

# LOCAL CINEMA HISTORIES IN FRANCE

## AN OVERVIEW

French interest in cinema history can be traced back to the 1920s. In 1925, in particular, G-Michel Coissac published his *Histoire du cinématographe*, a history of technical, industrial and commercial aspects of cinema. Apart from the history by Bardèche and Brasillach, the first edition of which was published in a single volume in 1935, all the significant general histories of the cinema appeared in France after the Second World War, spread out over a period of about twenty five years (and even longer for Mitry's work) (see table 1). None of these histories were written by academic authors, as cinema studies was not an established academic discipline in universities at this time. Most authors came from journalism and film criticism.

TABLE 1 *General cinema histories by French authors*

<i>Author</i>	<i>Title</i>	<i>Number of volumes</i>	<i>Year of publication (first editions)</i>
G-Michel Coissac	<i>Histoire générale du cinématographe</i>	1	1925
Maurice Bardèche & Robert Brasillach	<i>Histoire du cinéma</i> idem	1 2	1935 1953 and 1954
Georges Sadoul	– <i>Histoire générale du cinéma</i> – <i>Histoire du cinéma mondial des origines à nos jours</i>	6	1946-1954
René Jeanne & Charles Ford	<i>Histoire encyclopédique du cinéma</i>	5	1947-1962
Marcel Lapierre	<i>Les cent visages du cinéma</i>	1	1948
Pierre Leprohon	<i>Histoire du cinématographe</i>	2	1961 and 1963
Jacques Deslandes (and Jacques Richard for the second volume)	<i>Histoire comparée du cinéma</i>	2 (4 volumes were initially planned)	1966 and 1968
Jean Mitry	<i>Histoire du cinéma</i>	5	1968-1980

With the exception of the popular press, these works were not followed by any general works of cinema history.<sup>1</sup> This decline of the general cinema historiography was followed by the progressive emergence of local histories and very specialised works. Is this explosion of cinema historiography an implicit confession of the gnosiological impossibility to give henceforth a general overview of cinema history? Are these microhistories a product of the desire to valorise sources that generalist historians have neglected? And what is their goal? Are they maybe an end in itself? Or will they allow general cinema historiography to take off again? In this essay, I will outline some reflections about these complex questions that are the object of long theoretical debates. Convinced of the interest offered by local studies and of the possibility to establish a dialogue between microhistory and macrohistory, I took care, in the first place, to make the most exhaustive possible inventory of local studies of cinema history in France.

Although this inventory requires a regular update, it allows already to outline a typology of studies, of their authors and their motivations, of publication media, et cetera. As we will see, it turns out that a good part of these studies is physically almost inaccessible. The ultimate task, therefore, will be to put quality studies with very limited distribution at the disposal of historians. Digitisation and online publication are without doubt the best solution, but this requires adequate means.

Apart from some earlier works,<sup>2</sup> local studies of cinema began in 1966 with an article by René Prédal 'Les débuts du cinéma à Nice, de 1896 à 1906' published in *Provence historique*. Interest in ground cinema histories increased especially from the 1980s onward, and following the centenary celebration of the invention of cinema.

## A definition of local cinema histories

Local cinema histories are studies that are geographically restricted to a specific region within a country. The area the authors select can be a region (there are twenty-two regions in France), a department (there are ninety-six departments in France), a town, or possibly a specific movie theatre. Because of this large range of possible areas of study, I prefer to use the term 'local studies' rather than 'regional studies', which is too restrictive. Studies devoted to a region in the literal sense involve 17 per cent of the 272 references I have found up till now,<sup>3</sup> while 55 per cent concern towns.

The departments that are intermediary areas are selected by the authors less frequently (about 9 per cent), probably because they are only administrative divisions, and the cinemas only 5.5 per cent. We then still have to add about 13 per cent of general works on local historiography.

Cinema, like so many other businesses, has always been largely concentrated in the capital. At first, the main offices of film production companies were

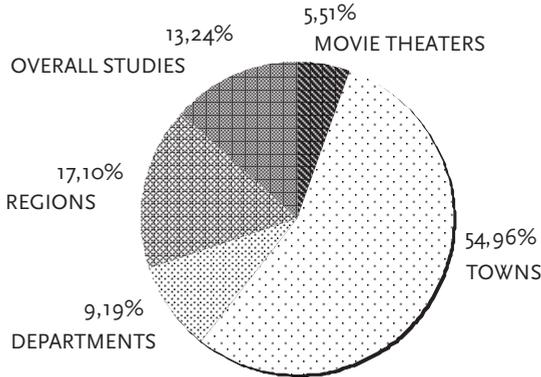


FIG. 1  
*Geographical extent  
of the studies*

set up in the main Parisian boulevards, and later on the Champs-Élysées. Most of the studios were built in Paris (like Gaumont studios) or in the immediate suburbs. Local studies devoted to the provinces therefore more often deal with the cinema theatres than with film production. And when we speak of the cinema theatres, we speak of the places of consumption of the film product.

We know that consumption aroused an increasing interest in the past decades on the part of the economists and sociologists. The Marxist influence, which emphasises production as the founding factor of social classes, may have contributed to the lesser amount of attention paid to consumption before. Despite the difficulties in finding reliable sources, historians moved this interest in consumption on the study of the past.

### Topics researched by local histories

The authors of local histories intend to include everything connected to cinema within their area in their research. In most cases their works deal with the cinemas or, generally speaking, the places where films have been screened. Exhibition is indeed the only branch of the cinema with which the audience has direct and frequent contact. Cinema exhibition has taken place in all the towns and villages, however small they are, if only on a temporary basis when travelling cinemas visited the town. The cinemas are familiar places whose living memory can still exhume the traces. Local studies provide descriptions of them, often accompanied by anecdotes and illustrations. Films that were screened and that are considered important are also mentioned. Sometimes some actors or actresses who were invited to special events are also named. Former exhibitors relate their accounts on occasion.

The second topic often written about by local historians deals with film shoots that took place in the area. The arrival of a film crew is always an exceptional event in the everyday life of a town, especially in small towns.

Celebrities who were born in the town or in the region (actors and actresses, directors, screenwriters) constitute the third topic and are often included in local histories. Some of these celebrities have been influenced by their place of birth so much that it seems to be a part of them. But others have built their careers elsewhere and kept no ties with it. So not all of them are worth mentioning.

Anyway, we must note that these three topics have no relationship with each other, and their inclusion in a single study is often more a matter of parochialism than of historical relevance.

The cinematic representation of a region makes up a fourth topic, but it does not seem to fit completely into the angle defined here. In my opinion, only films that were conceived and produced in the regions themselves should be taken into account. We must exclude the initiatives coming from the 'top', that is to say from Paris, which would concern the Parisian representation of a region rather than the expression of the region itself. The difficulty lies in the fact that many works mix these two aspects.

## Author profiles and motivations

It appears to be relatively easy to launch a local study as long as the subject is well circumscribed, at least geographically, and the majority of the sources are preserved locally. The presentation of the results apparently does not require a long exertion, descriptions and chronology being able to guide the hand of the budding historian. Many amateur historians, often elderly people who are members of a local history society, have undertaken this task. Their motivation often involves a sense of nostalgia for a past which is also their own. Indeed, the interest for the cinema theatres truly began only when a large number of them closed their doors. Many people experienced the sudden disappearance of these familiar elements in their daily landscape as a personal attack, as a wound. The study of the history of these cinemas, the transmission of their memory, seems therefore like a duty, a way of reacting to a great loss.

The students who prepare a paper, a DEA thesis (equivalent of an MA thesis), or even a dissertation make up another category of authors. Some of the most ambitious students tend to scorn subjects that seem to lack panache in their eyes. But others prefer well-circumscribed corpora which offer the best chances for them to carry their work through to a successful conclusion. Perhaps they think that local history, the *microstoria* of the Italian historians, represents an interesting approach to general history.

Confirmed academics, former owners of cinemas, impassioned collectors, municipal officials, journalists, members of liberal professions, and so on, make up other categories of authors.



Promotional car of the Athénée Cinéma in Lunel, Hérault (*RÊVE DE VALSE*, L. Berger, 1925) Source: Courtesy of Georges Loisel



The Familia Cinéma in Cambrai, Nord (*L'AIGLON*, Victor Tourjansky, 1931) Source: Courtesy of Georges Loisel

## Publication media

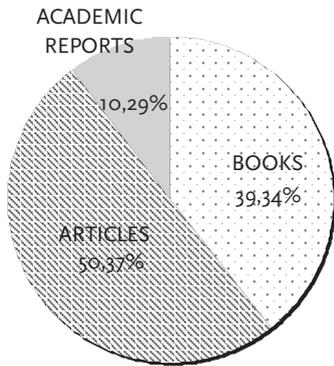


FIG. 2 Nature of the publications

One of the difficulties of taking into account regional studies has to do with the very limited access of a large number of publications. The books and booklets, which constitute nearly 40 per cent of the references, are often published by small local publishers with very limited means of distribution. They sometimes neglect the legal deposit and turn out to have disappeared when one seeks to contact them. Publication is often handled by municipalities, associations, even by the authors themselves, and none of them are qualified or equipped to ensure the distribution of their products. The articles (about 50 per cent) are generally printed in local periodicals that are very hard to buy or consult outside the region itself: bulletins of local history societies, municipal bulletins, regional newspapers.

As for the unpublished *DEA* and even theses reports, they all have a chance to stagnate in some obscure place where nobody will ever come to consult them. They are thought to make up about 10 per cent of the references, though this percentage is probably underestimated.

## Treatment of the subject

The great diversity of origins and motivation of the authors, the great diversity of nature, extent and quality of their work, make bibliographies of regional studies extremely disparate. Some studies are strictly descriptive and even come across as a catalogue of cinemas. Their authors did the work of documentarians rather than that of historians. Nevertheless, these studies are very useful as long as the facts are well established. Other works constitute in-depth studies, showing multiple approaches of the subject, setting up the results in their cultural, sociological and economical context, comparing them with those relating to other areas, et cetera. Many other aspects could be taken into account: for example the architecture of the cinemas, the situation and integration of them in the towns, the structure of the programmes and the course of the performances, the social constitution of the audience, the film reception, the place occupied by the cinema among the other forms of entertainment available locally and its relationships to other types of spectacle, the background of the showmen, the economy of the exhibition enterprises... In this connection we can quote Odile Gozillon-Fronsacq's book on *Cinéma et Alsace*, developed on the basis of her thesis.<sup>4</sup> The direct importance of Alsace for the general history, with the return of this region to France at the time of the First World War and its reabsorption by French language and culture, in which the cinema played an important role, gives the subject a nationwide significance.



*A fairground cinematograph on the Place des Fêtes in Nanterre (suburb of Paris) before the First World War. Source: Courtesy of Robert Cornaille*

### Defects and qualities of local histories

Local studies are often reproached for lacking rigour and not always providing references, which makes difficult a later critical examination of the reported facts. Certain authors' lack of sufficient knowledge of general film history is sometimes both glaring and detrimental, if not to the experienced historian who will easily notice these errors, then at least to the non-specialist reader or the journalist who might popularise them. The students who devote themselves to this type of research at least have the advantage of having acquired a certain methodology of research and writing.

Local studies are also reproached for a lack of problematisation, or an insufficient amount of it. They would present the reader with a multitude of factual events, more or less anecdotal in nature, leading to an impression of confusion. Otherwise drawing on either direct or transmitted memories can lead to errors if each stated fact is not checked carefully.<sup>5</sup>

The merit of these local histories, when they are not simple inventories, often lies in the impression of realism that they produce. The men and women

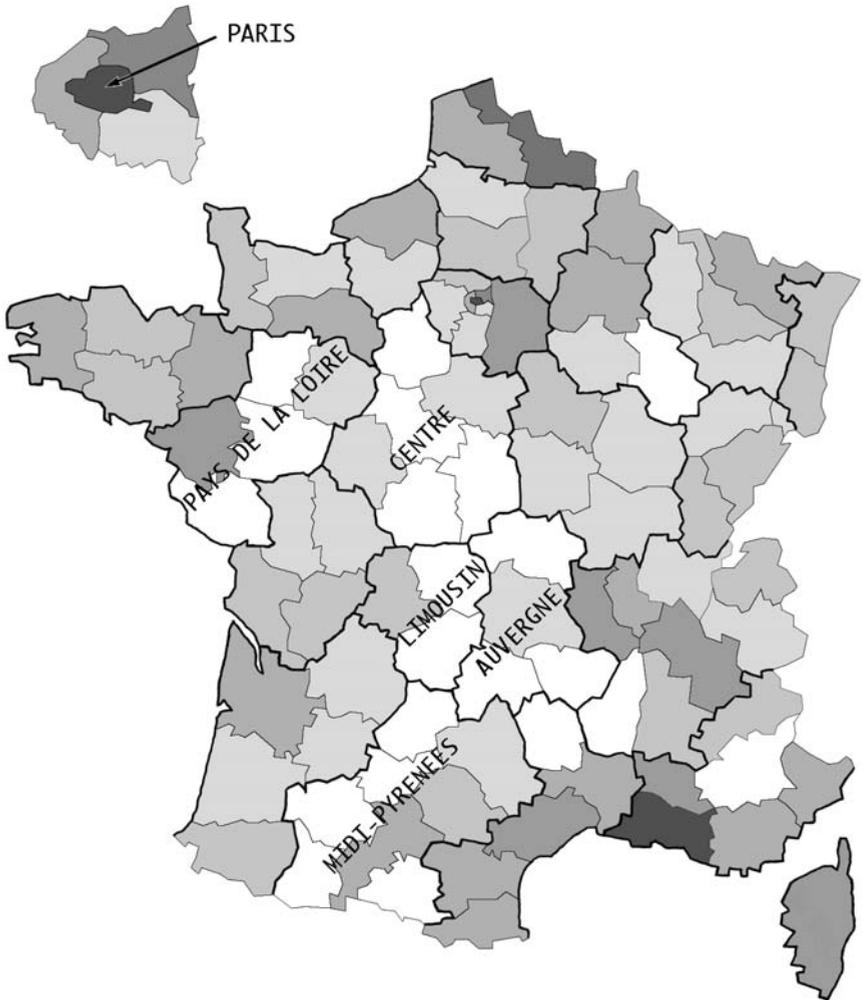
who are the actual consumers of film and those who place the cinematographic spectacle at their disposal are no longer mere statistics or simple categories: they acquire a face.

The other element of interest these studies hold – and it is not the least – is the hope for a revival of general film history. I shall return to this subject later, as it merits further attention.

### Coverage of the country

France is not completely covered by local cinema studies. The shadings of grey in the map below indicate the density of studies (even limited to a town or a movie theatre) carried out in the various departments of France. The regions

FIG. 3  
Coverage of France



that are mostly made up of departments where no studies were undertaken – supposing that my bibliography is in fact complete – are generally remote from any coast: Midi-Pyrénées, Limousin, Auvergne, Centre, Pays-de-la-Loire (the Vendée department is nevertheless an exception, as it borders the Atlantic coast).

The best documented departments are those of the Mediterranean coast (especially the Bouches-du-Rhône), Paris and some departments around the capital, the Nord and the departments of Lyon area (Rhône, Isère, Loire). This distribution is not a matter of chance and has numerous causes, the study of which would exceed the limits of this article.

### Functions of local histories

Local studies – I do not speak only about those which are devoted to the cinema – were appreciated by many as a new form of attention paid to the common man, not to people categorised and reduced to large groups by macrohistory, but to actual individuals in their various relationships to the group among which they evolve. In fact, it was a real evolution only to historians, ethnologists having always limited the basis of their study to restricted groups of individuals living in limited areas themselves.

However, everyone knows the Aristotelian principle: science can only be general in nature. The first question to be put is the following: must the interest of local studies be measured only with the yardstick of the contributions it can make to general history which would be able to extract the very substance from it on its own? For this extraction will inevitably result in a loss of information. Macrohistory seeks out regularities in order to establish standards and to extract laws. It is known that the dispersion of samples usually constitutes a Gaussian curve the tails of which consist of the bad pupils. These are regarded as irrelevant items, obeying unknown or more or less random micro-factors. The facts analyzed by macrohistory will thus undergo a smoothing over, and those which deviate too much from the 'standard' will not be taken into account by general histories. Unfortunately, these facts are sometimes the ugly ducklings that lead to future developments, and that will upset the status quo to later become the new standard. Let us take the example of the renting of films. When in 1904 the renting system appeared in France on the initiative of travelling film exhibitors like George Petit, it constituted an irregular situation, unworthy to be taken into account by macrohistory. Indeed most cinema studies do not mention this at all, and they attribute to Charles Pathé the initiative of renting out films three years later. Such facts should however grasp the attention of historians, because they enable us to better understand the appearance of the innovation by revealing its generative mechanisms.

Taking into account the dangers which macro-analysis represents with its irrepressible tendency to erase the margins, the microhistory should not be regarded exclusively as the humble servant of the general history, destined to vanish after the achievement of its work. It must remain a permanent pole of reference available to the historians in this constant to and fro movement between micro- and macrohistory, in these scale changes that constitute a basic part of the process of historiography. American ethnologist Clifford Geertz elegantly expressed this need:

‘Hopping between the whole conceived through the parts which bring it up to date and the parts conceived through the whole which justifies them, we seek to turn them, by a kind of intellectual perpetual motion locked into explanations of each other.’<sup>6</sup>

Microhistory was practised largely during the past centuries, in the form of monographs and biographies of key figures. This form of historiography was criticised by positivist historians in the nineteenth century. In the following century, historians turned more readily to ordinary people. In 1914, Maurrassian historian Jacques Valdour published his *Méthode concrète en science sociale*: a micro-sociological method based on a personal immersion of the researcher into the social milieu to study, in this case the working class.<sup>7</sup> Le Roy Ladurie himself produced microhistorical work in some of his writings, such as *Montaillou, village occitan de 1294 à 1324* (1975) or *Le carnaval du Romans de la chandeleur au mercredi des Cendres 1579-1580* (1979).<sup>8</sup> In the field of cinema, the *Histoire générale du cinéma* by George Sadoul, a title indicative of the macrohistorian intentions of its author, is however full of information concerning microhistory or local history.

Microhistory moved to the fore in the 1980s thanks to several Italian historians like Giovanni Levi (whose *Pouvoir au village* is now considered a classic), Carlo Ginzburg, and several others. However, I do not think that this movement had any influence on the authors of local histories about cinema, most of them probably not having been informed about the Italian works. This renewed interest for local histories was a reaction against *L’Ecole des Annales*<sup>9</sup> and the all-embracing systems that influenced a whole generation of historians, in the first place Structuralism and Marxism. Concerning the cinema, this phenomenon is relatively recent since it dates back, essentially, only forty years. Undoubtedly, local historiography is currently encouraged by the political ideology of Europe, which tends to privilege regional cultures and powers with the hardly dissimulated aim of weakening national identity. But for many historians, local history is initially a means of giving new life to history in general. It should not be an overcautious return to the lonely individual, the church tower and the village fairground, at a time of doubt about the relevance of science, the reality of progress and the value of ideologies. As Jacques Revel wrote in his foreword for *Le Pouvoir au village*,



The Tivoli Cinéma in Reims, Marne (Charlot in LE PÈLERIN, 1923) Source: Courtesy of Georges Loisel

[the burst of history] can also express the fact that historians, like other experts of the social sciences, temporarily limit their ambitions to more restricted and more controllable topics. (...) The ambitions are undoubtedly reduced, and the intentions have become more modest, for the immediate future at least. But this time of apparent withdrawal could also be that of rebuilding. Microhistory must be understood as an attempt in this direction.<sup>10</sup>

In fact, many historians sought at various times ‘to observe each ant while never forgetting the anthill’, as expressed by Lewis B. Namier,<sup>11</sup> an English historian from the early twentieth century. The operation is extremely tricky if one wants to avoid the simple joining of isolated facts that would only be used ‘to illustrate’ a general history elaborated independently of them. Paul Ricœur pointed out that ‘in changing scale, we do not see the same things larger or smaller (...) We see different things’. This author added that ‘microhistory and macrohistory have a distinct relevance, and that the passage from one to the other is a nodal epistemological problem which remains unsolved’.<sup>12</sup>

Whereas the passage from local to general history, implying a change of scale, remains an empirical process that is difficult to theorise, there is another way of considering the relationship between local history and general history. Edgar Morin emphasised that ‘society as a whole, *via* its culture, is present in the mind of each individual’, and he compared this phenomenon to the hologram ‘which is an image of which each point contains almost all the information about the represented object’.<sup>13</sup> Physics and biology offer other examples of this phenomenon, which first of all seems to contradict common sense. Thus, when we zoom in on a Mandelbrot fractal, we find the same drawing, the same pattern, repeated indefinitely. In biology, any cell has in its DNA the information concerning the whole of the individual. In other words: if the part is contained within the whole, then the whole is also contained within the part. Local history can indeed offer a perception of general history. But this vision is not interchangeable: it can substitute completely neither that which is produced by another local history nor by general history. It is not so much a problem of scale, in this case, as it is a problem of perspective: each local history offers its own perspective, its own vision of general history.

Does local history, or ‘microhistory’, provide the missing parts of a huge puzzle, or does it offer multiple varied images of general history? As in the case of the light which is explained by two different theories (corpuscular and undulatory theory), it might very well be the case that these two hypotheses, far from excluding each other, work together towards a better understanding of the complex mechanism involved in the development of history.

In any case, it is necessary to support and take into account as many high-quality local histories as possible, and to make them accessible to the community of historians.

\* I am very grateful to Dan Hassler-Forest and to Wanda Strauven for having reviewed my English text.

1 *Histoire du cinéma français* by Maurice Bessy and Raymond Chirat (7 volumes) is in fact, as its subtitle indicates, an 'Encyclopédie des films', i.e. a catalogue of French films, and not a work of cinema history in the usual sense.

2 In particular the series of articles 'Historique du cinéma à Marseille', published in 1913-1914 by *L'Officiel de la Fédération cinématographique du Midi de la France*; Albert Hec's articles 'Le cinéma sur les boulevards', published in 1914 in *Ciné-Journal* (n° 292, 28 May 1914; n° 294, 11 April 1914; n° 296, 25 April 1914; n° 297, 2 May 1914; n° 299, 16 May 1914; n° 302, 6 June 1914; n° 305, 27 June 1914); the articles on the architecture of such or such movie theatres published from the years 1928-1930 in architecture journals; the article by Françoise Fleury 'Les cinémas parisiens, un aspect de la vie urbaine' (*Urbanisme et Habitation, La Vie urbaine*, n° 21, janvier-mars 1953); the article by Herry Caouissin about Brittany, 'L'âme et le visage d'un peuple par le cinéma' (*Cahiers d'histoire et de folklore*, n° 2, January 1956, p. 54-62); Jacques Deslandes's *Le boulevard du cinéma à l'époque de Georges Méliès* (Paris 1963); and the article by Aimé Coulandon on the beginnings of the cinema in Clermont-Ferrand (*Vieux-Clermont*, n° 10, January-February-March 1962, p. 8-10).

3 April 2006.

4 O. Gozillon-Fronsacq, *Cinéma et Alsace. Stratégies cinématographiques 1896-1939*, Paris 2003.

5 Comparing memory reports and history, Pierre Nora very precisely writes: 'The memory is put up only with the details which consolidate it; it nourishes recollections which are vague, telescoping, global or wandering, particular or symbolic, sensitive to all the transfers, screens, censures or projections' (*Les lieux de mémoire, 1. – La République*, Paris 1984, p. xix). My translation.

6 C. Geertz, *Savoir local, savoir global. Les lieux du savoir*, Paris 1986. My translation.

7 J. Valdour, *La méthode concrète en science sociale*, Lille/Paris 1914. Between the wars, this author published several books on the working class. If we believe him, he took a job as a workman in companies in order to approach the workmen more closely and to share their living conditions. Unfortunately, the prejudices of this author, in particular his true anticommunist paranoia, completely dominates his work of which it decreases the credibility.

8 In the introduction to *Le carnaval du Romans de la chandeleur au mercredi des Cendres 1579-1580* (Paris 1979, p. 9), Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie writes: 'For a long time I fancied writing the history of a small town, Romans for example in Dauphiné – a town which I haunt with pleasure and a department of which I love the inhabitants and the landscapes. Seven or eight centuries, or even more, of local, social, economic, cultural, municipal life. Abounding archives... On second thoughts, the subject appeared quite vast to me. It exceeded the forces of the monographic researcher that I try to be at the moment. Everything considered, I chose to describe only fifteen days of Romans history. Two short weeks. But what kind of weeks! Those of Romans Carnival, in February 1580, during which the participants of the two sides dressed up and then killed each other.' My translation.

9 Named in reference to the journal *Les Annales d'histoire économique et sociale* founded in 1929 by Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre.

10 J. Revel, *Le Pouvoir au village*, Paris 1989, p. ix. My translation.

11 Cited by Sabina Loriga, 'La biographie comme problème', in: J. Revel (red.), *Jeux d'échelles. La micro-analyse à l'expérience*, Paris 1996, p. 225. This collective work is one of the very rare books entirely devoted to microhistory (or more largely to micro-analysis), most of the 'microhistorians' having rather acted as practising experts than theorists.

12 P. Ricoeur, *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, Paris 2000, p. 270, p. 276 (note 65). My translation.

13 E. Morin, *La méthode 5. L'humanité de l'humanité. L'identité humaine*, Paris 2001, p. 282. My translation.