weidmer, 69; Maurice Rajsfus, *Drancy: un camp de concentration très ordinaire* (Paris: Le Cherche Midi, 1996), 410. There is a video about Drancy in which the current inhabitants are interviewed. *Cité de la Muette*, directed by Jean-Patrick Lebel, is a 90-minute video dating from 1986 that uses a montage between past and present, mingling the history of Drancy as a concentration camp and site of deportation with an account of its present roles as memorial and as a housing development.

⁴⁵ Marcelle Tristan Bernard, *René Blum 1878-1942: textes réunis* (Paris: Arts et Métiers Graphiques, 1950). The account by Jean-Jacques Bernard describes Blum’s return from New York to Paris after the French defeat and his attitude during the first days of the Occupation. See also Georges Wellers, *De Drancy à Auschwitz* (Paris: Éditions du Centre de Documentation Juive Contemporaine, 1946), with drawings by Gottko; and the first-hand account by Julie Crémieux-Dunand, *La Vie à Drancy: récit documentaire* (Paris: Gedalge, 1945), with drawings by Jeanne Lévy. When I did research at the library of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in 2006, the pages of the volume by Crémieux-Dunand were still uncut.

in search of a design. For if the essence, the meaning, or the meaninglessness of the Holocaust will survive our sordid history, it will be in works of art⁴⁶."

⁴⁶ Raymond Federman, "The Necessity and Impossibility of Being a Jewish Writer," 2004. Available at www.federman.com/rfsr5.htm