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Projecting *le Temps des Loisirs*: Cycling and Working-Class Identity in French Cinema of the 1930s

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Abstract

This article interprets images of bicycles in two films – *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange* (Jean Renoir, 1936) and *Le Jour se lève* (Marcel Carné, 1939) – whose directors each turned their cameras to the conflicting ideologies that fractured France over the course of the 1930s.

Locating the practice of cycling within its contemporary economic, political and sociological contexts, this analysis proposes that Renoir and Carné’s respective portrayals of cycling chart evolutions in French national identity and express French society’s expectations of the future during the rise and precipitous fall of the Front populaire during the turbulent years preceding the outbreak of the Second World War. Particular attention is lent to the relationship between cycling and concerns raised by Léon Blum’s government, including industrialism, enterprise, health and *le loisir*.

Keywords: bicycle; Front populaire; poetic realism; economy; working-class

‘[L]e vélo occupe une place privilégiée comparable à celle
qu’il occupe dans la vie et le coeur des Français.’¹

– Françoise Couquet

Introduction: cinema, cycling and the Front populaire

In an insightful study of sport in cinema, Seán Crosson writes that sporting activities exemplify broader cultural values, and thus provide ‘a crucial source of personal, communal,

¹ Françoise Couquet, ‘Le Clou du film: la bicyclette dans le cinéma français des années trente à soixante’, *French Cultural Studies* 4.10 (1993), p. 51. ‘[T]he bicycle occupies a privileged place comparable with the one it occupies in the lives and hearts of the French’.

national and occasionally international identification'.² Crosson further notes that '[t]he attraction of sport [...] for filmmakers is immediately apparent as one of the most popular cultural practices, in all its various forms, in everyday life across the world'.³ Crosson's comments are particularly pertinent in the case of cycling in 1930s France, where cycling became an increasingly popular spectacle as well as a crucial vehicle of transport and leisure in daily life. Furthermore, this surge in popular interest in cycling, as this article aims to demonstrate, was reflected in two canonised classics produced during what is now considered the Golden Age of French cinema. Such a study is particularly important because the image of the bicycle immediately evokes memories of Vittorio de Sica's neorealist classic, *Bicycle Thieves* (1948), whereas critical studies, with the exception of Couquet's enlightening survey of cycling in French cinema from the 1930s to the 1960s, have largely neglected its importance to the French pre-war realist works that influenced Italian films of the post-war period. How the image of cycling in French cinema of the 1930s charts evolutions in French national identity and its expectations of the future during the rise and precipitous fall of the Front populaire as the Second World War became inevitable therefore represents the core concern of this article.

Before analysing Jean Renoir's *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange* (1936) and Marcel Carné's *Le Jour se lève* (1939), which constitute this article's primary case-studies, the films in question, it is worth outlining the historical context underlying cinema of this period. In the wake of the 6 February 1934 riots, which saw extreme right-wing factions taking to Place de la Concorde, the French Radicals, Socialists and Communists coordinated a coalition and established a government majority in the elections of 26 April and 3 May 1936, headed by France's first Jewish Prime Minister, Léon Blum. United, the front deigned to present a united league that was capable of contending with the reactionary forces emerging across Europe, notably in France itself, which was marked by the pressure of burgeoning economic issues and the prominence of communism as a potential collective European project, each of which stoked right-wing groups across the country and aggravated the longstanding disparity between the visions proposed by left and right in France. However, Blum's government was already struggling to contend with the splintered nation months after the elections. The coalition expired after little over a year, lasting from 4 June 1936 until 23 June 1937, and although Blum returned to power briefly in March 1938, his notorious refusal to intervene in the

² Seán Crosson: *Sport and Film*. New York: Routledge, 2013, p. 2.

³ Crosson, *Sport and Film*, p. 12.

Spanish Civil War, which had broken out on 18 June 1936 (less than two months after Blum's initial rise to power), catalysed the dissolution of the coalition.

If we persist in dwelling nostalgically on memories of the Front populaire, it fair to claim that this is partly because of our fascination with the very possibility that a nation could believe in what Keith Reader dubs 'the imaginary resolution of political contradictions'.⁴ However, with the benefit of hindsight, it is far too simple to criticise the Front populaire for failing to crystallise the hopes and expectations of a nation drifting inexorably towards its darkest years. In fact, Blum's relatively short stint as Prime Minister resulted in a series of crucial reforms for the working classes. The Matignon Accords, signed on 7 June 1936 in the wake of a massive general strike, granted workers the legal right to strike, full entitlement to trade union organisation, and a general wage increase. Other major developments ensued including the introduction of *congés payés* (paid holidays), the 40-hour working week, and the right to collective bargaining, among other benefits. By granting workers a higher rate of pay and liberating their time, these legal reforms lent new scope to the relationship between social, cultural and economic spheres in France, and the Front populaire actively emphasised the importance of directing these *congés payés* towards national development in ways that have been extensively documented by Pascal Ory, Dudley Andrew, and Steven Ungar among others.⁵

Two facets of French culture that benefitted most fruitfully from the Front populaire's policies were sport and film. French sport had already been promoted heavily in post-war society by Henri Paté, who defended the value of *éducation physique* as Under-secretary of State at the Ministry of Education and Arts from 1928 to 1932.⁶ The 1930s represented a watershed in the promotion of sport, thanks largely to the Front populaire's emphasis on redistributing time towards what Benigno Casérès dubs France's *redressement moral et physique* ('ethical and physical renewal').⁷ Discussing the attention devoted by Blum's minister, Léo Lagrange, to sport, Casérès writes that the Front populaire's sponsorship of sporting activities whose prohibitive costs had formerly precluded working-class participation was particularly intended to combat widespread alcoholism and tuberculosis at a

⁴ Keith Reader: 'Renoir's Popular Front Films in Context'. In: Ginette Vincendeau and Keith Reader (eds.): *La Vie est à nous! French Cinema of the Popular Front 1935-1938*. London: BFI, 1986, p. 40.

⁵ Dudley Andrew and Steven Ungar: *Popular Front Paris and the Poetics of Culture*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005; Pascal Ory, *La belle illusion: Culture et politique sous le signe du Front Populaire*. Paris: CNRS, 2016.

⁶ Hugh Dauncey: *French Cycling: A Social and Cultural History*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2012, p. 104.

⁷ Benigno Cacérès: *Allons au-devant de la vie: la naissance du temps des loisirs en 1936*. Paris: F. Maspero, 1981, p.77.

time when, for the majority of French citizens, sport was a popular spectacle rather than a daily practice.⁸ This outlook was echoed by Blum when, on trial in March 1942 by the collaborationist Vichy government, he declared: ‘On s’est rendu compte que le loisir n’était pas la paresse, que le loisir et le repos après le travail sont aussi comme une réconciliation avec la vie naturelle dont le travailleur est trop souvent séparé et frustré’.⁹

Chief among the various sporting and leisure activities promoted by the Front populaire was cycling. Although the Tour de France had ensured the centrality of the cycling as a lynchpin of French culture since 1903, the increasingly affordable price of bicycles and the newfound availability of time to the working classes instigated a huge leap in ownership (6,968,000 in 1934 to 7,500,000 in 1936).¹⁰ This shift in ownership iconographically fixed the bicycle, in Dauncey’s analysis, as ‘a symbol of working-class freedom’, and transformed the tandem into ‘[t]he iconic image of the Popular Front’s invention of *congés payés* [...], symbol of the recreational emancipation of the working class’.¹¹ As Philip Dine observes in his analysis of the relationship between cycling and industrial processes, ‘[c]ycling’s rhythms and values would [...] be informed by those of the harsh working world from which it had emerged’, and the Tour de France, even today, is ‘readily assimilated to the grinding industrial labour that so many participants were historically seeking to avoid’.¹² The bicycle was doubly significant as a symbol of working-class liberation since, as Gaboriau notes, it ‘symbolisait le progrès bourgeois, l’aisance sociale’¹³ during the 19th century before eventually entering into ownership of the class that produced them, thus becoming, ‘l’ami de l’homme, le premier moyen de locomotion utile, qui éloigne l’ouvrier de l’usine, rapproche le paysan de la ville et ouvre l’horizon des vacances et des congés payés’.¹⁴ A key contributor to the popularisation of cycling was the Fédération Sportive et Gymnique du Travail. The FSGT evolved from l’Union sportive du parti socialiste, which had been established in 1907 with the goal ‘[de] donner aux jeunes gens des distractions saines et agréables, ce qui est un palliative à

⁸ Cacérés, *Allons au-devant de la vie*, p. 77.

⁹ Cacérés, *Allons au-devant de la vie*, p. 34: ‘We realised that leisure and laziness were not the same thing, that leisure and rest after work also serve as a reconciliation with natural life, from which workers are separated and isolated far too often.’

¹⁰ Paul Gerbod: ‘La “petite reine” en France du Second Empire aux années 30’, *L’Information historique*, 48 (1986), p. 77.

¹¹ Dauncey, *French Cycling*, p. 108, p. 8.

¹² Philip Dine: *Sport and Identity in France: Practices, Locations, Representations*. Oxford: Peter Lang, 2012, p. 85, p. 97.

¹³ Philippe Gaboriau: *Le Tour de France et le vélo: Histoire sociale d’une épopée contemporaine*. Paris: L’Harmattan, 1995, p. 26: ‘symbolised bourgeois progress and social affluence’.

¹⁴ Gaboriau, *Le Tour de France et le vélo*, p. 26: ‘every man’s friend, the first useful means of transport that distances workers from factories, draws the country-dwellers to the city and broadens the horizon of vacations and paid holidays.’

l'alcoolisme et aux mauvaises fréquentations'.¹⁵ By 1935, the organisation headed 732 clubs nationwide and 42,706 members, and by 1939, it was in charge of 1,769 clubs and 103420 members.¹⁶

As in the case of popular sports, the cinema was recognised by the Front populaire as an essential social cohesive and a keystone in French cultural production. While Blum's coalition was rising to power, the French studio-system was, as Dudley Andrew notes, 'unruly, unregulated and utterly speculative', rationalised by independent producers operating in a market in which studios had either radically altered their modes of production or, like one-time powerhouses Pathé-Natan and Gaumont, were on the brink of bankruptcy.¹⁷ Furthermore, production fell from upward of 150 films per year in 1931–1933 to an average of 115 films per year between 1935 and 1938. Within this anarchic system, the Front populaire was determined to mobilise cinema as a critical political instrument and as a prestigious expression of national heritage. The cultural reach of the Front populaire motivated film production through left-wing journals such as *Ciné-Liberté*, *Esprit* and *Le Travailleur du film*. Prize-giving was also recognised a crucial opportunity to promote a culturally progressive cinema. The most famous of these prix Louis Delluc, which was established by a group of predominantly left-wing journalists and writers unofficially associated with the Front populaire 'pour opposer au Grand Prix du Cinéma, académique et bien-pensant, un jugement exempt de conformisme artistique, patriotique et moral.'¹⁸ Best remembered among the Front populaire's attempts to elevate the reputation, efficiency and political utility of French film production is Ciné-Liberté. Originally known as the Alliance du Cinéma Indépendant (ACI) and operating within the Parti communiste français's Association des Écrivains et Artistes Révolutionnaires (AEAR), Ciné-Liberté offered an alternative independent mode of production and distribution to the mainstream capitalist film industry whilst promoting the elimination of censorship and the union of filmmakers and spectators. *La Vie est à nous* (multiple directors, 1936), the organisation's first major feature,¹⁹ promoted the Front populaire in the run up to the impending May-June 1936

¹⁵ '[Of] giving young people healthy and pleasurable pastimes, which alleviate alcoholism and unsavoury outings'.

¹⁶ Gaboriau, *Le Tour de France et le vélo*, p. 79–80.

¹⁷ Dudley Andrew: *Mists of Regret: Culture and Sensibility in Classic French Film*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995, p. 104.

¹⁸ Ory, *La belle illusion*, p. 426: 'to stand up against the academic and orthodox Grand Prix du Cinéma with a judgment devoid of artistic and moral conformity'.

¹⁹ Jonathan Buchsbaum: *Cinema Engagé: Film in the Popular Front*. Urbana: Illinois University Press, 1988, p. 3–4. For further information, see Richard Abel, *French Film Theory and Criticism: A History/anthology, 1907-1939, Volume 2: 1929-1939*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988, p. 145–58. For a comprehensive

elections and the company unsurprisingly placed a special emphasis on propagandist documentaries such as *Les Grèves de juin* (Pierre Lamarre, 1936) and *Visages de France* (André Vigneau, 1938). Ciné-Liberté subsequently became a trade union group under the influence of the Confédération Générale du Travail (then France's foremost trade union) and produced Renoir's *La Marseillaise* (1938), a large-scale retelling of the French Revolution, which was partly funded through a popular subscription programme. By then, the coherence of the Front populaire's shared vision was already disintegrating, and the funding scheme was ultimately aborted in favour of completing the film, in Renoir's words, as 'an absolutely normal enterprise'.²⁰

Colin Crisp rightly argues that films of this period 'are good not *despite* being borne of the classic production system, but rather because of it, [and] that their quality and diversity were in fact a logical outcome of that system'. In other words, the very *laissez-faire* mode of production that problematised any attempt to establish financially stable studios in France exposed celluloid to various cultural, economic and political determinants, ensuring that 'class conflicts and social distress of the age could be explored at a time when such social realism was anathema elsewhere'.²¹ More specifically, this turbulent liberty gave free rein to filmmakers eager to craft features that anticipated, reflected and, later, lamented the optimism characterised by the rise of the Front populaire. With this in mind, the remainder of this article proposes a reading of *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange* and *Le Jour se lève*, whose directors each turned their cameras to the competing ideologies that fractured the nation over the course of the 1930s and who, like the chosen films, have become synonymous with cinema of this period.

The first, Renoir, had previously helmed projects ranging from propaganda (*Le Bled*, 1929) to historical set-pieces (*Le Tournoi*, 1928) and prestigious adaptations (*Nana*, 1926) and esoteric experimental features (*La Fille de l'eau*, 1925). Following *Toni* (1935), a proto-neorealist portrait of Italian and Spanish working-class immigrants living in Provence, Renoir directed *Lange*. Although *Toni* had exemplified Renoir's sympathy for the proletariat, *Lange* projected this concern to a wider audience, and cemented his unofficial affiliation with the French Left. This relationship would later be ratified by his assistance in the production of *La Vie est à nous*, his direction of *La Marseillaise*, his regular contributions to *Ce Soir*, a

analysis of the establishment and dissolution of Ciné-Liberté, see Pascal Ory: De 'Cine-Liberte' à *La Marseillaise*: Espoirs et limites d'un cinéma libéré (1936-1938). In: *Le Mouvement Social* 91 (1975), p. 153-75.

²⁰ Alexander Sesonske: *Jean Renoir, the French Films, 1924-1939*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980, p. 323-25.

²¹ Colin Crisp: *The Classic French Cinema, 1930-1960*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993, p. xii.

communist newspaper, from 4 March 1937 to 7 October 1938,²² and his role as editor of *Ciné-Liberté*, a short-lived polemical journal that lent a voice to the production company of the same name.²³ *Lange* was released before the election of the Front populaire and projects utopic ideas that the Front populaire was ultimately helpless to implement. However, it was planned and directed by Renoir as the Front populaire was preparing its common policy and election campaign, and the ideas that it projects regarding cycling remain a valuable reflection of Front populaire culture. As Christopher Faulkner notes, by going beyond the policies proposed by the alliance of Socialists, Radicals and Communists, *Lange* becomes ‘one of those films that functions as a future memory’ and valuably operates as ‘a mirror held up to a measure of desire circa 1936’.²⁴

The second director, Marcel Carné, emerged as a major filmmaker after the threat of war had become an inevitable fact. Carné worked as a critic before beginning his filmmaking career with *Nogent, El Dorado du dimanche* (1929) and, more notably, as assistant director to Jacques Feyder from 1929 to 1935. *Jenny* (1936) inaugurated a famous collaboration between Carné and screenwriter-poet Jacques Prévert, which lasted until 1946, and saw the production of foreboding classics including *Le Quai des brumes* (1938) and *Le Jour se lève*. Carné’s studio-bound recreations of French life intimately engaged with the everyday lives of the working classes in ways that were famously foreshadowed by his 1933 article, ‘Quand le cinéma descendra-t-il dans la rue?’ (‘When will the cinema go down into the streets?’):

Populisme, direz-vous. Et après? Le mot, pas plus que la chose, ne nous effraie. Décire la vie simple des petites gens, rendre l’atmosphère d’humanité laborieuse qu’est la leur, cela ne vaut-il pas mieux que de reconstituer l’ambiance troublé et surchauffée des dancings, de la noblesse irréaliste des boîtes de nuit, dont le cinéma jusqu’alors, a fait si abondamment son profit!²⁵

Although Carné shared Renoir’s class concerns, he did not publicly commit himself to any national party during this period, and never reportedly subscribed to the wave of enthusiasm

²² Michel Marie: ‘Renoir and the French Communist Party’. In: Alastair Phillips and Ginette Vincendeau (eds.): *A Companion to Jean Renoir*. London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013, p. 331.

²³ For a critical analysis of Renoir’s filmmaking activities *engagement politique* during the 1930s, see: Barry Nevin: ‘“Prochainement: Arizona Jim contre Cagoulard”: framing the future of the Front populaire in Jean Renoir’s *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange* (1936)’. In: *Studies in French Cinema* (forthcoming 2017).

²⁴ Christopher Faulkner: ‘Paris, Arizona; or the Redemption of Difference: Jean Renoir’s *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange*’. In: Susan Hayward and Ginette Vincendeau (eds.): *French Film: Texts and Contexts*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge, 2002, p. 27.

²⁵ Marcel Carné, ‘Quand le cinéma descendra-t-il dans la rue?’ 1933. In Philippe Morisson (ed.): *Marcel Carné, ciné-reporter (1929–1934)*. Grandvilliers: La Tour Verte, 2016, p. 100. ‘Populism, you say. And after that? Neither the word nor the thing itself scares us. To describe the simple life of humble people, to portray the atmosphere of hard-working humanity that is theirs. Isn’t that better than reconstructing the murky and overexcited ambience of dance-halls, of the unreal greatness of nightclubs, from which the cinema has so abundantly profited?’

recollected by Renoir in *Ma vie et mes films*. On the contrary, Carné remarks in his autobiography that as early as 1934, ‘le fascisme était “à nos portes”’.²⁶ This sombreness informs Carné’s work of this period, which Jonathan Driskell describes as a series of ‘dark and fatalistic, yet lyrical and stylised accounts of working-class lives’, and *Le Jour se lève* remains a startling *cri de coeur* from a politically gridlocked France.²⁷

Although debates regarding the paternity of *Lange* and *Le Jour se lève* are beyond the scope of this article, it is worth noting that both films were scripted, at least in part, by Prévert (he served as co-writer with Renoir on *Lange*), whose poems (such ‘Rue Stevenson’ and ‘Petite tête sans cervelle’) also occasionally feature descriptions of bicycles. Furthermore, the two films share a variety of dramatic, thematic and formal attributes. Both scripts recount a series of events leading to a pivotal act of murder and both are structured through extended flashbacks (one in *Lange* and three in *Le Jour se lève*). Both films also intimately engage with working-class communities and interrogate the very concept of community in relation to the workplace. Each also addresses the issue of personal health and its relationship with working conditions. Most interestingly, each of these films forges connections between all of these issues through the image of leisure, specifically the bicycle. In doing so, each of these films provides complex commentaries on the hopes and dreams inspired by the rise of the French Left as well as the risks threatening the Front populaire’s policies and, in the case of *Le Jour se lève*, the debris of the coalition’s optimistic agenda.

***Le Crime de Monsieur Lange* (1936): ‘une reconciliation avec la vie naturelle’**

Lange’s role in fortifying Renoir’s relationship with working-class audiences and popularising his sympathy towards their private and professional grievances is immediately evident in a basic synopsis. The film, set in an area recognised by Reader as the Marais district of Paris,²⁸ recounts the efforts of the eponymous protagonist (René Lefèvre) and his fellow employees at a publication house to establish a socialist cooperative following the apparent death of their exploitative boss, Batala (Jules Berry). Aided by the workers of the adjoining *blanchisserie* owned by Valentine (Florelle) and Meunier *fils* (Henri Guisol), an enthusiastic capitalist backer, the community markets *Lange*’s *Arizona Jim* comics. At the peak of the cooperative’s financial success, Batala returns unscathed but is shot by *Lange*.

²⁶ Marcel Carné: *Ma vie à belles dents*, Paris: L’Archipel, p. 54: ‘fascism was “at our door”’.

²⁷ Jonathan Driskell: *Marcel Carné*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012, p. 1.

²⁸ Keith Reader: ‘The Circular Ruins? Frontiers, Exile and the Nation in Jean Renoir’s *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange*’. In: *French Studies* 54.3 (2000), p. 289.

Aided by Valentine, Lange is escorted across the Belgian border by a group of men who deem the murder a necessary one.

Bicycles are ubiquitous, featuring in all of the film's key narrative settings: as Lange and Valentine are escorted by Meunier through the countryside to the Café-hôtel de la frontière during the film's opening scenes, a policeman cycles slowly towards them; bicycle wheels are suspended on the walls of the room where Lange rests, instantly underscoring the working-class relationships that populate the café in which Valentine is about to recount her story; a similar approach to *mise en scène* informs the design of the courtyard on which most of the narrative centres, where a bicycle-repair shop is located opposite the entrance to *Les Éditions Batala* (see figs. 1–3).²⁹ No character in the film personifies the contemporary popular enthusiasm for cycling more closely than Charles (Maurice Baquet), the son of the concierge of *Les Éditions Batala*. Charles works as a delivery-boy for Batala's company and the walls of his bedroom testify to a far more personal interest in cycling (see fig. 4). A poster on the right-hand side of his wall contains photos of French track stars of the early 1930s while another poster situated on the left-hand side of the wall reading '6 jours – Départ: 4 avril, Arrivée: 10 avril' ('6 days – Departure: 4 April, Arrival: 10 April') advertises the 'Six Jours de Paris' track race of 1933, which was held in the Vélodrome d'hiver, located on Rue Nélaton in Paris.³⁰ The six-day non-stop races were introduced by Henri Desgrange in 1913 and, although interrupted by the Great War, were reestablished in 1921. In Dauncey's analysis, the event enhanced the development of sport in general as a mass culture in France, where it 'exemplified the sport and popular culture of the inter-war years'.³¹ By extension, each poster recalls Gaboriau's theorisation of the bicycle as 'objet ludique qui ouvre l'espace des rêves sportifs, des exploits des champions du Tour de France'.³² Interestingly, this association is mobilised across a number of scenes to comment on hopes and expectations regarding the community, enterprise and health in contemporary France.

²⁹ All screenshots from *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange* have been taken from the 2004 Studiocanal release. All screenshots from *Le Jour se lève* have been taken from the 2007 Studiocanal release.

³⁰ I would like to express my gratitude to Hugh Dauncey, who kindly clarified the contents of these posters.

³¹ Dauncey, *French Cycling*, p. 115. For an insightful analysis of cultural representations of the 'Vél' d'Hiv' during the 1920s, see: Thomas Bauer and Tony Froissart, "'Vél' d'Hiv'" Six-day Race: The Spirit of Paris during the Twenties'. In: *Sport in History* 37.1 (2017), p. 76–94.

³² Gaboriau, *Le Tour de France et le vélo*, p. 136–37: 'a recreational object that opens the space of sporting dreams and of the exploits of the Tour de France's champions.'



Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

From the outset, the narrative emphasises the bicycle's importance as a means of separating oneself from the workplace and establishing Blum's vision of 'une reconciliation avec la vie naturelle'. We are first introduced to Charles as he exits the main door of *Les Éditions Batale*. As he walks by the facade of the building, we can see that his window is completely obscured by a large placard advertising the publishing house's latest titles. As he emerges with his bicycle, he declares to his father 'quand tu avais mon âge, tu ne dormais pas comme ça dans une cage à mouches.'³³ Apart from providing a transparent commentary on Batale's influence that echoes his other employees' manifest dissatisfaction with working conditions and lack of pay, Charles's remark underscores the contrast between the social oppression imposed by Batale and the liberating mobility that the bicycle offers to the very stratum that Batale subjugates. Indeed, the geographic mobility offered by the bicycle emphasises Charles's that the power of the imagination does not constitute the only recourse of the working classes, even if it is the one that Lange, the eponymous comic-book writer, has chosen.

³³ 'When you were my age, you didn't sleep in a flycage.'

Charles is later injured on the streets after becoming lodged between two lorries while cycling. His recovery forms the focus of two key subsequent sequences that provide a commentary on issues pertaining to enterprise, health and community, and how a productive relationship between all three is forged through cycling. The first of these occurs after Batala's apparent death in a train accident as Charles remains entrapped within his room, his window obscured by a gigantic advertisement publicising Batala's latest publication. Equipped with a set of tools, Lange begins removing nails pinning the advert to Charles's window-frame, gleefully remarking 'le soleil, c'est la santé'.³⁴ After Lange begins to remove the panel, the camera cranes upwards diagonally, revealing groups of workers leaning out of the first-floor windows of *Les Éditions Batala*, who all watch Lange. Tracking left, the camera reveals another group of workers looking out of a window. The camera then cranes downwards as Meunier *fils* prevents Charles's father from interfering with Lange's efforts. More and more workers gather at the window, cheering Lange on. The camera's point of view switches to the interior of Charles's room, facing the window as the billboard is removed, opening his quarters to the physical space of the courtyard and allowing light to flood the room (see fig. 5). This shot frames not only the ratification of solidarity amongst the workers. The framing of interior and exterior space, captured through Renoir's signature staging of events in depth, testifies to the Front populaire's own emphasis on granting the working classes the opportunity to retreat to natural surroundings.



Fig. 5



Fig. 6

The second scene in question unfolds following the decision to market *Arizona Jim* comics to the general public. The camera, travelling backward, slowly tilts downward from the Arch de Triomphe on Place de l'Étoile to frame Charles as he rides his bicycle in front of the

³⁴ 'Sunshine means health.'

monument for the first time since his accident (see fig. 6). The juxtaposition of Charles with the Arc de Triomphe forms a commentary on the relationship between health, community, leisure, and enterprise, and on the disparity between the principles guiding the businesses respectively operated by Batala and the cooperative. Batala's corrupt business was founded on extortion of capital from his peers, empty promises of artistic liberty to employees such as Lange, and sexual and economic exploitation of women including (but not limited to) his secretary, Édith (Sylvia Bataille). Furthermore, realising the futility of attempting to preserve his crumbling business, he abandons it without warning his employees. An inquest into Batala's accounts led by his workers following his apparent death reveals that, despite his elaborate sequence of exploits, *Les Éditions Batala* remains hopelessly in debt. Conversely, the cooperative's participants include the creator *Arizona Jim* (Lange himself), the laundrettes and Batala's former employees. Its ranks also include Meunier *fils*, the son of one of Batala's creditors, who not only provides a benevolent counterpoint to Batala's avaricious capitalist regime, but also provides a refreshingly positive image of capitalist investment in art in the way of the scandals and financial mismanagement that had betrayed the popular classes and resulted in the bankruptcy of film powerhouses Pathé-Natan and Gaumont-Franco-Film-Aubert (in 1934 and 1936 respectively).

This image of Charles cycling revolution represented by mutual benefits created through bicycle-ownership and the working-class cooperative. Furthermore, this shot illustrates how this fruitful alliance of interests could productively increase the circulation of popular culture among all classes in the heart of Paris, recalling Gaboriau's observation that *le loisir* steadily infiltrated not only French culture but also French values when industrial products – not least the bicycle – finally entered into the ownership of the class that produced them.³⁵

Within this shot, the Arc de Triomphe serves as what Pierre Nora terms a *lieu de mémoire*, a site 'where memory crystallizes and secretes itself'³⁶ through a particular landmark's material, symbolic, and functional presence. The arch was originally constructed in honour of the people who fought and died for the country during the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars. Crucially, in 1920, it also became host to the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, an eternal flame that commemorates the unidentified dead soldiers of the war. Renoir himself had fought in the war within the cavalry and, after sustaining wounds, in a reconnaissance squadron. In his autobiography, he writes that historians 'pourront diviser le

³⁵ Gaboriau, *Le Tour de France et le vélo*, p. 90.

³⁶ Pierre Nora: 'Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*'. *Representations* 26 (1989), p. 7.

récit de notre histoire en deux parties: avant 1914 et après'.³⁷ This perspective most transparently structures the *mise en scène* of *La Grande Illusion*, which, as Martin O'Shaughnessy remarks, 'is an attempt to make productive sense of the First World War within the French republican and revolutionary traditions while at the same time responding to the challenges of the 1930s', and was released two years after *Lange* during his unofficial affiliation with the Front populaire.³⁸ This sequence in *Lange* allows us to approach Renoir's statement from an alternative perspective: as Charles is a young male, presumably in his twenties (Baquet was 24 during the making of the film), his positioning in front of the Arc de Triomphe provides a powerful statement on the rejuvenation of a demographic that had been mutilated less than two decades earlier. As such, the film recalls Renoir's own recollection – however simplified it may be – that the rise of the Front populaire 'fut un moment où les Français crurent vraiment qu'ils allaient s'aimer les uns les autres. On se sentait porté par une vague de générosité.'³⁹ Although the film refrains from providing any commentaries on the French national health system, this shot marks a point where the various political threads established earlier in the film – health, enterprise, community, and *le loisir* – and contemporary optimism for a productive relationship between them: sport and enterprise are not merely prerequisites for personal health and professional stability in *Lange*, but catalysts for personal and social rejuvenation.

***Le Jour se lève* (1939): 'pas de situation, pas d'avenir, pas de santé...'**

Le Jour se lève, released two years after the inevitable demise of the Front populaire and a mere three months before France entered the Second World War, mobilises images of bicycles to provide a commentary on the same key facets of French society that are explored in *Lange* – among them leisure, community, health, and enterprise – and which had occupied a central place in the Front populaire's defunct agenda of *redressement*. However, Carné's film elaborates on the political resonance of the bicycle on a notably more pessimistic register. The narrative, set in an area identified by Reader and Edward Baron Turk as the

³⁷ Jean Renoir: *Ma vie et mes films*. Paris: Flammarion, 2005, p. 35: 'will be able to divide our historical narrative in two parts: before and after 1914'. For an analysis of Renoir's representation of wounded war-veterans in *La Grande Illusion*, see Julie Powell, 'Re-membering the War: Masculinity and the Wounded Body in Jean Renoir's *La Grande Illusion* (1937)'. In: Marcelline Block and Barry Nevin (eds.): *French Cinema and the Great War: Remembrance and Representation*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016, p. 131–146.

³⁸ Martin O'Shaughnessy: *La Grande Illusion*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2009, p. 25.

³⁹ Renoir: *Ma vie et mes films*, p. 114: 'was a moment when the French truly believed that they were going to love one another. We felt ourselves being carried along by a wave of generosity'.

industrial city of Amiens,⁴⁰ opens with François's (Jean Gabin) off-screen murder of Valentin (Berry once again). As police proceed to surround the house, François barricades himself within his room and recollects the events that culminated in his act of violence including his encounters with Françoise (Jacqueline Laurent) and Clara (Arletty). Convinced that any appeal to his community for understanding will prove fruitless, François eventually shoots himself. Turim observes, by no surprise, that critics saw the film as a renunciation of the ideals of the Front populaire.⁴¹ Yet the film is more complex than its initial critics were willing to acknowledge: rather than merely criticising the optimism that had swept the nation three years prior, the film, as McCann notes, 'charts a gradual erosion of positively framed working-class discourses.'⁴² Inverting the formula discussed in *Lange*, the progressive impotence of the bicycle – both as a vehicle granting geographic mobility vehicle and as a symbol of Frontist values – constitutes the focal point of this dissolution of ideals.

Bicycle ownership reached 8.8 million in the year of the film's release even though bicycle tax more than doubled from 12 francs to 25 francs in 1938.⁴³ Unsurprisingly perhaps, the association between the bicycle and working-class characters is emphasised throughout the entire film, which contains incidental shots of unnamed, everyday characters on bicycles. In the very first shot following the credit-sequence, the camera tilts upward on a nameless street to reveal an anonymous character cycling towards the central building in which François has enclosed himself. Later, as police inspectors arrive on the street to inspect the scene of Valentin's recent death, we witness people of all generations cycling bicycles on the street. The flashback to Valentin's music-hall spectacle is followed by entertainers performing routines on bicycles, demonstrating the extent to which cycling pervaded such realms of everyday cultural life. Later, as François and Valentin discuss their respective relationships with Françoise and Clara in a café, the windows behind them frame a cyclist passing by. During the film's final scenes following François's outburst, as Clara and François's peers carry the latter away from the mass of onlooking spectators, characters carrying bicycles occupy the foreground, obscuring our view of Françoise (fig. 7). Although the bicycles do not provide any crucial dramatic thrust during this particular moment, they reinforce the working-class associations of François's milieu. Furthermore, it is telling that the bicycles are

⁴⁰ Keith Reader, 'The *banlieue* in French cinema of the 1930s', *French Cultural Studies* 25.3–4 (2014), p. 392; Turk, *Child of Paradise*, p. 163.

⁴¹ Maureen Turim: 'Poetic Realism as psychoanalytical and ideological operation: Marcel Carné's *Le Jour se lève*.' In: Susan Hayward and Ginette Vincendeau: *French Film: texts and contexts*. London: Routledge, 2002, p. 63.

⁴² Ben McCann, *Le Jour se lève*. London: I. B. Tauris, 2014, p. 84.

⁴³ Dauncey, *French Cycling*, p. 102.

privileged with this space and, by extension, permitted to inhibit the spectator's view of two central characters at this critical moment, mere minutes from the narrative's close.



Fig. 7



Fig. 8

François's bicycle is one of the many memorable objects that feature in his room. In a landmark review first published over a decade after the film's original release, film theorist André Bazin suggests that this bicycle acquires a complex signification through its relationship with the film's protagonist. Bazin, elaborating on François's relationship with his surroundings, proposes that '[l]e décor sert à constituer les personnages tout autant que le jeu des acteurs eux-mêmes.'⁴⁴ For Bazin, François's dwindling supply of cigarettes and the position of his wardrobe foreground the passage of time in the ongoing present, whereas François's bicycle, football and photographs are among the many items that allow the spectator to understand the depth and various facets of the protagonist's character. François's sporting memorabilia are of particular interest to Bazin, who remarks that 'les objets sportifs sont à peu près le seul désordre qu'il s'autorise dans sa chambre parce qu'il ne les considère pas comme désordonnés. C'est au contraire une sorte de privilège qu'il leur accorde sur les autres objets.'⁴⁵ Considering what he perceived as the producers' desire to maintain 'la plus bénigne neutralité politique',⁴⁶ Bazin analyses François's involvement in sport with a view to emphatically isolating the protagonist from any ideological commitments:

⁴⁴ André Bazin: 'Le Jour se lève.' In: Jean Narboni (ed.): *Le Cinéma français de la Libération à la Nouvelle Vague (1945-1958)*. Paris: Cahiers du Cinéma, 1998, p. 93. This chapter reproduces Bazin's review, originally entitled 'La psychologie du décor'.

⁴⁵ Bazin, 'Le Jour se lève', p. 94: 'Sport-related objects are almost the only kind of clutter that he allows within his room because he does not consider them as being untidy. On the contrary, he privileges them in a way over the other objects.'

⁴⁶ 'The most inoffensive political neutrality'.

François ne paraît guère faire de politique alors que le sport et la camaraderie des copains de ‘foot’ ou de vélo laisse des traces visibles dans sa chambre, nous ne possédons aucun indice d’une quelconque opinion politique, rien non plus qui indique, par exemple, un militantisme syndical auquel son métier devrait pourtant le pousser. [...] Même s’il est ‘syndiqué’, il y a en lui un élément anarchiste qui doit le faire se méfier de la politique comme des femmes; la solidarité directe des copains d’atelier ou de sport est certainement plus à sa mesure.⁴⁷

Bazin rightly implies that the bicycle constitutes an important signifier of François’s character. This is further suggested by the photograph of a child (presumably François himself) with a bicycle on the left-hand side of his mirror (fig. 8). Moreover, by featuring in scenes unfolding in the ongoing present as well as in flashbacks, François’s bicycle – like the cigarettes he smokes – plays an essential role in the dialectic of remembrance that structures the narrative. However, as in Bazin’s seminal study of Renoir’s work, the theorist depoliticises Carné’s approach to décor and characterisation across the review. In doing so, Bazin productively avoids confining his analysis to the film’s masterly negotiation of genre or reducing the film to the nightmare of a society on the verge of war.⁴⁸ Where one should remedy Bazin’s view is his self-imposed attempt to divorce both work and leisure from politics. Building on the evident centrality of memory to *Le Jour se lève* on a structural and thematic level, this analysis aims to shift our attention from the flashback structure to the ways in which the film mobilises the image of the bicycle to tap into collective national memory of the Front populaire.⁴⁹ In particular, I wish to address how the images of François’s bicycle enter into dialectic with images of industrial labour and the protagonist’s love for Françoise to create a reflexive narrative space that reflects on the shattered hopes and dreams stimulated by the Front populaire’s policies.

⁴⁷ Bazin, ‘*Le Jour se lève*’, p. 95–96: ‘François hardly participates in politics while sport and the camaraderie among his football-playing and cycling friends visibly marks his room. We are given no clue regarding a possible political opinion, nor anything that indicates, for example, a union-related militancy towards which his occupation should encourage him. [...] Even if he is ‘unionised’, he embodies an anarchistic core which must make him as sceptical of politics as of women; the direct solidarity of his co-workers or fellow sports fans is undoubtedly better made to his measure’.

⁴⁸ André Bazin: *Jean Renoir*. Edited by François Truffaut. Paris: Éditions Ivrea, 2005.

⁴⁹ Comprehensive analyses of the film’s flashback structure are provided by: Inez Hedges, ‘Form and Meaning in the French Film I: Time and Space’. In: *The French Review* 54.1 (1980), pp. 29–32; Francis Vanoye, *Récit écrit, récit filmique*. Paris: Nathan, 1989, pp. 174–180.



Fig. 9

Indirectly drawing our attention to the factors that elevated cycling to the forefront of sporting and leisure activities in 1930s France, Dave Horton, Paul Rosen and Peter Cox observe that '[p]leasure appears to be one of the principal motivations for cycling, and one which remains remarkably durable across time and space.'⁵⁰ Lending credence to this view, François's memories emphasise the satisfaction that he derives from the physical mobility provided by his bicycle, which 'permet encore à François de s'arracher à l'immobilisme de sa condition,'⁵¹ most notably when he rides it to Françoise's lodgings during one of his few reprieves over the course of the narrative (fig. 9). During this meeting, Françoise gives François her teddy-bear, Bolop, which François subsequently ties to the front of his bicycle, and which is placed on his dressing-table in the present-day narrative. The teddy-bear, through its association with the bicycle, operates as a conduit to François's memory of cycling. Thus, when it is shot down by police snipers later in the present-day narrative, both François and the spectator are reminded not only of his delusive optimism regarding his relationship with Françoise, but of the transient pleasure that the bicycle once granted him. The aforementioned sequence portraying François's trip to Françoise testifies to the values of sociability, and relaxation associated by the Front populaire with sport and leisure in everyday life. In doing so, these scenes recall Gaboriau's description of the bicycle as an industrial product that, although initially beyond the financial means of the working class that manufactured it, eventually became a feasible investment, and one that crystallised hopes that had accompanied that dawn of industrialisation:

⁵⁰ Dave Horton, Paul Rosen and Peter Cox: 'Introduction'. In: Dave Horton, Paul Rosen and Peter Cox (eds.): *Cycling and Society*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007, p. 6.

⁵¹ Couquet, 'Le Clou du film', p. 57. 'This bicycle still allows François to liberate himself from the stasis of his situation.'

Depuis son origine, le vélo semble incarner *l'espérance industrielle* à l'intérieur de la société française. Le vélo se présente comme un objet historique original, un témoin privilégié des métamorphoses sociales. Machine de loisir, moyen de transport, instrument de sport, il représente l'espoir mille fois vécu de la révolution industrielle.⁵²

However, an earlier scene within the factory where François works emphasises the progressive physical and psychological toll imposed by his debilitating proletarian labour. Tellingly, François's very first recollection portrays him exiting his apartment-building on his bicycle (fig. 10). In contrast, the subsequent scene grants the spectator an establishing shot of the factory where he remains mutely isolated from his co-workers within an insulated suit (fig. 11). François jokingly mocks the very real oppression of the workplace when meeting Françoise there for the first time:

C'est le travail qui t'intéresse? Beau travail, hein! Et le costume? Il n'est pas mal non plus, le costume! Ça fait moyen-âge! On s'amuse comme on peut. On se déguise, quoi. Faut bien rigoler! En somme, le travail, c'est la liberté, et puis la santé. C'est vrai, c'est tout ce qu'il y a de sain ici.⁵³



Fig. 10



Fig. 11

François's humour satirically underscores the very real health risks posed by the factory: as he directs Françoise to Mme Lagardier's office, a fan on an adjacent building indicates the artificial systems required to circulate air within the factory; and before leaving, Françoise's new bouquet of flowers has already wilted, transparently demonstrating the impossibility of

⁵² Gaboriau, *Le Tour de France et le vélo*, p. 89–90: 'Since its birth, the bicycle seems to have embodied *industrial hopes* held by French society. The bicycle features as an original historical objet, a privileged witness of social metamorphoses. A leisure machine, a means of transport and a sporting tool, it represents the hope of the industrial revolution, lived one thousand times over'. Italics in original.

⁵³ 'You're interested in the job? It's a lovely job! And the outfit? It's not bad either! It looks like something out of the Middle Ages! We have fun when we can. We dress up. You have to have a laugh. All things said, work is liberty and, what's more, it's health. It's true. Everything here is a picture of health'.

supporting organic life within his workplace. What is particularly alarming about *Le Jour se lève* is that, contextualised within the Front populaire's policies regarding leisure and balance, the scenes set in the sandblasting factories not only signal François's own isolation within his workplace, but also express a disillusioned attitude towards the rise of industrialism in France, and signal the inefaceable incompatibility of François's professional life with his personal health. In fact, his job specifically conforms to '[l]es conditions de travail modernes, qui tendent à éliminer l'effort proprement physique au profit des gestes automatiques'⁵⁴ which, according to a radio broadcast made by Lagrange on 10 June 1936, 'sont de nature, s'ils n'ont pas de contrepartie active, à provoquer une nette dégénérescence de l'être humain.'⁵⁵ Gaboriau's description of the bicycle as 'objet industriel type'⁵⁶ only further emphasises the oppressive enclosure of the factory and the deflated hopes represented by the working-class's appropriation of what was once a distinctly bourgeois mode of transportation, sport and leisure. The lost hopes charted by the juxtaposition of François's bicycle and workplace are more transparently lamented by François himself when he meets Françoise in the greenhouse adjoining her residence.

Tiens, un jour, j'ai pris le train. Une casquette neuve, elle s'envole par la portière. Et puis tout, quoi, le chômage ou bien le boulot... Ah, j'en ai fait des boulots, jamais les mêmes, toujours pareils... La peinture, le pistolet, ou bien le minium. Pas bon non plus, le minium, le sable...et...et... Je cherchais pas à lutter... Je laissais aller... Ça allait mal... Alors, je m'installais. Tu sais...quand on attend le tramway sous la flotte...il s'arrête pas, le tramway... Ding! Il est complet... Alors, on attend l'autre, et l'autre arrive. Ding! Complet... Alors, on attend l'autre... Ding, ding! Complet, complet, les tramways passent... Ding! Et on reste là, on attend...⁵⁷

The film's disillusioned vision of the leisure/industry binary is reinforced by a class struggle embodied by François and Valentin, most saliently during their arranged meeting in a local café where Valentin falsely claims to be Clara's father. Whereas François typifies Gabin's

⁵⁴ Léo Lagrange, cited in Gaboriau, *Le Tour de France et le vélo*, p. 95: 'working conditions which tend to eliminate intrinsically physical effort in favour of automated gestures'.

⁵⁵ Lagrange, cited in Gaboriau, *Le Tour de France et le vélo*, p. 95: 'if not balanced with physical activity, inherently provoke a clear degeneration of human beings'.

⁵⁶ Gaboriau, *Le Tour de France et le vélo*, p. 26: 'prototypical industrial object'. No article in original French.

⁵⁷ 'Listen, I took the train one day. A new hat flew out the window and then everything else with it, unemployment or the job... Oh I've done jobs, never the same, always the same...spray painting, lead painting. Lead painting isn't good either, the sand...and...and...I wasn't trying to fight...I let things flow...It wasn't going well...So I set myself up. You know...when you're waiting for the tram in the rain...it doesn't stop... Ding! It's full... So you wait for another, and the other arrives. Ding! It's full...so you wait for another... Ding, ding! It's full, it's full, and the trams pass by... Ding! And you wait there, you wait...'

instantly recognisable *ouvrier* persona,⁵⁸ Valentin, as Turk notes, ‘flaunts magnified bourgeois values’, drinking a *fine à l’eau* in François’s company and wearing a tailored suit, reminding us that François’s struggle for ownership of Françoise ‘acts out a power play that French society was actually experiencing: the bourgeoisie’s attempt to restrain the encroachment on their property by the proletariat.’⁵⁹ Furthermore, as Reader notes, the upper-class aspirations represented by Valentin’s motor-car contrast with François’s bicycle,⁶⁰ and Valentin’s ‘campily mincing mannerisms’ – the product of clear social determiners – and contrast with François’s working-class functionality.⁶¹ Such a dynamic was already palpable in *Lange*, in which Berry also plays the unsympathetic counterpoint to the working-class cooperative (indeed, McCann observes that Berry’s role as Batale in *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange* ‘clearly anticipates Valentin’).⁶²

Although Turk rightly notes that Valentin is ‘a social marginal whose precise economic profile is undeterminable’,⁶³ the fact remains that Valentin has the unique ability to distinguish himself (albeit superficially) from François’s stratum that wields a fatal influence on François’s future and relationships. The control that Valentin is capable of exerting is suggested by Clara’s remark that ‘il peut raconter n’importe quoi et tout de suite on croit que c’est arrivé’,⁶⁴ and by his convincing declaration to François that ‘j’ai toléré votre liaison avec Clara. J’aurais pu m’y opposer. Croyez bien, j’en avais les moyens, mais j’ai laissé faire’.⁶⁵ However, his most malevolent attempt to deploy his characteristic ability to control relationships among the working-class characters around him is represented by his demoralising comments to François, which emphasise the psychological, physical and social impact of the protagonist’s lifestyle: ‘Réfléchissez un peu. Vous n’avez pas de situation, pas d’avenir, et pas de santé. Enfin, il faut tout de même le dire, vous faites un métier malsain’.⁶⁶ Valentin’s comments are met with a violent rebuke from François, whose rage prefigures his murderous reaction to Valentin’s mockery during the film’s final flashback. Indeed, when

⁵⁸ For a detailed analysis of Gabin’s star-image, specifically his *ouvrier* persona, see Claude Gauteur and Ginette Vincendeau: *Jean Gabin: Anatomie d’un mythe*. Paris: Nouveau Monde, 2006, p. 179–212.

⁵⁹ Edward Baron Turk: *Child of Paradise: Marcel Carné and the Golden Age of French Cinema*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989, p. 163.

⁶⁰ Reader, ‘The *banlieue*’, p. 393.

⁶¹ Keith Reader, ‘“Mon cul est intersexuel?”: Arletty’s Performance of Gender’. In Alex Hughes and James S. Williams (eds.): *Gender and French Cinema*, p. 68; Reader, ‘The *banlieue*’, p. 393.

⁶² McCann, *Le Jour se lève*, p. 65.

⁶³ Turk, *Child of Paradise*, p. 163.

⁶⁴ ‘He can tell you anything at all and, straight away, you believe that it has already happened’.

⁶⁵ ‘I tolerated your affair with Clara. I could have opposed it. Believe me when I say I had the means, but I let things go in their own direction’.

⁶⁶ ‘Think a little. You have no position, no future and no health. All is all, it has to be said that you have an unhealthy job’.

Valentin seals both his and François's fates, it is not through any act of violence or through his dalliance with François's lovers (not exclusively, at least), but through provocative verbal belittlement of François's stratum. In a scene set in François's apartment during the final flashback, seconds before he finally shoots Valentin (allowing the narrative arcs of the ongoing present and the recollected past to coalesce), the latter derides François's typification of 'les gens simples [qui] se font des idées étonnantes sur les femmes, l'amour, la romance...'⁶⁷ and deliberately incites him by recalling their shared history with François: 'je lui plaisais, tu comprends, la petite et moi... [...] J'aime bien la jeunesse, moi... Ça t'intéresse? Tu veux des détails?'⁶⁸ François's impulsive act of murder is no surprise, for the threat posed by Valentin's incendiary jibes is already emphasised by Prévert's script in the film's very first scene (which depicts the murder prior to François's own recollection of Valentin's death), as François shouts 'tais-toi' off-screen no fewer than three times before shooting his nemesis. Further underscoring the dangerously provocative force of Valentin's words, we learn in the closing moments of the film's final flashback that he has already repeatedly warned Valentin 'puisque tu ne veux pas te taire, je vais te taire, moi!' ('since you won't shut up, I'm going to shut you up!') and 'tais-toi' ('shut up').

Gaboriau notes that '[é]tymologiquement, le vélo représente l'idée elle-même de vitesse.'⁶⁹ However, by the end of the film, the bicycle is defined through its immobility and its impotence as a social cohesive: François's peers gather around his apartment beside their stationary bicycles, staring at their comrade as he admits his guilt from his window and condemns their spectatorship, while the police proceed towards the rooftop of his building. As François lies dead on the floor of his bedroom, the sun shines through the window, illuminates the site of his demise and creating a space of reflection (in both senses of the term) which incorporates his dead body and bicycle (fig. 11). This bicycle, as we have seen, operates as what Turim terms an 'associative memory object', a prop whose meaning is charged with signification by the film's double temporality.⁷⁰ However, what is particularly interesting about the bicycle in *Le Jour se lève* is that the memories it evokes transcend the dual temporal flows that lend François's narrative its core structure: the dialectic forged between the bicycle and working-class identity through its ubiquity across the narrative extends these recollections far beyond François's respective relationships with Clara,

⁶⁷ 'Simple people [who] think up fantastic ideas about women, love, romance...'

⁶⁸ 'She liked me, you understand, the young one and I... [...] I personally love youth. Does it interest you? Would you like details?'

⁶⁹ Gaboriau, *Le Tour de France et le vélo*, p. 90.

⁷⁰ Turim, 'Poetic Realism as psychoanalytical and ideological operation', p. 65–6.

Françoise and Valentin to the broader hopes and dreams that had been projected by *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange* and were partly crystallised by the Front populaire.



Fig. 11

Conclusion: wheels of history

Horton, Cox, and Rosen rightly warn us that the bicycle's very universality 'is [...] one reason for its very complexity.'⁷¹ As the two present case-studies demonstrate, the bicycle provides a rewarding avenue of inquiry towards the ways in which characters navigate society in each of these films largely because of this duality, which allows each of the filmmakers discussed to provide an accessible but politically complex point of identification for audiences. Crucially, as the other historians and sociologists whose observations inform this article demonstrate, bicycles are imbricated in discourses regarding leisure, sociability, and utility in equal measure, and it may come as no surprise that each intersects with constructions of national identity in both of the films discussed. *Lange's* attitude towards politics is shaped by its awareness of the potentially dehumanising influence of capitalism and its proposal that working-class solidarity potentially provides a means (albeit temporary) of combatting such alienating forces. On the other hand, *Le Jour se lève* expresses a nostalgia for a time when such notions could feasibly inform what Faulkner dubs a 'future memory', and laments their inevitable dissipation. Drawing on the dialogue between François and Clara, Turim reminds us that the French *souvenir* can mean both memory and memento, and that '[t]his word play reminds us of how objects become invested with memories, for in Prévert's poetic condensation of *souvenir*, objects and memories are inseparable.'⁷² The same

⁷¹ Horton, Rosen and Cox, *Cycling and Society*, p. 1.

⁷² Turim, 'Poetic Realism as psychoanalytical and ideological operation', p. 66.

could be said of the role lent to the bicycle in both of these films, whether we are discussing the ‘future memory’ projected by *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange* or the ways in which the dialectic between the ongoing present and the recollected past in *Le Jour se lève* grieves for the Front populaire’s ultimately unsustainable vision.

This analysis does not aim to irreconcilably polarise the two films in question or the relationships that they each frame between cycling and working-class identity. After all, by admitting to the existence of characters such as Batala and leaving the fate of both Lange and the cooperative open to question, *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange* is acutely aware of the competing social forces that would ultimately curtail the Front populaire’s utopic agenda and deliver French society to the standstill leading to François’s suicide in *Le Jour se lève*. In hindsight, *Lange*’s opening shots of a car speeding along country roads whilst a policeman cycles along in search of Lange make it clear from the outset that the law plays a crucial determining role in the film and that the radical force required to surmount social injustice permitted by French laws in both films was incompatible with contemporary systems of legal justice. Most importantly, this analysis of these two key films of the 1930s demonstrates the value of considering the importance of such deceptively banal images in relation to concerns raised by Blum’s government – industrialism, enterprise, health and *le loisir* – when revisiting such extensively documented classics.