Adrien VALGALIER

(De)constructing Nostalgia: Ageing, Life Review and Artificial Stagings of the Past in Contemporary French Cinema

Abstract: This article aims to challenge reductive assumptions about ageing and nostalgia by examining how contemporary French cinema represents later life through the framework of the life review, focusing in particular on *Guy* (Alex Lutz, 2018) and *La Belle Époque* (Nicolas Bedos, 2019). Rather than assuming that nostalgia naturally intensifies with age, the study argues that nostalgia emerges from a specific experience of temporal distance and change. Drawing on theoretical contributions from philosophy, cultural gerontology, and nostalgia studies, the article situates nostalgia within the broader framework of the life review, understood as a dynamic and interpretive process of revisiting one's past in the ageing individual.

The analysis shows that these films reject simplistic narratives of decline or idealized longing for a lost past. Instead, they stage the past through deliberately artificial dispositifs (mock documentaries, studio reconstructions, reenactments, and simulated fake archives) that foreground critical distance with the past. Nostalgia functions as a process of redefinition.

Both *Guy* and *La Belle Époque* initially present ageing protagonists as outdated or in decline, yet progressively complicate these caricatures by challenging cultural disdain, age norms, and assumptions about old age. Through music, performance, and narratives of ambiguous fatherhood, ageing is ultimately reframed as a moment of self-examination. The life review is thus portrayed less as a final synthesis of existence than as an ongoing reshaping of selfhood, in which past and present remain unstable and open. Ageing is depicted as a moment of questioning, regeneration, and renewed capacity for transmission rather than closure.

The study is limited to two case studies within contemporary French cinema and does not claim generalizability. However, it opens avenues for future research on mediated memory and the performativity of age across broader cinematic and cultural contexts.

Keywords: Nostalgia; Ageing; Life Review; Old Age; French Cinema; Artificial; Past.

Adrien VALGALIER

(Postdoctoral researcher)
Université Sorbonne Nouvelle (Paris)
adrien.valgalier@sorbonne-nouvelle.fr

EKPHRASIS, 2/2025

Age and Ageing
in European and World Cinema(s)
pp. 69–83

DOI: 10.24193/ekphrasis.34.6
Published First Online: December 30, 2025

Does the experience of nostalgia intensify with age? The accumulation of years and life experiences seem to multiply the occasions for recalling and regretting moments from the past in old age. This period of existence would thus be characterized by a kind of memorial inflation, mechanically leading to retrospective thoughts. Such a quantitative and exponential approach to ageing and nostalgia would nevertheless deny the very principle of the latter. Nostalgia is above all a matter of distance. This affect has a long intellectual and cultural history. For a considerable period, it was understood in medical terms, as the pathological expression—sometimes accompanied by somatic disturbances—of a sense of deprivation, whether of one's family or one's homeland. In the nineteenth century, and even more so in the twentieth, nostalgia gradually shifted from a predominantly spatial meaning to a more explicitly temporal one. As Vladimir Jankélévitch argues, nostalgia is "the consciousness of something other, the consciousness of an elsewhere, the consciousness of a contrast between past and present, between present and future" (Jankélévitch 280–281; my translation). Nostalgia unfolds within a dialectical and paradoxical relationship between absence and presence. Far from being merely an individual feeling, it even takes on a social, or even political, meaning in Jean Starobinski, as "the useless regret for a social world or a way of life that has passed away, whose loss it is vain to deplore" (Starobinski 113; my translation). Nostalgia arises from a singular experience of time and, even more so, from an awareness of change. It does not arise merely from the fact of having lived, but from the recognition that something (within oneself, in others, or in one's environment) has been transformed over the years. Thus, nostalgia is part of a broader personal process of structuring time. The question of nostalgia is decentralized and instead emerges as a possible effect of a reshaping of past experiences.

What becomes more pronounced with age is not so much nostalgia as the tendency to return to what an individual has lived through. In cultural gerontology, Robert Butler introduced the concept of the "life review" to describe this mental process of reorganizing the stages of life, characterized by "the progressive return to consciousness of past experiences, and particularly, the resurgence of unresolved conflicts" (Butler 66). This re-encoding of life episodes offers a form of reassurance in the face of approaching death by fostering "features of the personality such as flexibility, resilience, and self-awareness" (Butler 69). According to Jeff and Christine Garland, the life review has multiple therapeutic aims: "to aid the narrator in achieving new insight and peace of mind; to bring closure to troubling events through viewing them from a different perspective; and to restore as far as possible neglected skills or abilities" (Garland & Garland 4). From a similar perspective, Gary M. Kenyon and William L. Randall advance the notion of the "therapoetic" (Kenyon & Randall 2) to designate this activity of memory restoration and narrative self-construction in later life. The life review is a dynamic and evolving process that reveals the interpretive tensions and negotiations underlying the definition of one's identity: "[...] life stories reveal that identity

formation occurs throughout life and well into old age; [...] Thus, it is not just the stories that are important, but also the changes that occur in the tellings over time, as well as the interpersonal processes of sharing and negotiating their meanings with others" (Ray 27). Kathleen Woodward, however, identifies within the life review a totalizing, teleological, and synthetic temptation (Woodward). She prefers the notion of "reminiscence" to emphasize the fragmentary and incomplete dimension that can accompany life narratives. In her analyses of literary works and films concerned with life narratives and ageing, Amelia DeFalco similarly underscores the difficulty protagonists encounter in clarifying and effectively organizing their life reviews:

> These novels and this film suggest that life narratives are multiple and complex, full of ambiguities and contradictions, with interpretive blind spots and frustrating ellipses. As the various narrators and characters in these texts make clear, "looking back" rarely, if ever, produces a clear narrative of the self. Instead, the reading and writing of lives in these texts reveal the very mutability at the heart of narrative itself, inseparable from its constantly changing temporality. (DeFalco 26)

Revisiting one's past consists less in smoothing it into a unified whole than in acknowledging possible bifurcations and ruptures that can no longer be repaired. Rather than asserting the unity and logic of the subject, such an act instead reveals its instability. The nostalgic feeling that may result from such an exercise becomes more complex. It is no longer simply a matter of drawing a clear boundary or measuring a distance between past and present, absence and presence, but of opening oneself to the conditional, to alternative narratives, to what might have been. Nostalgia no longer marks out an idealized elsewhere opposed to a diminished present; it becomes a questioning of the individual and the choices they have made. Placed within the framework of the life review, nostalgia can thus resemble a form of deconstruction of existence.

Several recent French films, whose narrative structures are close to the life review, depict elderly characters confronted with their past and prompted to question it. The nostalgia that emerges from these films does not take the form of a reactionary discourse based on the idea that "everything was better before" (even if it may at times flirt with such a stance). Rather, it is integrated into a complex dispositif that, even before idealizing the past or lamenting its loss, restores a sense of strangeness to it. This singularity is expressed through the deliberately artificial modes by which the past is staged. Rather than being mediated exclusively through the conventional device of the flashback, the past is deployed in unusual and contrived forms. These include incongruous instances of time travel, in which protagonists revisit their adolescent years while remaining embodied as adults, as in *Bis* (Dominique Farrugia, 2015). One may also evoke the reconstruction of memories in *On sourit pour la photo* (François Uzan, 2022) and *Une belle course* (Christian Carion, 2022). Finally, mention should be

made of dreams, hallucinations, and ghostly apparitions in *Le Cancre* (Paul Vecchiali, 2016), *Le lion est mort ce soir* (Nobuhiro Suwa, 2017), and *La Dernière Folie de Claire Darling* (Julie Bertuccelli, 2019)[1]. By foregrounding a degree of facticity, whether at the level of mise-en-scène or narrative construction, these films maintain a critical distance from the past and frame it as a problem to be examined rather than a source of justification. Old age thus appears as a moment of diffraction of existence, rather than as a culminating point at which memories would confirm a continuous ascent.

In the wake of the French feature films mentioned above, two films in particular open up a more in-depth reflection on how the life review turns advanced old age into a moment of redefinition of both the individual and their existence. *Guy* (Alex Lutz, 2018) portrays Guy Jamet, a fictional septuagenarian variety singer who enjoyed his moment of glory in the 1970s and 1980s. The director, who was just over forty at the time the film was made, plays the lead role and makes use of gray face, an artificial ageing of the body and voice achieved through acting, makeup, and prosthetics[2]. Although he may appear somewhat outdated today, Guy Jamet continues to perform concerts. The film adopts the form of a mock documentary. Gauthier, a young man who learned from his mother shortly before her death that Guy Jamet might be his biological father, makes a filmed portrait of the singer and follows him on tour, at his home in Provence, and during promotional appearances in Paris. *La Belle Époque* (Nicolas Bedos, 2019) centers on Victor (Daniel Auteuil), a sixty-something illustrator and unsuccessful comic-book author, disillusioned with contemporary society. His wife Marianne (Fanny Ardant) criticizes his backward-looking outlook and lack of resolve, and their marriage is on the brink of collapse. Antoine (Guillaume Canet), a friend of their son, offers Victor the opportunity to relive his youth through an innovative dispositif. Antoine runs a company that enables clients to revisit a period of their choosing through immersive historical reenactment. Costumes, studio sets, and professional actors are used to stage bespoke scenarios, for instance, an evening of drinking in a bar with William Faulkner or a dinner in an eighteenth-century aristocratic salon. Victor is seduced by the concept and asks to relive the evening when he met Marianne in a bar in Lyon on May 16, 1974. Gradually, he becomes increasingly captivated by Margot (Doria Tillier), the actress cast to play Marianne as she was in 1974.

Caught between memories of a bygone time and regressive trajectories, these two films summon the past through artificial dispositifs. The life review is thereby articulated within a deliberately contrived framework that establishes critical distance from the past and foregrounds the non-self-evident, problematic nature of retrospective perception in both central protagonists. Considered more broadly within sociocultural representations of ageing, *Guy* and *La Belle Époque* challenge the assumption that old age is necessarily associated with wisdom and fulfillment, decline, or nostalgic backward-looking attitudes. Instead, old age is portrayed as a moment of questioning, in which past and present are not

set in opposition but are examined simultaneously. The life review thus appears less as a conclusion or synthesis of existence than as a reshaping of it.

Has-been and narratives of decline

At the beginning of both films, the life review of these two characters is hardly appealing. Although Guy and Victor both enjoy comfortable social and financial positions and are in good health[3], they are portrayed as ageing men out of step with their time, struggling to reconcile the realities of the present with a past they glorify. This trait is particularly pronounced in *La Belle Époque*, where Victor openly proclaims his rejection of the modern world. The film's opening sequences schematically oppose Victor to those around him. He is skeptical about a television series project developed by one of his friends for a streaming platform and even dismissive of his wife and the artificial-intelligence-based psychoanalysis application she has created. Victor's technophobic stance and refusal to live with his time become a source of growing exasperation for Marianne, his wife, who remarks, "I feel as though I am ageing faster when I fall asleep next to you" (00:15:24; my translation), and even, "I think you've been alive for too long" (00:16:04; my translation). In these opening scenes, the couple formed by Victor and Marianne displays a troubled relationship with ageing. Marianne displays a form of internalized ageism, struggling to acknowledge her own age and her status as a grandmother. She takes a certain pleasure in humiliating her husband for behaviors she associates with old age, such as backward-looking attitudes, rejection of technology, or inertia. Victor, for his part, articulates a deep-seated hostility toward the present and repeatedly mourns what has been lost, ultimately becoming a caricature of the familiar refrain that "things were better before." For both Marianne and Victor, ageing is anything but self-evident. It is something to repress, something to be ashamed of, or something embodied in specific practices and attitudes. This lack of self-evidence resonates with a well-established premise in cultural gerontology, namely that age is a performative process[4] whose meaning and interpretation are, at least in part, socially produced and conditioned by the surrounding environment[5].

The issues surrounding age are addressed less directly in *Guy*. Any nostalgia that Guy Jamet may feel for the past is never a rejection of the present, unlike Victor. While he is not in opposition to his era, the singer still displays a certain distance from it. His cultural references, as well as his interactions with women, almost always mediated through seduction or paternalism, belong to another time. He also seems reduced to humming the same old songs and repeating the successes of the past, having not released any new album in many years.

Guy also disrupts conventional assumptions associated with ageing. Despite his status as an outdated performer whose audience is now primarily composed of retirees, he maintains diva-like comportment and continues to frequent nightclubs in the manner of a jet-setter.

Gauthier eventually tells him that he has become a caricature, precisely because his conduct no longer aligns with normative expectations of age. Like *La Belle Époque*, *Guy* interrogates the social construction of age and focuses specifically on how age can be sanctioned when it appears to deviate from norms. As Aagje Swinnen emphasizes, age is as much "performed" as it is lived, since it must conform to culturally prescribed expectations. Cinema, through the interpretive work of actors, sharply reveals the tension inherent in this embodiment:

> [...] ageing does not 'happen to us' but is something we actively engage in or 'do'. Age performances are potential sites of transformation and subversion because, both on and off stage, one can escape normative behavioural scripts by 'failing' to act one's age. For older people this involves disrupting expectations dictated by the master narrative of decline. Film is a medium particularly suited to facilitate study of the performativity of age because it potentially creates a field of tension between the age of the character performed and the 'default body' of the actor, which is the visible manifestation of their selfhood at a given moment or the embodied identity in culture over time. (Swinnen 72)

In *Guy*, Alex Lutz's gray face technique underscores this performative and staged dimension of ageing. Makeup, prosthetics, diction, vocal range, gait, and gestures constitute visible and audible markers through which old age is simulated. This performance, his way of conforming to a specific physical state through prosthetics and acting techniques, expresses both plastically and symbolically the performativity of age.

In *La Belle Époque* and *Guy*, the social construction of age is primarily mediated through external viewpoints. In Nicolas Bedos's film, Victor is made to look outdated by his wife and friends. In *Guy*, the question of point of view is central, as the narrative is entirely structured through Gauthier's point of view, who is supposed to carry the camera throughout the film. By choosing the format of a mock documentary directed by a fictional character, Alex Lutz deprives his main protagonist of control over his own story and image in order to interrogate how he is seen, both by Gauthier and by the audience. Both films take the gaze of others and the projections they make onto the main characters as their starting point. This perspective is hardly flattering: Victor and Guy are seen as declining caricatures. Victor embodies a cliché of the grumpy old man who rejects modernity and praises the world of the past. Guy is a synthesis of the once-popular singer who continues to capitalize on his past successes[6].

However, this flirtation with caricature does not aim to make the characters ridiculous. The positioning of these two films is more nuanced. The issue of being outdated or in decline, which casts ageing in an unflattering light, is coupled with a discourse on cultural disdain. Guy and Victor are associated with popular cultures: French variety music for Guy and comic books for Victor[7]. Their outdatedness is thus less an essentialized trait than the product of the way they are perceived.

In *La Belle Époque*, a clear dichotomy is established between a trendy, modern, elitist, highly technologized culture (streaming platforms, digital applications, artificial intelligence) represented by Marianne and Maxime, Victor's son, and a more popular, artisanal culture embodied by Victor, which is depreciated and mocked by the former. The film attempts to bridge the two, or rather, to translate Victor's references into a contemporary universe. Victor eventually works in his son's company (a kind of digital start-up), and his work as an illustrator achieves a certain success there. In *Guy*, cultural hierarchy is explicitly rejected, particularly with regard to music. Guy Jamet does not disavow his sentimental variety songs, nor does he refrain from appreciating a wide range of musical references, from John Denver and Cat Stevens to César Franck. The film thus advocates for the complexity, or the "cultural dissonance of individuals" (Lahire), highlighting how a single individual can simultaneously engage in cultural practices of varying legitimacy. Moreover, in the musical sequences, Alex Lutz's staging conveys no trace of irony toward French variety music: the filmmaker treats it seriously. Without denying its sentimentality, Lutz highlights its joyful force, the emotion it evokes, the pleasure it provides, and the sincerity with which Guy performs it.

Both films adopt a nuanced position regarding cultural matters, thereby immediately mitigating the apparent caricatures of "out-of-touch" figures they might initially suggest. Whether it is French variety music in *Guy* or comics and illustration in *La Belle Époque*, these cultural forms are associated with dated tastes and the advanced age of the protagonists. Symbolically, old age itself that is implicitly accused. Cultural disdain, more or less explicit, expressed by Marianne and Gauthier in *La Belle Époque* and *Guy*, is therefore accompanied by a form of ageism. Nevertheless, the vitality with which these cultural domains are depicted in both films reflects back onto Guy and Victor, restoring value to their practices and countering any straightforward narrative of decline.

This question of cultural sociology helps to complicate the audience's relationship with the characters and gradually disentangle the link between decline and ageing. In another sense, the cinematic devices employed in both films offer an alternative way to enrich representations of ageing by establishing a paradoxical relationship with the past.

Artificial nostalgias

Guy and *La Belle Époque* fully embrace the artificiality of their representations of the past. In *Guy*, this is achieved through the meticulous creation of fake period archives (music videos, Super 8 family films) that replicate the visual textures of television images from the late 1960s through the 1980s. This mode of reworking the past, rendering it vivid yet curiously distant through the explicit assertion of artifice, goes hand in hand with the way the character of Guy is portrayed. Alex Lutz's use of gray face renders Guy Jamet both credible

and implausible at the same time. By performing old age, playing a man in his seventies while himself in his forties, the actor-director reinforces the artificial nature of the device. This disturbance surrounding authenticity, this deliberate lack of transparency, helps to clarify the film's project: the aim is to film the fantasy of an era, not its historical truth.

If the device is different in *La Belle Époque*, the project is fairly similar. The film displays the same fetishistic attachment to the past. In the reconstructions he offers his clients, Antoine is obsessed with precision and plausibility. Numerous close-ups linger on objects and set details that, for Victor (and probably also for viewers who experienced the 1970s), activate highly concrete memories. Once again, the film does not seek to confuse the past with its copy. It reveals the backstage of these reconstructions of the 1970s by showing rehearsals, actors' makeup, the structures of the sets, and the technical control room. Although Victor remains deeply affected by the meticulousness of the reconstruction, he is not duped by the dispositif. The power of the fake is primarily placed in the service of a subjectivity, Victor's own. Artifice does not stand in for an era; rather, it functions as the simulation of a memory, the revisiting of a past that distance tends to embellish, and the improbable, unreal promise of a world that revolves entirely around Victor's perspective.

These two representations of the past resonate with recent research on nostalgia that rethinks the concept in relation to media and consumer society. As Deena Weinstein argues:

> [...] contemporary nostalgia is a construct of the communications media that is directed to a simulation of a de-individualized empirical past that never existed as such and is not directly part of the lives of the individuals who experience the nostalgia. Contemporary nostalgia is neither for everyone's personal past nor for a concrete individual's life history, but for a social construction. (Weinstein 24–25)

In other words, contemporary nostalgia may thus be understood as a de-individualized reformulation of the past, a taste for a particular aesthetic of an era reconstructed by the media. Nostalgia must also be situated within a broader consumerist framework. In this regard, Gary Cross introduces the notion of "consumed nostalgia," referring to a form of nostalgia constructed through objects produced by capitalism and consumer culture:

> Unlike the longing for the lost place and time that once was satisfied with public monuments or family heirlooms, many of us today recapture and relive the past in our own possessions, whose significance and attachments we seldom share with family members or the broad community. Instead of seeking a lost community or cause, we recover our personal childhoods in a vast array of objects and recorded sensations. (Cross 13–14)

There is a double consumerist relationship to objects here: more than simply experiencing the object, reliving or replaying the act of consumption also means recovering one's youth.

Nostalgia therefore appears less as an affective state than as a specific mode of relating to the past. More specifically, it is a social and media-based construction of the past, which can take shape through attachment to objects produced by capitalism (with "objects" understood here in a broad sense, including cultural goods such as films or music).

This complex relationship with the past is probably at play for the directors of *Guy* and *La Belle Époque* in the periods they reconstruct in their films. Alex Lutz and Nicolas Bedos belong to the same generation (born in 1978 and 1979 respectively) and therefore did not directly experience or have little experience of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s evoked in their films. Their perception of these decades is mediated, aligning closely with Deena Weinstein's notion of "contemporary nostalgia". If nostalgia operates within these films, it is less directed toward a specific historical period than toward the capacity of media to render that period once again tangible and vivid. According to Katharina Niemeyer, contemporary forms of nostalgia are closely linked to media structures:

> Media produce contents and narratives not only in the nostalgic style but also as triggers of nostalgia. Media, and new technologies in particular, can function as platforms, projection places and tools to express nostalgia. Furthermore, media are very often nostalgic for themselves, their own past, their structures and contents. Perpetual media changes render media nostalgic for their non-existent end. Nostalgia, in turn, offers a reflection on mediation, media and their related technologies. In this sense, media practice becomes an essential element of nostalgia, increasing with the recent development of new communication technologies. (Niemeyer 7)

Guy expresses an attachment to French television culture of the second half of the twentieth century and to a particular history of popular entertainment perceived as capable of expressing something about France during those decades[8]. In *La Belle Époque*, the power of the film studio makes it possible to restore the collective and artisanal dimension of cinema[9]. These artificial stagings of the past do not simply aim to recount the past of an ageing character or to return to a supposed golden age. Rather, each film seeks to establish a dialectical and problematized relationship with the past and with the ways it is perceived and experienced. The nostalgia at work in these films thus acknowledges the artificiality of this connection and even accentuates it through dispositifs that openly foreground their own facticity. Ageing, in this context, does not simply entail longing for the past and for youth; it involves recognizing that one's relationship to the past is mediated by simulacra. In other words, the past no longer lives within us, but through media, objects, or songs, for instance. Put differently, the past no longer resides within the subject but is accessed through media, objects, or songs. To age and to remember is therefore to experience a form of dispossession of one's own history.

This sense of estrangement from one's past and personal history in both films enters into dialogue with the protagonists' awareness of their ageing bodies. *Guy* and *La Belle Époque* foreground the visibility of the ageing body while simultaneously reintroducing a sense of unfamiliarity with it. In the former, this issue is expressed formally through Alex Lutz's makeup: ageing takes the form of a mask whose artificiality remains evident to anyone familiar with the actor's actual age. In the latter, the reconstruction of Victor's youthful environment serves to highlight his aged body more strongly. Although he is never confronted with his forty-years-younger double (which deprives the spectator of a direct point of comparison), he nonetheless must face the fact that, within a setting frozen in 1974 and preserved from temporal change, he is the only one who has altered. His ageing body appears discordant within this temporal capsule. Yet he never perceives his body as a problem and retains his ease in seduction when feelings begin to develop between him and Margot. Such a representation diverges from several medical studies that emphasize declining self-esteem and diminished feelings of attractiveness among ageing men as a consequence of bodily changes and illness (Baker & Gringart; Hurd Clark, Griffin & the PACC Research Team).

Guy's relationship to his body is more ambivalent, in part due to his status as a popular singer. It is less a matter of diminished confidence in his desirability than of a constant and anxious monitoring of his appearance, which ageing renders unstable. Several scenes show him worrying about his looks, depicting Guy carefully applying hairspray or seeking advice about hair dye from his press agent. The vulnerability and mutability of the ageing body thus mirror the precariousness of stardom itself, which is not rooted in a stable essence but in an acquired prestige perpetually at risk of erosion:

> [...] the process of 'starification' is therefore potentially never far from the possibility of casting its object into abjection, as if the quasi-demurgic power associated with stars were always liable to turn into negativity, shifting them from sacralization to degrading objectification, from sacred monster to monster pure and simple. (Courcoux, Le Gras & Moine 13; my translation)

When Guy and his former partner Anne-Marie (Dani) revisit the site of their former Parisian nightclub, now converted into a fitness center, they are confronted with the material transformation of their shared past. The songs provide another register through which such temporal fluctuations are rendered perceptible. By alternating between music videos from the 1970s and 1980s and excerpts from contemporary concerts, the film juxtaposes different versions of the same song and allows the spectator to measure the changes in Guy's voice, now deeper and more tremulous. In a confessional moment addressed to Gauthier's camera, Guy says:

> I'm getting older. But I haven't changed, you don't change. You take some knocks. It's like a vase. It's the same vase, but it doesn't look the same anymore because a kid

> dropped it, one handle broke, then the spout isn't the same, then the color of the ceramic faded. But it's the same vase. I haven't changed. (01:22:48; my translation)

Whether it is the former nightclub, the songs, or Guy's body, the structure remains the same, yet everything is different.

In *La Belle Époque* and *Guy*, nostalgia is constructed through cinematic devices that interrogate the relationship to the past and highlight the artificial nature of this connection. It also manifests through the repetition of the same elements (the same café in Lyon, the same songs) from different perspectives. Thus, it is less the objects themselves that change than the way they are perceived. In this sense, ageing in these two films is not treated as an endpoint but as a space to be built, where the subject can continue to shape themselves and where everything remains malleable.

Celebrating Life

While both films initially present themselves as narratives of decline (a has-been singer in *Guy* and a backward-looking misanthrope in *La Belle Époque*) and appear to depict old age in an unflattering manner, the perspectives adopted toward the protagonists, as well as the films' formal and narrative devices, allow for the articulation of more nuanced trajectories. Rather than simply opposing a glorious past to a dull present, these films tend to celebrate life paths in which old age becomes both a moment of reclaiming one's existence and a point of regeneration.

In the context of the life review and the inevitable assessment it entails, the protagonists of both films are less concerned with synthesizing their lives into a coherent whole than with identifying the elements that have endured within them over time. By reliving his 1970s, Victor realizes one thing: he has not abandoned his youthful ideals, contrary to what Marianne suggests about herself at the end of the film[10]. Reliving one's past (or rather its simulation) does not mean becoming trapped in it, nor glorifying it (indeed, Marianne asserts that the 1970s were far from straightforward for women and that she does not regret that decade). Returning to the past means measuring the distance traveled. The film's final scene, in which Victor and Marianne reunite in the café where they first met, recreated in a studio, serves less as a narrative moment of reconciliation than as an occasion for reflective assessment. They discuss their regrets, fears, and doubts about their life as a couple, but also return to what they loved about each other and the hardships they endured together. By reflecting on the longevity of their relationship in the very place where it began, they can measure how beautiful and passionate their story has been, and how much it might still continue to be. In a radio interview, Nicolas Bedos states that one of the film's aims is "to say that our life is a work of art, and that we are its novelist, its designated painter[11]" (my translation). Old age

thus becomes the moment when, by structuring and re-encoding one's life, one brings one's work to completion.

In *Guy*, the repetitive circulation of Guy Jamet's songs, reappearing from one sequence to the next, and modulated in a form of constant reiteration, tends to turn the music into the soundtrack of a life, or even of an era. Gary Cross's concept of "consumed nostalgia" suggests that, in a capitalist context, nostalgia is experienced through the consumption of an object. Such objects mediate a historical moment while encapsulating fragments of individual and collective memory. The final minutes of *Guy* attempt to crystallize this idea. The film offers a condensed version of Guy Jamet's life, as well as a summary of the film itself. The voice-over commentary by Guy Jamet, drawn from Annie Ernaux's *The Years* (2008), suggests that while images may fade, memory persists so long as there is someone to remember[12]. Guy Jamet's songs are nothing more—and nothing less—than fragments that carry and mediate popular memory, having accompanied an entire life and embodied an era. Guy may be a has-been, but he has succeeded in becoming a catchy refrain. It is only in old age that this realization becomes possible, and fully appreciable.

This idea of regeneration also emerges in the narratives of fatherhood proposed by the two films. Alex Lutz's film never clearly confirms whether Guy is Gauthier's biological father, nor whether the singer becomes fully aware of it[13]. In Nicolas Bedos's film, Victor figures as a spiritual or symbolic father to Antoine, who internalized decisive guidance from him when he was younger. These forms of fatherhood remain ambiguous, unspoken, or highly indirect, yet they offer Guy and Victor the possibility of becoming fathers once again. Having seemed trapped in the past, they now rediscover the capacity to transmit.

Conclusion

The analysis of nostalgia, life review, and cinematic representation in *Guy* and *La Belle Époque* reveals that ageing is neither a linear decline nor a mere accumulation of past experiences. In these films, nostalgia in old age is a complex, mediated, and often artificial engagement with the past. Through life review and reminiscence, the protagonists negotiate identity, memory, and the passage of time, confronting both continuity and rupture in their personal histories.

Both films demonstrate that old age is not necessarily a period of stagnation or regression. By foregrounding the artificial reconstruction of past moments, through immersive reenactments, cinematic techniques, or performative ageing, they emphasize the contingent and interpretive nature of memory. Nostalgia becomes a lens through which characters reassess their lives, rather than a straightforward longing for a lost golden age. It is this reflective, sometimes playful, confrontation with the past that enables regeneration, self-understanding, and the reclamation of agency, even in later life. Moreover, the films illustrate the social

and cultural dimensions of ageing. The protagonists' apparent "outdatedness" is not a simple personal failing but a reflection of societal expectations and cultural hierarchies. By interrogating these frameworks, the films complicate conventional notions of decline, demonstrating that age is performative, relational, and negotiated rather than predetermined.

Ultimately, both *Guy* and *La Belle Époque* present ageing as a space for redefinition, where life review and nostalgia converge to produce a nuanced, dynamic understanding of identity and existence. In this sense, old age can be a reflection and the continued shaping of a life well lived.

End Notes

1. These examples attest to the markedly cinephilic dimension that such returns to the past may assume, insofar as each of these three films asserts itself as a reflexive commentary on major figures of French cinema (Paul Vecchiali and some of the actresses from his cinematic pantheon in *Le Cancre*; Jean-Pierre Léaud in *Le lion est mort ce soir*; and Catherine Deneuve in *La Dernière Folie de Claire Darling*). In a similar vein, one may add *Les Plus Belles Années d'une vie* (Claude Lelouch, 2019), which reunites the protagonists of *Un homme et une femme* (1966), and in which the memories of the characters portrayed by Anouk Aimée and Jean-Louis Trintignant are interwoven with images from Lelouch's canonical film.
2. This term suggested by Timothy Shary and Nancy McVittie (2016), and expanded by Josephine Dolan (2017), describe performances in which a younger actor portrays an ageing character, often through the use of performance, CGI, prosthetics, make-up, etc.
3. In *Guy*, the singer hints to Gauthier that he has suffered a stroke. However, he does not appear to have been significantly or permanently affected by this condition.
4. "[...] age as well as gender can be viewed as performative, in that each of us performs the actions associated with chronological age minute by minute, and that the repetition of these performances creates a so-called reality of age both for the subject and those who interact with the subject." (Lipscomb & Leni Marshall 2)
5. "[...] aging is a creation of this time and place, more cultural than biological, determined by social institutions, or, more optimistically, a set of life experiences we can consciously shape, once we see how others are attempting to shape them for us. Thus learning to be old requires that we both observe how aging is socially constructed and find ways to resist being molded to its dictates." (Cruikshank 2)
6. *Guy* is not very different from those well-known French popular singers of the 1960s to 1980s who, in recent years, have taken part in musical tours (such as *Âge tendre et tête de bois* or *Stars 80*) that capitalize on nostalgia for these decades and are primarily aimed at a generational audience.
7. Moreover, this idea runs counter to Bourdieusian approaches to the sociology of culture, in which cultural tastes are closely correlated with class-based habitus. In these two films, however, this is not the case, as Guy and Victor claim tastes and practices associated with popular culture despite belonging to the bourgeoisie.

8. "The AIDS years completely upended an entertainment system that had transformed a previously stagnant France. You have to see what France was like after the Second World War, and then how, all of a sudden, with the record industry, but not only that, things started to move. A liberation, with its parade of flaws, perversions, failed utopias, but never mind that. And then, suddenly, AIDS arrives, telling you that the party is over. People stop laughing, society becomes 'over-regulated'. It's enough to make you furious, to scream. Like a tolling bell..." (Alex Lutz, French press kit of *Guy*; my translation).
9. "I wanted to show behind-the-scenes, like those I've been surrounded by since I was born. It allowed me and my team to highlight the artisanal side of cinema and theater! Dressers, set designers, stagehands, assistants, actors: the film shows a team at work!" (Nicolas Bedos, French press kit of *La Belle Époque*; my translation).
10. It is also regrettable that the film adopts a somewhat misogynistic view of female success by failing to give greater weight to Marianne's trajectory. Although she runs an innovative company and is driven by a strong work ethic, she is led to downplay her own achievements, while Victor's trajectory is more highly valued, even though he wallows in self-pity and has produced nothing for years.
11. "L'invité de 7h50". *France Inter*, November 6, 2019. URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mB-EJRFwakM.
12. "All the images will disappear. They will vanish all at once, just as the millions of images that once lay behind our grandparents' foreheads, and our parents' as well, have vanished. One day we will exist only in our children's memories, among grandchildren and people who have not yet been born. Like desire, memory never stops. It binds the dead to the living, real beings to imaginary ones, dreams to history. Everything will be erased in a single second. There will be silence, and no words to express it. From an open mouth nothing will come out. Neither 'I' nor 'me'. In conversations around a festive table, we will be nothing more than a first name, increasingly faceless, until we disappear into the anonymous mass of a distant generation." (01:31:45; my translation)
13. Implicitly, the film's ending suggests an affirmative answer. As Gauthier and Guy go horseback riding at dawn after a night of celebration, the singer asks the young man whether it was in Tours that his mother saw him perform, even though Gauthier has never mentioned that city. The precision of the location implies that Guy is recalling a particular moment, most likely the moment of Gauthier's conception. At the end of the scene, Guy encourages Gauthier to set his horse into a gallop, affectionately telling him, "Go on, my boy," the film's final line, which suggests that the singer acknowledges his filial bond with Gauthier.

Works Cited

Baker, Lucie and Eyal Gringart. "Body image and self-esteem in older adulthood". *Ageing and Society*, vol. 29/6, 2009, pp. 977–995.

Butler, Robert N. "The life review: an interpretation of reminiscence in the aged". *Psychiatry*, no. 26, 1963, pp. 65–75.

Courcoux, Charles-Antoine, Gwénaëlle Le Gras and Raphaëlle Moine (eds). *L'Âge des stars. Des images à l'épreuve du vieillissement*. L'Âge d'homme, 2017.

Cross, Gary. *Consumed Nostalgia. Memory in the Age of Fast Capitalism*. Columbia University Press, 2015.

Cruikshank, Margaret. *Learning to Be Old. Gender, Culture, and Aging*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2013 (3rd ed).

DeFalco, Amelia. *Uncanny Subjects. Aging in Contemporary Narrative*. The Ohio State University Press, 2010.

Dolan, Josephine. *Contemporary Cinema and 'Old Age'. Gender and the Silvering of Stardom*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

French press kit: *Guy*. Apollo Films Distribution, 2018. URL: https://medias.unifrance.org/medias/130/232/190594/presse/guy-dossier-de-presse-francais.pdf.

French press kit: *La Belle Époque*. Distribution Pathé, 2019. URL: https://medias.unifrance.org/medias/199/35/205767/presse/la-belle-epoque-dossier-de-presse-francais.pdf.

Garland, Jeff, and Christina Garland. *Life Review in Health and Social Care: A Practitioner's Guide*. Brunner-Routledge, 2001.

Hurd Clarke, Laura, Meridith Griffin, and the PACC Research Team. "Failing bodies: body image and multiple chronic conditions in later life". *Qualitative Health Research*, vol. 18/8, 2008, pp. 1084–1095.

Jankélévitch, Vladimir. *L'Irréversible et la Nostalgie*. Flammarion, 1974.

Kenyon, Gary M., and William L. Randall. *Restorying our Lives. Personal Growth Through Autobiographical Reflection*. Praeger, 1997.

Lahire, Bernard. *La Culture des individus. Dissonances culturelles et distinction de soi*. La Découverte, 2004.

Lipscomb, Valerie Barnes, and Leni Marshall (eds). *Staging Age. The Performance of Age in Theatre, Dance, and Film*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

Niemeyer, Katharina (ed). *Media and Nostalgia. Yearning for the Past, Present and Future*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

Ray, Ruth E. *Beyond Nostalgia. Aging and Life-Story Writing*. The University Press of Virginia, 2000.

Shary, Timothy, and Nancy McVittie. *Fade to Gray. Aging in American Cinema*. The University of Texas Press, 2016.

Starobinski, Jean. "Le concept de nostalgie". *Diogène*, no. 54, 1966, pp. 92–115.

Swinnen, Aagje. "Ageing in film". In Twigg, Julia, and Wendy Martin (eds), *Routledge Handbook of Cultural Gerontology*. Routledge, 2015, pp. 69–76.

Weinstein, Deena Weinstein. "Constructed Nostalgia for Rock's Golden Age: 'I Believe in Yesterday'", *Volume !*, no. 11/1, 2015, pp. 20–36. URL: https://journals.openedition.org/volume/4314

Woodward, Kathleen. "Telling Stories: Aging, Reminiscence and the Life Review". *Occasional Papers of the Doreen B. Townsend Centre for the Humanities*, no. 9, 1997, pp. 1–17.