Focusing on Yellow: Reframing the Gilets Jaunes Through Cinema

Dardonville, Yann

Focusing on Yellow: Reframing the *Gilets Jaunes* Through Cinema

Yann Dardonville

Yann Dardonville
s3685748
ResMA Arts, Literature, and Media
Supervisor: Pepita Hesselberth
Second Reader: Janna Houwen
Date of Submission: August 15, 2024
Word Count: 36290
y.h.m.dardonville@umail.leidenuniv.nl

Table of Contents

Introduction

In November 2018, a surge of neon yellow began to spread from the roundabouts of France to the cities. The *gilets jaunes* ("yellow vests") movement proliferated quickly; within a matter of weeks, millions of protestors would process through the streets of Paris, regional metropoles, as well as smaller French cities. The unusual length, scale, and character of the protests left many scrambling to make sense of the emerging movement. Mainstream news media organizations were the first to be transfixed by the novel phenomenon: journalists donned their own vests as they took on their traditional role as interpreters of the present. They would produce an enormous quantity of images and commentary in their attempts to exegete the movement, and for more than a year, the *gilets jaunes* became the fourth most mediatized subject in France.[1] Also contributing to the growing sensation of vertigo around apprehending the movement was the enormous cultural output of the members themselves. Struggling to take ahold of their own image, as well as trying to make sense of their own actions, the *gilets jaunes*—like other major movements of the 2010s—filmed themselves with their smartphones on a constant basis. Facebook livestreams and short online videos became a way for members not only for self-documentation, but also holding the state accountable in the face of mounting police repression. In the endeavor to make sense of the movement, though, there existed a third principal actor, less visible, who straddled the line between being both inside and outside: researchers who went into the various spaces of the movement and observed the movement over a long period of time, amongst them a large number of anthropologists, sociologists, and documentary filmmakers.[2]

Like the ethnographers and sociologists who conducted fieldwork on the roundabouts and in the *gilets jaunes*' assembly spaces, documentary filmmakers engaged in long-term processes of observation and interpretation, bringing their much larger, expensive cameras into a sea of smartphones. Their presence is confirmed by the increasing number of documentary films released in cinemas in recent years. Films like *J'veux du soleil* (2019), *Imagine, demain on*

[1] The first three subjects were music, football, and the internet, respectively. From Brigitte Sebbah and Pierre Ratinaud, "Frénésie médiatique dans la presse quotidienne française : analyse lexicométrique de plus de 100 000 articles sur les Gilets jaunes," in *Les gilets jaunes: un défi journalistique*, by Jean-Marie Charon and Arnaud Mercier (Paris: Éditions Panthéon-Assas, 2022).

[2] The first chapter of this thesis will provide an overview of the various studies conducted in the social sciences on the *gilets jaunes*.

gagne (2020), *Un peuple* (2022) and *Boum Boum* (2022) capture the movement from up close and personal. *Les rendez-vous du samedi* (2022) uses 16mm film from the protests to fashion a poetic reflection on crisis. *Les Voies Jaunes* (2023) conducts a retrospective ethnography of the movement. And *Un pays qui se tient sage* (2020) uses the images captured by the protestors of police violence to question the legitimacy of state violence. This confluence of documentaries has allowed some to claim that they constitute a new "genre" of films.[3] I would personally not go as far as to say that these films have produced a cohesive genre. However, I argue in this thesis that this *tendance* merits investigation in order to ask what the role is that cinema, and in this case especially documentary film, might continue to play in an era of mobilization which has seen a dramatic increase in the quantity of images produced by smartphones. Indeed, reflecting the growing role of online activism during the Arab Spring, Gezi Park, as well as Occupy movements of the early 2010s, recent scholarship on the intersection of protest and media has often focused on visual activism and digital media, considering in particular the cultural production of members of the protests.[4] When cinema is considered in such accounts, it has mainly been to question how fictional and documentary films intervene retrospectively to produce a cultural memory of the protests.[5] Few of these studies, however, broach how documentary film can do precisely what the supposedly counter-hegemonic uses of mobile devices in the (self-)capturing of social movements attempt to achieve, which is to challenge hegemonic media in fashioning new images of a social movement.

When we are not direct participants in a social movement itself, when we are not on the scene to bear witness, we cannot help but engage with a movement through media (and even when we are present on the scene, media still plays a large role in shaping what we understand the movement to be). In this thesis, I contend that the image of a movement, and more importantly the frames through which the image of the movement is not only reproduced but also arguably produced, are fundamental to how we (dis)engage with the movement, (dis)identify with it, and even engage with future movements. This thesis further proposes that the *gilets jaunes* can serve as a case study for understanding the relationship between two modes of

[3] "Les Gilets Jaunes, Signe de Cinéma," Le Regard Culturel, n.d., https://www.radiofrance.fr/franceculture/podcasts/le-regard-culturel/le-regard-culturel-chronique-du-lundi-20-novembre-2023-9347860.
[4] See McGarry et al., *The Aesthetics of Global Protest*.
[5] Ghazal, *Egyptian Cinema and the 2011 Revolution*.

framing social movements, specifically, between the dominant mainstream media frames of television news media, and the alternative frames produced by documentary film. As I show in the first chapter, television news media played a crucial role in the initial mediatization of the movement. While television news organizations were a main driver behind the *gilets jaunes*' initial success, though, they would soon transform into one of the movement's fiercest critics. Accordingly, I explore the different structuring forces driving the largely negative mainstream media framing of the movement. The next two chapters are dedicated to four films which reframe the movement through what I call documentary frames. These frames, I will argue, give rise to different, often more intimate images, and can facilitate different forms of encounter with the social movement. Concentrating on these two modes of framing will also allow me to reflect on a third mode of framing, albeit in passing: social media, which in my estimation serves as a medium through which to deframe the movement.

Framing, reframing, deframing—in using this language, my thesis draws on an extensive body of existing work around framing, bridging the fields of media studies, cultural analysis, and social movement studies. In invoking the concept of media framing, I follow Todd Gitlin who, building on the work of Goffman (1974)[6], defines these in his seminal text, *The Whole World Was Watching*, as "the persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation of selection, emphasis, and exclusion, by which symbol-handles routinely organize discourse, whether verbal or visual."[7] Media frames are a powerful tool for journalists that allows them to simplify large amounts of information and relay it expeditiously in a packaged form to their audiences. However, as Gitlin and other researchers since have shown, media frames are also essential to the way that we engage with the world: "we frame reality in order to negotiate it, manage it, comprehend it, and choose appropriate repertoires of cognition and action."[8] The centrality of media framing to determining action and orientations is also particularly important when it comes to social movements, which are fundamentally mediatized phenomena. Researchers in social movement studies, such as Bart Cammaerts, have extensively drawn on framing theory to make sense of how movements deploy their own media frames in order to

[6] Goffman understands frames as "schemata of interpretation" that "locate, perceive, identify and label" social phenomena." From Goffman, *Frame Analysis*, 21
[7] Todd Gitlin, *"The Whole World Is Watching": Mass Media in the Making & Unmaking of the New Left* (Berkeley, Calif.: Univ. of Calif. Press, 1980), 7.
[8] Ibid., 6-7.

"communicate its aims, to build collective identities, and to mobilize."[9] The extent to which these frames are able to mobilize people, however, is also determined by how they are relayed in the media through established media frames.

To illustrate how these different frames interact on a concrete level, Gitlin takes the movements of the New Left in 1960s America as case studies and shows how mass media coverage partook in the production of a "common sense" through which the general public sense apprehended these movements. He highlights the important role that media frames played in quietly regulating the images associated with the movement, such as by dividing "movements into legitimate main acts and illegitimate sideshows."[10] Dependent on the exposure that mass media provides, social movements find themselves compelled to adopt the images used to portray them into their own imaginaries. This, in turn, shapes the way they organize themselves, their registers of action. Media frames therefore have an at once restrictive and domesticating function vis-à-vis a movement—the shorthand of news media fixes an image of the movement in place, often on an unconscious level, that becomes operative within the collective imaginary. These frames are laden with norms and suppositions, bringing with them certain hierarchies: what kind of action is acceptable and what is not, what is legitimate and what is not. They even function to determine who can be treated as human and who is not. Media frames, in other words, can be said to contribute to what Jacques Rancière calls the "distribution of the sensible… a delimitation of [14] spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience."[11] As I explore in greater depth in my first chapter, the kind of regulation through media framing that Gitlin observed is just as pertinent to the *gilets jaunes* movement as it was to the movements of the sixties.[12] Already, on an anecdotal level, I should say that whenever I speak to a French

[9] Bart Cammaerts, "The Production of Anti-Austerity Discourses and Frames," in *The Circulation of Anti-Austerity Protest*, by Bart Cammaerts (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 39–67, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-70123-3_3, 41.
[10] Gitlin, *The Whole World Is Watching*, 6.
[11] Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator* (London New York: Verso, 2009), 13.
[12] Mainstream media frames have been central to maintaining the social distance between the general public and social movements in France. As Axelle Carballo, a graduate student at the *Institute Français de Presse* at *Paris-Panthéon-Assas*, remarked, there are striking parallels, for instance, between the media coverage of the *banlieue* riots of 2005 and the *gilets jaunes*, especially with respect to how they both insisted on frames of "deviance." Media frames then and now have worked to establish a clear line: either you toe normative lines and do not exceed the contours of "good" protest, or you spill over the frame to become a "bad," deviant, and even violent figure. See "Révoltes de 2005 et crise des Gilets jaunes : étude du traitement médiatique de la violence populaire dans la presse quotidienne nationale."

person about doing research on the *gilets jaunes*, I am more often than not met with raised eyebrows or expressions of bemusement—or even outright disgust. This is undoubtedly a result of the negative coverage of the movement in mainstream media. In effect, the image of the *gilets jaune* to some, both on the left and right of the political spectrum, has become synonymous with economic and social disorder, an image which provokes both disdain and repulsion amongst large segments of the population.[13] Yet as ethnographic research and the documentary films I consider make clear, much of the reality of the *gilets jaunes* movement spills beyond preestablished frames—this is also why the movement would provoke so much confusion amongst "experts."

What happens when mainstream media frames collide with the documentary frame? In *The Corporeal Image*, David MacDougall remarks that the practice of framing is also central to documentary filmmaking:

> Framing people, objects, and events with a camera is always "about" something. It is a way of pointing out, of describing, of judging. It domesticates and organizes vision. It both enlarges and diminishes. It diminishes by leaving out those connections in life to which the photographer is blind, as when it imposes an explanation on events that we know to be more complex. Or it does this as a deliberate sacrifice to some seemingly more important argument or dramatic effect. Framing enlarges through a similar process. It is what lifts something out of its background in order to look at it more closely, as we might pick up a leaf in a forest.[14]

Each of the documentary filmmakers I consider, like their journalistic counterparts, must make choices as to what aspects of the movement they emphasize and present. This means that in fashioning an image of the movement, a filmmaker has significant power in determining how it is received and engaged with. Through the process of representation, they participate directly, whether they like it or not, in the process of definition. With this power to reframe, however, comes bundled a number of political and ethical considerations, as well as questions over legitimacy. In effect, these filmmakers all have a responsibility to represent the movement in a manner faithful to its participants. Moreover, their films all participate in organizing different

[13] Etienne Balibar, "Le Sens Du Face-à-Face," in *Le Fond de l'air Est Jaune: Comprendre Une Révolte Inédite* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2019).
[14] David MacDougall, *The Corporeal Image: Film, Ethnography, and the Senses* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2006), 3-4.

modes of engagement with the *gilets jaunes* movement. As I will argue, this happens not only on a visual level but also a corporeal one. They stage different kinds of encounters with the movement than those reproduced through the lens of mainstream media. They must move alongside the movement, and as I explore in Chapter II and III, who they move with and how they move will determine the kind of encounter that is facilitated.

On Methodology

In this thesis, my first chapter will introduce the *gilets jaunes* movement through a literature review which pays particular attention to the ways in which a dominant image of the movement has been framed and constructed for the general public via television and news coverage. The fact that "framing" is a verb, as Mieke Bal remarks in *Traveling Concepts*, implies necessarily that it is an action "performed by agent who is responsible, accountable, for his or her acts."[15] My first chapter thus seeks to "sharpen the image" of the movement and identify the agents responsible for how it has been framed in the media. I must note here that my style of writing in this chapter is inspired by a methodological approach recently outlined by Joost de Bloois as "cultural-analysis-as-reportage."[16] This approach, inspired by Les Beck's "Live Sociology," advocates for a kind of analysis "…concerned not so much with cultural 'objects' for their own sake but with events, with culture as it is happening here and now."[17] Though I come to the events of the *gilets jaunes* belatedly, I report on the mediatic construction of the *gilets jaunes* with the same sense of urgency de Bloois calls for on the assertion that the dominant media framing of the *gilets jaunes* remains an active force shaping the French political imaginary to this day, just as the *gilets jaunes* are still themselves present in the French political landscape, even if more muted nowadays.[18]

My reportage, nonetheless, is not exhaustive. As de Bloois remarks, cultural-analysis-as-reportage "privileges the incomplete, the partial, the topical, the emergent," and in this vein, the

---

[15] Mieke Bal, *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide*, Green College Lectures (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002),135.
[16] Joost De Bloois, "Cultural Analysis as Reportage," in *Future of Cultural Analysis*, ed. Murat Aydemir, Noa Roei, and Aylin Kuryel (Amsterdam University Press, 2024).
[17] Les Back, "Live Sociology: Social Research and Its Futures," *The Sociological Review* 60, no. 1_suppl (June 2012): 18–39, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954X.2012.02115.x., 7.
[18] I want to put forward here as well that my description of the *gilets jaunes*'s media construction can also contribute to understanding the general processes by which contemporary mainstream news media acts to ascertain any social movement.

account I give only paints the framing process in broad strokes.[19] It does not, for instance, reflect extensively on the role the *gilets jaunes* had in framing themselves through their livestreams and other communicative means, a subject which demands further research. Furthermore, while I ground my account in social scientific research, my writing does not come from a place of political neutrality. In doing this, I am heeding de Bloois' call for a kind of cultural analysis that recognizes itself as "candidly political."[20] If I have chosen to write about the *gilets jaunes* after five years have passed, it is because I judge that the violence they experienced then is still present today, evidenced by the quickness with which they are still dismissed in journalistic and academic circles. By describing the process by which the movement's detractors have intentionally and unintentionally discredited it, I affirm my solidarity with the movement and my desire to have it—as well as its members—be taken seriously. In framing the movement's framing, my first chapter can be conceived as an attempt to "unfix" the dominant image that has been produced of the movement.

Providing an account of how the *gilets jaunes* have been processed as media images also gives me a frame through which I will subsequently consider a selection of documentary films—*J'veux du Soleil, Les Voiese Jaunes, Un peuple,* and *Boum boum* — which I argue must be understood as attempts at a "live sociology" of the movement, documents which evince "forms of attentiveness that can admit the fleeting, distributed, multiple, sensory, emotional and kinaesthetic aspects of the social world," and which *"work on the move* in order to attend to the newly coordinated nature of social reality."[21] In effect, as they attempt to move along with the movement, they make sensible dimensions of sociality that are difficult to capture in writing. My objective is to move fluidly through these films in order to distinguish precisely what kind of forms of attention and sensorial engagement they can produce. By constructing alternative frames through which to engage with the movement, they become operative as a political force. As these films run across a wide spectrum of documentary modes,[22] I do not attempt to analyze them according to a unified theoretical framework. Once more, I heed de Bloois' call to engage in a kind of cultural analysis that uses "theory" in order to "illuminate, actually make more real

[19] De Bloois, "Cultural Analysis as Reportage."
[20] De Bloois, "Cultural Analysis as Reportage."
[21] Back, "Live Sociology." 28.
[22] For more on documentary modes, see Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*.

and concrete, that upon which it is focused."[23] My one constant supposition remains that these films all engage their viewers, per Pepita Hesselberth, deictically and on a corporeal level, and depending on their approach bring into focus different aspects of the movement.[24]

As for the remaining structure of my thesis, I organize the two chapters following the first according to how the various documentary filmmakers position themselves relative to the movement in time and in space, using close reading, visual analysis, and formal analysis to assess the boundaries and effects of the frames they produce. The first of these two chapters, Chapter II, considers *J'veux du soleil* and *Les Voies Jaunes* in matters of urgency and slowness. I will argue that the former film, as the first to be produced on the *gilets jaunes*, moves quickly across the landscape of the *gilets jaunes* as the movement is unfolding to intervene directly against the dominant media construction of the *gilets* jaunes to make the *gilets jaunes* visible under a different light and "correct" their image. The latter, meanwhile, meets the movement retrospectively, meandering slowly through their living spaces, taking its time to produce a radically different kinds of images and by extension a different form of encounter, less based on making the *gilets jaunes* visible than it is in making them audible. Not as concerned with time as it is with space, Chapter III considers the two documentary films which choose to stay physically close to the subjects they film over longer period of time, *Un peuple* and *Boum boum*. I will argue that both films, by maintaining the camera's proximity to the protestors over time, produce narrative framings of the movement that also make sensible the affective dimensions of the movement. In the process, they produce affective encounters which question the validity of the dominant media frame. I close out this thesis with a coda which reflects on the "doing of politics" of frames, the relationship of the documentary frame to the social media frame, and future avenues for research.

[23] De Bloois, "Cultural Analysis as Reportage."
[24] Pepita Hesselberth, *Cinematic Chronotopes: Here, Now, Me* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015).

Chapter I: Sharpening the Image of the *Gilets Jaunes*

In this chapter, I give a historical account of the *gilets jaunes* and their mediatic construction, and in the process provide a frame through which we can seize the general coordinates of the social movement, such as how it unfolded over time as well as who composed it. An initial glance reveals that the movement was never fully homogenous nor cohesive in its demands and instantiations—the bluntness of the neon yellow vest, in other words, hides the radical heterogeneity of the movement in terms of its demands, social composition, and forms of expression. I propose that it is this heterogeneity which would pose such difficulty to the mainstream media tasked with the interpretation of the *gilets jaunes*. Indeed, if a social movement comes to us like points of light through a receptacle, journalists are those responsible for developing them into a recognizable image and sharpening it. To do this, they engage in a process of media framing, drawing on preexisting patterns of recognition in order to make sense of and translate what they see for the general public. These media frames in turn play a consequential role in shaping the public's political imaginary. However, when new elements present themselves that are not easily assimilable to existing media frames or exceed them altogether, or when usual processes of source-gathering fail, news organizations can struggle to recognize what lies before them and produce erroneous or even bad-faith depictions. I argue that this kind of mediatic failure was at play in the news treatment of the *gilets jaunes* and that this contributed to the distortion of their image.

Here, I suggest that the usual process of media recognition was jammed, first of all, by the *gilets jaunes*' refusal to allow journalists into the fold, and secondly, by the growing divergence between the familiar media frame and the speech and actions of the protestors. I lean on existing studies on the *gilets jaunes* in media and discourse analysis in order to draw out how BFMTV, a major private French television news channel, was instrumental to the initial magnification of the movement in public discourse. However, when the movement took a novel direction that was no longer in line with the private interests of the news channel, BFMTV began to demonize the movement by covering it in bad faith. In effect, the movement was increasingly reduced by BFMTV as well as other mainstream outlets' news coverage to a series of violent tropes and caricatures based extremely loosely on reality. This mainstream framing would then be taken up and exploited by President Emmanuel Macron's government, which in order to undercut the protests, engaged in a dual-pronged media strategy aimed at discrediting the

movement. I argue that the Macron government reinforced the framing of a "violent" and "senseless" movement by both ramping up aggressive police measures against the protestors and creating the media ploy of the *Grand débat*, a national "conversation" that in reality policed the boundaries of who could speak "legitimately" and how they could speak. Not only would this media-police strategy function take the wind out of the movement's sails, but it would also work to further consolidate a series of associations and images that still plague the *gilets jaunes*, and more broadly the popular classes, to this day.

However, the dominant framing propagated by mainstream news media and by the government was not the only one circulating in France at the time. I show that alternative frames were often at work when regional and independent journalists were covering the movement, and that the *gilets jaunes* themselves actively produced their own media with the objective of presenting a different image of themselves. Moreover, many researchers and writers were attempting to produce more nuanced views of the social movement in a bid to reinterpret it more favorably and undo the symbolic violence inflicted by the dominant narrative. The documentary films that I consider in the following chapters complement and contribute, in their own way, to this broader set of efforts to reframe the movement. Nevertheless, before we can consider how each film reframes the movement, we must first get a sense of what kind of frame it is working against.

The beginnings of the movement

Similar to other protest movements from the 2010s like Occupy, the *Indignados*, and the Arab Spring movements, the *gilets jaunes* first gained momentum online. Facebook pages such as the massively populated "*Le peuple en colère*!" as well as smaller regional groups participated early on in the structuring of the movement, serving as relays for disseminating information and coordinating collective action. The stirrings of discontent over the government's implementation of a tax at the gas pump, especially shortly after the suppression of the wealth tax ("*Impôt sur la fortune"*), led to Priscilla Ludosky, a cosmetics vendor, presenting a widely circulated petition which would quickly gain traction. Citizens living in peri-urban zones, marked by a strong dependence on personal vehicles for transportation, perceived this measure as egregiously unjust – in the name of ecological sobriety, the *petit peuple* was being asked to tighten their belts while the government continued to carve out exceptions for the wealthy and hollow out the existing

social model. When President Macron's government failed to address their demands for the tax increase to be revoked, calls circulated on social media for protestors to take to the streets.

November 18, 2018, marked the first day of physical occupation. Protestors were called on to occupy and block circulation around roundabouts all across France as well as to block highway tolls to disrupt the circulation of people and goods. The movement's original locus was thus not located within the urban center as past social movements, but rather in those areas geographers such as Christophe Guilluy have termed as *La France pavillionaire*—the not quite rural, not quite urban zone that has become home to a growing percentage of the population.[25] The selection of the roundabout as the primary space of occupation and contestation was not anodyne. As political theorist Charles Devallennes has noted, the roundabout is a monument of both symbolic and practical centrality for those who drive around them every day, an essential node in the fabric of the peri-urbanity out of which many of the protestors emerged.[26] For political scientist Laurent Jeanpierre, the roundabout became a site which crystallized the essential link between geographical and social mobility. The movement was indeed quite sensitive to the question of movement itself. As Jeanpierre writes, "Blocking a roundabout, a toll, becomes a means for sharing with others the constraint of mobility and what it expresses."[27][28] The concrete circles, representative of a broader regime of suburban space which keeps individuals separate from one another, suddenly became spaces of intense social activity and community. Blockage and occupation effectively converted space sacrificed for commercial enterprise into a social metaphor. The non-place[29] of the roundabouts were produced into novel forms of shared, public space.

At the same time that the roundabouts were becoming a regular fixture across France, there were calls across social media to expand the stage of the protests to France's metropoles, to take up and reappropriate space which relied on the circulation and labor of peripheral zones. Every Saturday, protestors from around France convened in the capital. These became so routine as to be named sequentially as "*Actes*," theatrical chapters in an ever-expanding performance of

[25] Christophe Guilluy, *La France Périphérique: Comment on a Sacrifié Les Classes Populaires* (Paris: Flammarion, 2014).
[26] *The Gilets Jaunes and the New Social Contract* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2021), 3.
[27] Laurent Jeanpierre, *In Girum: Les Leçons Politiques Des Ronds-Points* (Paris: La Découverte, 2019), 52.
[28] Unless indicated otherwise, all translations of French sources are mine.
[29] I refer here, of course, to Marc Augé's *Non-places* (1991).

refusal.[30] True to their unconventionally theatrical nature, these protests broke with the unwritten rules of social protest that had been established a century before: they eschewed established sites of popular protest such as the Place de la Bastille or the Place de la République, preferring instead to target sites of everyday consumption, such as the shop-lined Champs-Elysées.[31] They refused to announce their demonstrations and to negotiate with representatives of the state, instead taking to the streets unannounced. The Parisian protests mobilized hundreds of thousands of protestors in the first months of the protests and would continue to rally thousands more on a consistent basis over the many months of the protests. Another novelty of the movement was that the protests also spread across regional metropolises, with significant numbers of protestors recorded in cities like Lyon, Toulouse, Lille, and Bordeaux, besides Paris. The movement further registered considerable participation in French overseas territories such as Guadeloupe, Martinique, and La Réunion. And, of course, the movement stayed notably active online on social media platforms and services such as Facebook and Telegram, which provided certain yellow vests with the space to participate in discussions without necessarily having to protest physically.

The resistance against the increase of the gas tax, the initial spark for the protests, soon gave way a panoply of demands and complaints primarily anchored around addressing social and economic inequality. More than expressing a coherent and fully practicable political program to replace the dominant regime, the movement instead inventoried an ever-growing list of grievances, both personal and collective. These claims were multiplied, moreover, across a series of media: on the roundabouts, the *gilets jaunes* wrote down their protestations in *cahiers de doléances* which were then structured into a list of demands by their general assemblies. Perhaps most visibly, however, the protests gave rise to a prolific *littérature sauvage* which tagged city walls and converted the yellow vests into canvases for creative political expression, as well as a variety of loud chants which sought to disrupt the everyday spaces of consumption.[32] The yellow vest in particular was at once a fitting and practical symbol for the moment: it quickly became

[30] Michaël Fossel, "Le Théâtre Des Gilets Jaunes," *Libération*, April 4, 2019, https://www.liberation.fr/debats/2019/04/04/le-theatre-des-gilets-jaunes_1719392/.
[31] Samuel Hayat, "L'économie Morale et Le Pouvoir," in *Le Fond de l'air Est Jaune: Comprendre Une Révolte Inédite* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2019).
[32] Artières, "« Les Gilets Jaunes Triompheront »."

the shared marker of discontent, conjugating particular grievances and political demands into a broader unified aesthetic of visibility.

Movement composition

The yellow vest, required by law to be in every vehicle in case of a roadside emergency since 2005 by the French government, has not only acquired its particular power as a symbol of visibility and protection, but also for the ability of anyone to don the vest. The movement has been noted for its heterogeneous social composition, with a gender distribution that counted slightly more men (55%) to women (45%).[33] Moreover, while the movement gathered together a significant portion of retirees, it was overall transgenerational, although with a weaker presence of younger members. The *gilets jaunes* came primarily from "the poor, peri-urban and non-unionized working class and lower-middle class," and even included a subsection of small entrepreneurs and business owners, although over time, the movement shed its middle-class character to become a movement that primarily rallied the urban poor.[34] This population, described as the *"petits-moyens*" or "small means/low-middles" by Isabelle Coutant had often found themselves locked outside of traditional bodies of political representation. [35] Not only did they register weak participation in elections, but they also generally fell outside the purview of trade unions and labor politics. Given this existing disconnect, the movement was thus remarkable for having brought out a significant population of individuals who had never protested before, some of whom had never even voted, and many of whom considered themselves to be first and foremost "apolitical."[36]

In lieu of sharing concrete class interests, the protestors were rather bound together by an affective thread, a shared feeling of precarity based on a feeling of dispossession and *déclassement*, specifically in the face of weakening purchasing power, dwindling government assistance, and the general sentiment that it was becoming increasingly difficult to make it to the

[33] Despite the parity in gender, the movement has been particularly remembered as a *mouvement de femmes*, a movement in which women in particular took on important leadership roles. See Bantigny, "Un Événement," in *Le Fond de l'air Est Jaune: Comprendre Une Révolte Inédite* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2019).
[34] Devellennes, *The Gilets Jaunes and the New Social Contract*, 36.
[35] Coutant, "Les « petits-Moyens » Prennent La Parole," in *Le Fond de l'air Est Jaune: Comprendre Une Révolte Inédite* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2019), 148.
[36] There was, albeit, a non-negligeable number of yellow vests who had previously belonged to a union or a party; these members often found themselves disillusioned with the state of affairs of labor politics, constrained by the tendency of unions to compromise with the State and negotiate with the police.

end of the month (hence the popular slogan, "fin du mois, fin du monde [end of the month, end of the world]"). I therefore consider the *gilets jaunes* to belong to the *precariat*, the "fundamentally affective class" that Lauren Berlant writes about in *Cruel Optimism*, for whom "spreading precarity provides the dominant *structure* and *experience* of the present moment, cutting across class and localities."[37] Indeed, many of these protestors had seen their living standards and social gains, negotiated in the heyday of the *trentes glorieuses*, crumble away as successive government reforms hollowed out France's once robust welfare system. Their preoccupation with precarity is evidenced by the substance of their demands: anti-precarity measures were a central pillar within the constellation of demands made by the yellow vests.[38]

The *gilets jaunes* were not only bound by a feeling of insecurity, however, but also by a shared anger over the economic and political injustice exemplified by the growing division between the wealthy elites and *le peuple*, the "people." Over and over again, protestors echoed the sentiment of "*ras-le-bol*" (the feeling of being fed up), particularly in relation to the presidentialist political system incarnated by Macron, who became a symbol of the fundamental disconnect between two populations, between the governing class who disposed of all decision-making power and the invisible majority who effectively had no say. Consequently, the protestors set out to produce their own spaces for deliberation. Intentionally disregarding the political cleavages between the left and the right, the *gilets jaunes* believed instead in fostering on roundabouts and in their assemblies trans- or a-partisan spaces in which anyone could participate as long as they agreed to respect communally decided rules, written down onto *chartes*, communally agreed charters.[39] Refusing to reproduce the verticality of the political system that had muzzled them, they insisted on a mode of doing politics that was horizontal, direct, and deliberative. In other words, they refused to be spoken for by or to speak on behalf of others; one spoke along or with but never for others. It must be noted that in practice, however, this was not always easy or practical to achieve.

The ethos of self-representation of the roundabout would persist throughout the time and space of the *gilets jaunes*, even as the composition and approach of the movement mutated to

[37] Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 192.
[38] Isabelle Coutant, "Les « petits-Moyens » Prennent La Parole," in *Le Fond de l'air Est Jaune: Comprendre Une Révolte Inédite* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2019).
[39] Zakaria Bendali et al., "Le Mouvement Des Gilets Jaunes : Un Apprentissage En Pratique(s) de La Politique ?:," *Politix* n° 128, no. 4 (March 12, 2020): 143–77, https://doi.org/10.3917/pox.128.0143.

structure a shared platform for political action in the *assemblées generales* and the *assemblées des assemblées*. Many *gilets jaunes* groups adopted different lines and approaches to the same political questions and retained regional particularities. It is difficult, then, to speak of the *gilets jaunes* as a unified social movement. On this subject, I concur with Hugo Reis, a union leader interviewed on the movement, that there was not one single *gilets jaunes* movement, but multiple, concurrent *gilets jaunes* movements that at times paralleled and other times diverged from one another.[40] Consequently, it is impossible, in my view, to provide a total, representative account of the movement. Even in my attempt here to give a faithful initial framing of the *gilets jaunes*, I acknowledge that I am constructing a representation of the movement which necessarily elides many of its particularities for the sake of brevity. Yet the mainstream news media, by the very way it functions to define the parts of the world, would go on to produce a totalizing as well as homogenizing framing of the movement, one that would deny its nuances and even produce a phantasmatic image of it. As I will show in the following sections, the *gilets jaunes* unfortunately fell victim to the same regime of vertical representation that they sought to critique in their very mode of doing politics.

Developing an Image of the Movement

Now that I have introduced the *gilets jaunes*, and in the process, my own framing of the movement, I want to outline how the *gilets jaunes* came to be recognized and developed as image by the mainstream news media. The codependence of social movements and journalists is nothing new, especially in France. The traditional French social model of the postwar era has relied upon a system of *social* partners with whom the state can coordinate and compromise.[41] For this process of legitimation and negotiation to occur, however, both sides of the equation have depended on intermediaries in the form of spokespersons or delegates as well as journalists who render "legible" protest actions. The mainstream news media plays a key role in this process by choosing spokespersons as well as designating which actions and demands are to be taken as legitimate demands of the movement; in framing the movement, though, they also often implicitly decide on which elements of its *mise-en-scène* get foregrounded. If there is one thing

[40] Anne Giraudon et al., "Quatre Syndicalistes et Les « Gilets Jaunes »," *La Nouvelle Revue Du Travail*, no. 18 (April 16, 2021), https://doi.org/10.4000/nrt.8505.
[41] Chris Howell, "The French Road to Neoliberalism," *Catalyst: A Journal of Theory & Strategy* 2, no. 3 (2018).

that most commentators of the *gilets jaunes* can agree upon, however, it is that the movement jammed existing schemas of recognition, the furrowed channels by which the governing class could identify political actors and negotiate with them. Jean-Marie Charon and Arnaud Mercier, professors in Communications at Panthéon-Assas Université in Paris, coordinated seminaries with journalists and compiled their reflections in an edition called *Les Gilets jaunes: Un défi journalistique*. Their synthesis of the journalists' responses offer insight into the various ways in which the gilets jaunes posed novel problems to traditional modes of journalistic interpretation. Their conclusion is clear: the *gilets jaunes*, in breaking down conventional forms of contestation, set the journalistic apparatus into a spiral.

To cover the *gilets jaunes*, there was the difficulty, first of all, of parsing through and organizing the plethora of heterogeneous demands made by the movement, which were often personally deemed "excessive," "contradictory," and "completely unrealistic" by journalists.[42] Journalists also struggled to acquire sources in the movement, as many established intermediaries, such as labor militants, did not take an active role in the movement; if they did, they put aside their credentials to become just another member of the movement, without necessarily disposing of delegative authority. Gaining proximity to the movement was also impeded by the fearfulness with which many protestors viewed journalists, who could potentially distort or misrepresent what was said or done. Journalists have remarked that the *gilets jaunes* were particularly sensitive to the question of public perception; during the general assemblies they were able to witness, they remarked that front-facing strategies for action were often privileged for discussion over their substantive demands.[43] It is also out of their desire to control their image that the movement quickly disavowed the spokespersons who had been chosen to speak on behalf of the movement by news media. Indeed, early on, social media platforms had promoted a number of minor celebrities like Maxime "Fly Rider" Nicolle, a truck driver whose long Facebook livestreams garnered significant viewership; François Boulo, an attorney who provided a traditionally intellectual face to the movement; or Jacline Mouraud, a founding member of the yellow vests who quickly became a polarizing figure in the movement for her

[42] Jean-Marie Charon, "Le bilan des journalistes face au mouvement des Gilets jaunes. Les enseignments des séminaires de journalistes," in *Les gilets jaunes: un défi journalistique*, by Jean-Marie Charon and Arnaud Mercier (Paris: Éditions Panthéon-Assas, 2022), 28-29.
[43] Ibid, 29.

promotion of pseudoscience and for sharing "fake news."[44] A majority of *gilets jaunes* nonetheless refused that these figures be taken as leaders of the movement or representative of their aims.

Perhaps consciously or not, the protestors were anticipating the dangers inherent to media representation as outlined by Gitlin in *The Whole World Was Watching*, which, as I mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, outlines the role mass media played in the symbolic politics, particularly in "[naming] the world's parts…[certifying] reality *as* reality."[45] As Gitlin shows in his work, in order to "matter," to become "newsworthy," political movements had to play a delicate game "…by submitting to the implicit rules of newsmaking, by conforming to journalistic notions (themselves embedded in history) of what a 'story' is, what an 'event' is, what a 'protest' is. The processed image then tends to *become* 'the movement' for wider publics and institutions who have few alternative sources of information, or none at all, about it."[46] Gitlin observes that media images not only played a major role in defining the movement on its outside, however, but also became "implicated in a movement's self-image" by converting leadership into celebrity, certifying leaders and personalities.[47] The *gilets jaunes* presciently avoided these pitfalls of media representation by carefully guarding their image from the outside. Baisnée et al. describes how journalistic routines for designating spokespersons were essentially rendered "inoperative" by the *gilets jaunes*' refusal to acknowledge the legitimate authority of any spokesperson.[48] The movement's horizontality, in other words, posed serious problems for a vertical system of representation that required the hierarchization of demands and representatives.

This is not to say, though, that the news media stopped reporting on the *gilets jaunes*, nor that the former would not attempt to project an image onto the movement. Quite the opposite, the movement's formal novelty as well as its inertia proved irresistible as an object of "newsworthiness." BFMTV, a private television news channel known for its right-wing bent and

---

[44] Brigitte Sebbah and Arnaud Mercier, "Les défis journalistiques d'un mouvement social organisé sur les réseaux socionumériques," in *Les gilets jaunes: un défi journalistique*, by Jean-Marie Charon and Arnaud Mercier (Paris: Éditions Panthéon-Assas, 2022).
[45] Gitlin, *The Whole World Is Watching*, 2.
[46] Ibid., 3.
[47] Ibid.
[48] Olivier Baisnée et al., "La « violence » Des Gilets Jaunes : Quand La Fait-Diversification Fait Diversion. Les Routines Journalistiques à l'épreuve Des Manifestations à Toulouse (Novembre 2018-Juin 2019)," *Sur Le Journalisme* 10, no. 1 (June 15, 2021), https://revue.surlejournalisme.com/slj/article/view/452/427, 32.

continuous, 24/7 news coverage, was particularly instrumental in the initial promotion of the *gilets jaunes* as a proper social movement, as they quickly caught on and consequently amplified the "extraordinary" character of the protests by providing them with significant airtime. Ludivine Préneron, a researcher and consultant in political communication, has done the invaluable work of laying out the contradictory role that the news channel played in both prescribing and censuring the movement. Both in their live coverage and in its journalistic exegesis, BFMTV foregrounded certain themes and images at the beginning of the protests, such as the price of gas, the relationship between President Macron and the people, the plight of automobilists, and opposition to taxation – lending a distinctly anti-statist, anti-fiscal and even anti-ecological flavor to the protests at first, framings which would then be picked up by other media.[49] The channel's coverage, moreover, emphasized the notion that these protests were of the order of the "event," that something new was happening—a perception buttressed by the movement's novel forms of protest. It boosted the notoriety and social "acceptability" of the *gilets jaunes* by commissioning opinion-polls which repeatedly showed that a large majority of the French were supportive of the protestors and their aims. In other words, BFMTV sought to develop the image of the movement in accordance with its prerogatives (promoting the image of citizen as consumer, critiquing the state), and in doing so, provided the movement with an initial hypervisibility allowing it to accumulate momentum. As Préneron notes, this uneasy equilibrium reflects what Gitlin has called a "conflictual symbiosis" between the news media and a social movement, where the former uses the latter to gain viewership, and the latter the former to gain visibility and membership.[50]

The situation of mutual exchange, however, would not last long. Once the movement's demands and grievances began to mutate from particularly containable claims around the gas tax to wider-spanning, more radical claims around social justice and precarity—claims which did not toe the channel's editorial line or fit neatly into the media frames it had crafted—gave way to a dramatic change in the tenor of the channel's coverage. As Préneron shows, these more radical claims, especially those lamenting a democratic deficit in France, were judged the most illegitimate by BFMTV's editorial line. Faced with a rapidly mutating movement which

[49] Ludivine Prénéron, "Les Gilets Jaunes Face à BFMTV : Une Lutte Des Classes Médiatique," in *Les Gilets Jaunes: Une Révolte Inclassable*, ed. Quentin Ravelli et al. (Paris: Rue d'Ulm, 2024), 189-190.
[50] Ibid., 192.

threatened, the channel went on the offensive. Over the following months of the protests, for every Saturday *Acte* of the yellow vest movement, BFMTV adopted a tripartite structure in their news coverage of the events aimed at gradually delegitimizing the movement's claims and its enunciators, first by starting the day's coverage with a discourse around the violence to come, then a livestream of the Parisian protests which confronted "acts of degradation" to the un-editorialized reactions of "official speech," to conclude finally with a "decryption" of the day's protests which privileged both property damage caused by the movement and the disruptive effects of the protest on the economy.[51] This formula, in turn, had profound consequences for the framing of the movement's actions on BFMTV and throughout other mainstream media. Confronted with decontextualized *images-choc* (conflict images), experts and commentators lacked the necessary time to apprehend either the identities of those in the camera frame or the specific motivations for their actions, meaning that relied on their instincts and reductive media frames to form their opinions. Official communications from government and police spokespersons were allowed to relay their messages unchallenged by BFMTV's journalists, and as a consequence, police brutality, a theme which would become increasingly urgent over the months of the protests, rarely received airtime.[52] According to Préneron, it is particularly when the movement became politically powerful that violence became an "omnipresent" theme in the channel's coverage of the protests, albeit in a disproportionately lopsided manner: at the same time that acts of police violence during the protests were occluded, the circulation of images of property damage strengthened the association between the image of the yellow vest protestor and that of the *"blac bloc"* or the "*casseur*," the trope of the rioting individual who seeks to destroy property for the sake of destruction and disorder. Already from December 1st 2018 onwards, or *Acte III* of the protests, news coverage of the Parisian protests became the "alpha and omega" of BFMTV's coverage, resulting at once in the relegation of the roundabout occupations to the status of a footnote, and the dominant characterization of the movement as being at once "violent and radical."[53] I want to reiterate, here, just how striking it is that the channel which had

[51] Ibid., 195.
[52] Police brutality against the protestors became such a prominent issue that UN High Commissioner Michelle Bachelet warned the French government to conduct "swift investigations" against potential human rights abuses by the police. See "Violences Policières et Discriminations : La Haut-Commissaire Aux Droits de l'homme de l'ONU Interpelle La France," *Le Monde*, December 9, 2020, https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2020/12/09/la-haut-commissaire-aux-droits-de-l-homme-de-l-onu-interpelle-la-france-sur-la-discrimination-de-minorites-et-les-violences-policieres_6062766_3224.html.
[53] Prénéron, "Les Gilets Jaunes Face à BFMTV : Une Lutte Des Classes Médiatique.", 196.

mediatized the movement so favorably at the beginning eventually became one of its most outspoken opponents.

BFMTV's negative coverage of the protests represents only one node in the broader circuitry of a widespread media-political discourse which sought to at once employ the image of violence as a means of morally condemning the movement while also discrediting the protestors through their assimilation to existing negative tropes and stereotypes. Academic research on media coverage of the *gilets jaunes* has shown that BFMTV was far from the only channel responsible for promoting this discourse: in most major national journals and news channels, the protest events were often relayed through a "rhetoric of conflict" whose media frames tended to reduce these events to simple binary oppositions: the government versus the yellow vests, order versus violence, legitimate versus illegitimate speech. Jérémie Moualek, for instance, lends greater credence to Préneron's analysis by employing quantitative media analysis methods to show how mainstream news images during the protests overwhelmingly privileged "*la violence événementialisée"* (event-based violence) over the "*fait social*", or the social dimensions of the protests.[54] The author argues that faced with a social movement that was complex bordering on the enigmatic, which avoided simple exegesis, "the angle of violence" served equally as a "refuge" and "invariant" for journalists trying to make sense of the event.[55] The overrepresentation of "violent" images, such as the material damages following a day of protests (these effectively made up one of every five images of gilets jaunes coverage), had a doubled effect: it not only primed the viewers of these to essentialize the protestors as violent, but it also distracted from the political confrontation the gilets jaunes were trying to stage. Instead of the government versus the people, viewer attention was redirected towards the ostensibly apolitical plane of damage and destruction. Pierre Rattinaud and Brigitte Sebah have come to the same conclusion as Préneron and Moualek. Using a lexicometric approach, they show how news outlets emphasized protestor violence over police violence.[56] Indeed, even as the images of police violence became harder to ignore, these were nonetheless routinely minimized and depoliticized by the media.

---

[54] Jérémie Moualek, "L'image Disqualifiante de La « violence Populaire » En Démocratie: Le Cas Des Gilets Jaunes et de Leurs « clichés »," *Socio*, no. 16 (March 3, 2022): 139–58, https://doi.org/10.4000/socio.12204.
[55] Ibid., paragraph 17.
[56] Brigitte Sebbah and Pierre Ratinaud, "Frénésie médiatique dans la presse quotidienne française : analyse lexicométrique de plus de 100 000 articles sur les Gilets jaunes," in *Les gilets jaunes: un défi journalistique* (Paris: Éditions Panthéon-Assas, 2022), 102-103.

I find it notable that the media's one-sided coverage, focusing more on the protests' spectacular actions than on their more routine occupations of the roundabouts, also reproduced visually the social distance between representatives and represented that the gilets jaunes protestors themselves decried. Moualek's statistical analysis reveals that impersonal, often wide shots of the mass demonstrations predominated (62% of the photographs analyzed were of marches) over photos from smaller assemblies of members on the roundabouts and in meetings (11% and 6%).[57] This lack of visual proximity, exemplified by distant swells of yellow bodies, privileges the interpretation of the movement as an undistinguished mass rather than a collection of distinct individuals. The language used to describe these scenes, moreover, reinforces the tendency towards massification and homogenization. Blanket descriptions like "discontent" and "anger" dissolve the multitude of protestors' demands into readily deployable signifiers which, as historian Samuel Hayat remarks, act as screens that hid the actual motivations for mobilizing in the streets.[58] When close-up images of protestors are used, these tend to reproduce the stereotypes and associations which were quickly repeated around the gilets jaunes. In addition to the figure of the *casseur,* the figure of the *beauf*—France's own particular brand of misbehaved, uncultured, and alcohol-drinking "white trash"—was recycled by news outlets whose editorialists, conscious or not, interpreted the movement through a class-prejudiced lens. The association with the *beauf,* often associated with the far right, reinforced the initial media perception that the gilets jaunes were a right-wing phenomenon, a particular representation on which President Macron and his spokespersons sought to capitalize in their campaign to discredit the movement. For instance, on November 26th, 2018, then-Minister of Public Finance Gerald Darmanin, invited to speak on *RTL*, used the term "*peste brune*" ("brown plague") to characterize those protesting on the Champs-Elysées, an obvious reference to the brownshirts of Nazi Germany.[59] In milder terms, likewise, multiple commentators drew the analogy between the *gilets jaunes* and the *poujadistes* of the 1940s and 1950s, an anti-fiscal movement with deep ties to the far right.[60] Even when the gilets jaunes were not mischaracterized as a far-right movement,

[57] Moualek, "L'image Disqualifiante de La « violence Populaire » En Démocratie." Paragraph 28.
[58] Hayat, "L'économie Morale et Le Pouvoir", 16.
[59] Geoffroy Clavel, "Gilets Jaunes: La 'Peste Brune' de Darmanin Ne Passe Pas," *Huffington Post*, November 26, 2018, https://www.huffingtonpost.fr/politique/article/gilets-jaunes-la-peste-brune-de-darmanin-ne-passe-pas_135569.html.
[60] "Les Gilets Jaunes, Ou La Longue Tradition Du Rejet de l'impôt Injuste," *Franceinfo*, November 19, 2018, https://www.francetvinfo.fr/replay-radio/histoires-d-info/les-gilets-jaunes-ou-la-longue-tradition-du-rejet-de-l-impot-injuste_3032707.html.

however, many of the historical associations reserved for them remained pejorative and reductive.

Take the term, *jacquerie*, for example. Used to describe the intermittent peasant revolts starting in the fourteenth century, the label was used liberally during the initial months of the movement by analysts and commentators such as Pierre Vermeren. However, as renowned historian of popular movements in France, Gerard Noiriel, points out, the term an unsustainable historical analogy. Not only are the *gilets jaunes* not a revolt of disadvantaged rural populations against wealthy metropolitan centers, but it is also a characterization loaded historically with upper-class resentment for the "thick," "stupid," and "ungainly" members of the lower classes. The traditional account of the *jacqueries* evokes the erroneous image of a disorganized, spontaneous, and anarchic revolts, which, as Noiriel states, is not a fair characterization of either the peasant revolts of the past nor the gilets jaunes of the present.[61] Or, as Edwy Plenel, the founding editor of the left-wing online periodical *Médiapart*, reflects in his 2019 book on the movement, *La Victoire des Vaincus*, the multiplication of negative characterizations of the gilets jaunes by those in power stem from a larger history of class struggle in France, wherein the elite strata have historically sought to delegitimize popular threats to their authority. He writes of the *gilets jaunes*:

> …those in power seized every racist incident to discredit it [the movement], combining class disdain with moral disqualification: not only this *peuple* understands or hears nothing, but it is additionally politically frightening, even monstruous. Magnifying the ephemeral to the detriment of inquiry, masking the otherwise complex and diverse reality of the *gilets jaunes*, who were closer to the common causes of emancipation than to the hunt for scapegoats, continuous news coverage was here a weapon of massive blindness, only giving to see what confirms fears and prejudices.[62] [*translation mine*]

By their assimilation to an existing mythology around populism and the figure of the *peuple*, often coded in the national imaginary as dangerous and disorderly, the *gilets jaunes* thus faced an upstream battle in their struggle over their own representation and, accordingly, their political legitimacy. The distortion of their actions and intentions by the editorial class brought old bugbears back to the fore, phantasms that would prevent potential allies from rallying to their

[61] Gérard Noiriel and Nicolas Truong, *Les Gilets Jaunes à La Lumière de l'histoire: Dialogue Avec Nicolas Truong*, Le Monde Des Idées (La Tour d'Aigues: Éditions de l'Aube, 2019), 28-29.
[62] Edwy Plenel, *La victoire des vaincus: à propos des gilets jaunes*, Cahiers libres (Paris: la Découverte, 2019), 74.

cause. In effect, I argue that the tropes baked into the language and images used to relay and refract the *gilets jaunes'* message had non-negligeable strategic consequences for the movement. This is particularly evident in the skepticism and dismissal with which left-wing unions and parties, which could have made common cause with the movement, initially viewed the *gilets jaunes*. It is in part due to their initial embrace by BFMTV that, for fear of rubbing shoulders with members of the far right, France's largest syndical organization, the CGT, announced in October 2018 that it would not be rallying beside the nascent movement.[63] This, in turn, prompted the *gilets jaunes* to distance themselves even more from union leadership, who they now assimilated to the elites who disdained them. [64]

In this section, I have elaborated how the *gilets jaunes* progressively morphed into an extraordinary source of anxiety for mainstream news outlets. The protestors' refusal to play the part they had been given was increasingly met with reductive qualifications of the movement as violent and disorderly, as a restaging of all kinds of historical tropes. Despite their continuous disparagement in mainstream media, however, I find it striking that even after a year of protests, the social movement maintained remarkably high levels of support from the French population, with around 72% of the population supporting the protests around the beginning of the movement and maintaining around 52% total support/sympathy after a year.[65] It is largely thanks to their popular support that the movement was more successful than prior political movements in extracting concessions from the government; in December 2018, Macron revoked the gas tax

[63] "Gilets Jaunes: 'Impossible Pour La CGT de Défiler à Côté Du FN,'" *La Croix*, November 16, 2018, https://www.la-croix.com/France/Politique/Gilets-jaunes-impossible-CGT-defiler-cote-FN-2018-11-16-1300983501.

[64] In addition to finding the movement's initial demands strategically incoherent or not ambitious enough, union leaders, such as CFDT President, Laurent Berger, also resented that many of the gilets jaunes had never participated in previous political mobilizations. This kind of viewpoint dismissed the fact that, belonging to a section of the labor class that lacked the material conditions and structures for engaging in sustained protests, many of the gilets jaunes had never imagined having the ability to rebel. Ethnographies have also attributed the distancing between the two groups to the phenomenon by which certain cadres of the popular classes, "the worker's aristocracy," have historically sought to distinguish themselves from those on the lower rungs of the socio-economic ladder. In spite of this reticence, as the movement picked up momentum, a growing number of individuals from these traditional militant structures, often in opposition to the main union line, began to put on their own yellow vests and integrate the ranks of the gilets jaunes. A common narrative from recent ethnographies of these encounters is the sentiment amongst militants that their misgivings about the gilets jaunes lacked a solid grounding in reality. In effect, much of the revisionism around the movement on the left has spoken of the movement as a "missed opportunity" of convergence. See Nollet, "Une Giletjaunisation Du Mouvement Ouvrier ? Les Cas de Deux Grèves En 2019 et 2020.," in *Les Gilets Jaunes: Une Révolte Inclassable* (Paris: Rue d'Ulm, 2024).

[65] IFOP, "Balises d'opinion #80: Les Français et Le Mouvement Des Gilets Jaunes - Ifop-Fidducial Pour CNews et Sud Radio," *IFOP*, no. Novembre 2019 (November 14, 2019), https://www.ifop.com/publication/balises-dopinion-80-les-francais-et-le-mouvement-des-gilets-jaunes/.

hike, and also increased the minimum wage by €100/month and pledged modest cuts to income taxes for lower and average earners.[66]

Although the result of manifold factors, I believe the supportive attitude of the French public can be partially attributed to the far less stigmatizing coverage of the movement by the regional press, which largely forewent the breathless coverage of street conflicts in the metropoles to privilege the action taking place around the roundabouts. This smaller-scale news coverage, reflecting a greater proximity to the protestors than the larger outlets of the national press had been able to achieve, focused more closely on what was being said and done in the day-to-day of the roundabouts; this coverage allowed for more personal accounts and testimonies of the protests as well as a more considered treatment of the movement's political demands.[67] Left-wing periodicals such as *lundimatin*, *l'Humanité*, and *Médiapart*, as well as online alternative media sources like the alter-globalist *Indymedia*, also covered the movement more favorably than mainstream national periodicals. And we cannot forget the role that alternative *gilets jaunes* medias like *Vécu, Le Média,* as well as the content disseminated on social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter, would play in exposing many French citizens to a parallel economy of words and images. There existed, in other words, alternative frames through which one could engage with the movement. However, a narrative of the media framing of the *gilets jaunes* is incomplete without an account of the role that the President would play in setting the media agenda around the movement. Consequently, in the next section, I explore how the French Executive tipped the scales of *gilets jaunes* news coverage by employing a media strategy designed to depress the movement physically and symbolically.

Coercion and Cooptation: The Government Tips the Scale

Why, after retaining popular support for so long and forcing President Macron's government to make concessions, did the tide turn on the *gilets jaunes*' popularity*?* After observing that its concessions to the *gilets jaunes* would not suffice to quell the mobilizations, Macron understood quickly that more drastic measures needed to be taken if the *gilets jaunes* were to be definitively

[66] "Mouvement Des Gilets Jaunes : Les Annonces Du Président de La République," *Vie-Publique.Fr*, December 11, 2018, https://www.vie-publique.fr/en-bref/20065-mouvement-des-gilets-jaunes-les-annonces-du-president-de-la-republique.
[67] Sebbah and Ratinaud, "Frénésie médiatique dans la presse quotidienne française : analyse lexicométrique de plus de 100 000 articles sur les Gilets jaunes.", 114.

defeated. In this section, I argue that the government consequently adopted a dual-pronged strategy meant to depress protest turnout and take control of the process of framing the movement. In effect, after two months of fighting a losing battle, from January 2019 onwards, the government would combine physical and symbolic violence to attempt to snuff out the movement once and for all.

First, the government hardened its policing against the protestors. In January 2019, the improvised structures which had been constructed on the roundabouts were repeatedly torn down by police forces and protests were increasingly criminalized. In addition to the police forces' liberal use of "sublethal" weapons such as LBD-40 "flashball" launchers and gas grenades, deployed early on in response to the protests and which by February 2019 had already, according to the Ministry of the Interior, injured 2060 protestors, the government also began to ramp up mass arrests—often "preventative"—during protests. By June 2019, 10,000 protestors had been taken into custody, with 3,100 convictions, 400 of which led to immediate extended jailtime.[68] Gerard Mauger, in a Rancièrian line of reasoning, ascribes the state's combination of physical and judicial force to a strategy aimed at limiting what was "thinkable, sayable, and doable in politics."[69] Brutal force served to dissuade potential protestors from taking to the streets, while mass arrests undercut the momentum of the protests by preventing members who were more militant from taking to the streets (many would also be designated as "Fichier S," presenting them with the possibility of extended sentences if they were to recidivate). On a symbolic level, the mass arrests also played into the stereotype associating gilets jaunes to delinquents and criminal *casseurs*, reinforcing the media narrative which had been circulating on BFMTV and other news channels about the alleged delinquency of the protestors. The notorious *anti-casseurs* law, adopted by the Macronist National Assembly in April 2019, only reified the criminal image of the protestors in the popular discourse. By producing scenes of conflict, the government's police actions directly fed into the media's conflict framing of the movement that I discussed in the previous section.

Second, as police repression ramped up, President Macron announced the launch in January 2019 of the *Grand débat* ("The Great Debate"), an initiative designed to "debate

[68] Vanessa Codaccioni, "Garder à Vue Les Gilets Jaunes : Stratégies Policiaro-Judiciares et Résistances Politiques," in *Les Gilets Jaunes: Une Révolte Inclassable* (Paris: Rue d'Ulm, 2024), 145.
[69] Gérard Mauger, "L'État Face Aux « Gilets Jaunes »: Violence Physique et Violence Symbolique," *Savoir/Agir* N° 48, no. 2 (October 11, 2019): 107–14, https://doi.org/10.3917/sava.048.0107, 112.

essential questions of national interest."[70] This was to be the other, more beneficent face of government intervention within the crisis, although I contest that its purpose was no less pernicious than the intensified police repression. The "debate" was organized according to four *grand thêmes* ("great themes"): 1) taxation and public spending 2) the organization of the state and public services 3) the ecological transition and 4) democracy and citizenship. Citizens could participate in their own name on an online platform as well as in assemblies organized by local mayor. Though Macron stated that "no topic would be off-limits," in reality, the terms of the debate were decided in advance. For instance, there would be no review of recently implemented fiscal measures, meaning that the reimplementation of the wealth tax, a major demand echoed by a majority of protestors, was off the table.[71] As *Mediapart* has reported, despite the marketing of the *Grand débat* as a transparent "face-to-face" between the president and his people, the initiative was plagued by instances of bias. In fact, the questionnaire on the online platform introduced subjects like immigration policy, which had remained conspicuously absent from the *gilets jaunes'* demands.[72] Its usage of binary and closed, rather than open, questions, moreover, introduced the problem of the government being able to decide the terms of the debate. Meanwhile, the government remained opaque on the manner in which they would incorporate the more open "direct contributions" provided in the *cahiers de doléances* and the local meeting initiatives. The government simply announced that it would synthesize—by its own admission, in a non-exhaustive manner—the results of the consultation via quantitative and qualitative means, and that it would implement measures based on the conclusions drawn. Conspicuously left out of the measures announced in April 2019 was one of the protestors' most vocally embraced demands: the reinstatement of the wealth tax and the implementation of the RIC (*Referendum d'Initiative Constitutive*), a mechanism which would have allowed for greater direct democratic control over government decisions.

The government spoke of the entire process as a "photograph of public opinion,"[73] although in reality, it was more of a weak photo negative. Indeed, if the *Grand Débat* did not yield the desired outcomes for the *gilets jaunes*, it is that it did not actually faithfully (nor, one

[70] Aurélie Dianara, "A Season of Discontent," *Jacobin*, February 22, 2019, https://jacobin.com/2019/02/gilets-jaunes-france-emmanuel-macron.
[71] Ibid.
[72] Romaric Godin and Ellen Salvi, "Surprise: Le «grand Débat» Valide Les Choix de Macron," *Médiapart*, April 8, 2019, https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/france/080419/surprise-le-grand-debat-valide-les-choix-de-macron.
[73] Ibid.

can argue, in good faith) represent the movement's real social composition or interests. Isabelle Falque-Pierrotin, a member of the *Collège des Garants*, the institutional body meant to "guarantee the independence" of the consultation, admitted that the consultation did not necessarily have representative value and that it could not be qualified as a real "survey" of public opinion.[74] After all, only 343,589 people responded to the government questionnaire, 152,477 submitted open contributions; additionally, sociological data about the profile of these citizens was not gathered, so these numbers did not hold statistical value. Moreover, it must be noted here those airing their grievances on the government platform were not the same as those airing their grievances on the roundabouts, the street, and on social media. Seeing through the government's public relations campaign—calling it the "great masquerade"—and exasperated by what they saw as another refusal by their representatives to listen to their voices or take them seriously, the *gilets jaunes* boycotted Macron's initiative and put in place their own online counter-platform, which they called *Le Vrai débat* ("The Real Debate").[75] Launched shortly after the *Grand Débat*'s platform, the platform promised transparency and the possibility to dialogue with others as opposed to its government analogue. Again, the *Vrai Débat* demonstrated the *gilets jaunes*'s unusual precocity when it came to waging a symbolic struggle in the media. Once more, the protestors refused the government's insisted framing and affirmed their own political legitimacy.

However, on the whole, I contend that Macron's strategy of the *Grand débat*, combined with the intensification of police repression, globally succeeded in wresting away the media's attention from the substantive demands of the *gilets jaunes* and marginalizing their actions. In their lexicometric analysis, Rattinaud and Sebbah observe that from the moment that the *Grand débat* was announced to mid-March 2019, there was an overrepresentation of articles concerning the violence and repression of the movement as well as an overrepresentation of the *Grand débat* and its procedure.[76] After this period, with the exception of a couple of weekends marked by renewed incidents of violence and destruction, coverage of the movement drastically subsided. In other words, the *Grand débat* had succeeded in its endeavor of projecting the image of a *peuple*

[74] Ibid.
[75] Damien Leloup and Claire Legros, "Face Au Grand Débat, Des « gilets Jaunes » Lancent Leur Propre Plate-Forme," *Le Monde*, January 21, 2019, https://www.lemonde.fr/pixels/article/2019/01/21/face-au-grand-debat-des-gilets-jaunes-lancent-leur-propre-plateforme_5412451_4408996.html.
[76] Rattinaud and Sebbah, 114.

who been consulted and heard by the executive. In effect, Mauger remarks that the debate was often framed in the media as "pedagogical", positioning Macron as a well-intentioned "educator of the masses."[77] Not only did the *Grand Débat* replicate the vertical, patronizing relationship between the president and the people so characteristic of the Gaullian 5th Republic, but resistance to participation in the debate came to be framed as "hostility" to democracy, a hostility in turn correlated with "violence, racism, antisemitism, homophobia, etc."[78] Indeed, the protests following the *Grand débat*'s conclusion could be marked by the media as excessive, redundant, disorderly. The matter was deemed to have been settled: the people had spoken, Macron had listened, what more did people need?

If I have chosen to draw our attention to this dual strategy, it is because it crystallizes the different measures at a government's disposal to shape and assert a dominant frame. As Mauger astutely points out, whereas the police's actions can be assimilated to the state's monopoly on legitimate physical violence, the *Grand débat* on the other hands exhibits the state's "monopoly on legitimate symbolic violence," which Pierre Bourdieu famously supplements to Max Weber's aphorism.[79] Indeed, these two monopolies of violence interpenetrate each other. An event like the *Grand débat* promulgates a certain image of politics, of the correct way to express oneself, of the right way speak to power. It maintains an ultimately vertical conception of politics wherein the president, in the position of the manager, reviews complaints and chooses the appropriate course of action. Those who refuse this state of affairs, meanwhile, are labeled—through pejorative terms like *jacquerie*, *poujadisme*, *complitisme*—as those without a proper voice and who must be taught to speak correctly or, if that does not work, punished into submission. It is partially on the basis of this symbolic violence that police and judicial repression tacitly received the media's stamp of moral legitimacy. Moreover, the state's physical violence produces its own symbolic violence by further discrediting the speech of protestors who refuse to play according to the state's rules. Macron's strategy, then, not only demonstrates the surplus of power that the government holds when challenged by an outside forces, but it also shows the material importance of media frames and representations for social movements. I would argue that the struggle over images is as meaningful and important strategically as the struggle in the streets.

[77] Mauger, 111.
[78] Ibid., footnote on 112.
[79] Ibid., 107.

This is also why, in my view, the role that journalists play in the framing of social movements should not go unstated. The media treatment of the *gilets jaunes* bolsters Gitlin's analysis that news media act to "*process* social opposition, to control its image and to diffuse it at the same time, to absorb what can be absorbed into the dominant structure of definitions and images and to push the rest to the margins of social life."[80] Accordingly, I believe that Macron's media strategy would not have been as effective had mainstream media organizations like BFMTV not primed the terrain against the *gilets jaunes*. Faced with a social movement which defied easy classification, the editorial lines of BFMTV and other mainstream outlets, consciously and not, pared down the *gilets jaunes* into images and words that fit into the dominant structure of definitions and images. Their journalists, deprived of their usual references and under pressure to fulfill their roles as interpreters of current events, meanwhile relied on a *habitus*[81] of journalistic practice developed over decades in response to instances of popular revolt. [82] It must be noted, however, that the more outright negative coverage of the *gilets jaunes* proceeded much more frequently from these publications' editorialists than journalists on the ground; Préneron remarks in her study that within an organization like BFMTV, there were "greatly contrasting images" of the movement depending on whether one was a Parisian editorialist or the freelance journalists who "…gets up at 6 am to go speak with protestors on the roundabouts."[83] The latter tended to be more in line with the measured and empathetic coverage of the regional press, which I have mentioned before. However, the editorialists, situated on a higher rungs of the ladder of knowledge production, weighed heaviest in setting the frame. Eschewing any relation of proximity and duration for distance and immediacy, they enacted the same symbolic violence which had brought the *gilets jaunes* out into the streets in the first place. The protestors' anger, in effect, derived from never being given the opportunity to speak for themselves, of being talked down to instead, misrepresented by facile and prejudiced cliches. Fabrice Valéry, chief editor charged with online publication for France 3 Occitanie, resumes succinctly this frustration when he states: "…they [feel that they] never have speech directly and are always represented by experts who do not necessarily re-transcribe the depth of their

[80] Gitlin, *The Whole World Is Watching*, 4.
[81] Bourdieu's definition of habitus
[82] For an analysis of the parallels and connections between the media coverage of the 2005 riots and the *gilets jaunes* protests, see Carballo, "Révoltes de 2005 et crise des Gilets jaunes : étude du traitement médiatique de la violence populaire dans la presse quotidienne nationale."
[83] Prénéron, "Les Gilets Jaunes Face à BFMTV : Une Lutte Des Classes Médiatique", 193.

thought."[84] Much of their frustration stems, in other words, from being unable to frame themselves.

As we have seen, the *gilets jaunes* attempted to respond to their invisibilization by innovating new media platforms and mechanisms aimed at adequately re-transcribing the depth of their thought while bypassing the traditional circuits of political representation. Yet the government's forceful demonstration of symbolic and physical force—its Janus-faced strategy of coercion and cooptation through judicial repression and the *Grand débat* —displaced the terms of the national debate that the *gilets jaunes* had initiated, and reduced a heterogenous, complex movement—one in which every protestor represented a different set of life circumstances, thoughts, and feelings—to a homogenous mass of agitated yellow. In lieu of distinguishing in the movement a resurrection of the social question and a desire for a real conversation around the contract between the people and its representatives, the mainstream media privileged the framing of yet another violent confrontation between the president and a populist movement. And perhaps most ironically, the yellow vest, a symbol which had the original intention of making the protestors visible in the eyes of the state and personalized in such a way to express particular grievances, was transformed by its media treatment into an object used to discredit them: it became, in the eyes of the dominant media class and those under its influence, the expression of a blurry and shapeless anger, a shorthand for violent discontent. The mainstream framing, profoundly shaped by the government's media strategy, had effectively transformed the public perception of the *gilets jaunes* from that of a social movement into a riot. Instead of sharpening the image of the movement, it lowered the resolution and turned up the noise.

Reframing the Movement

To resume, in this chapter, I have outlined the process by which the *gilets jaunes* movement came to be negatively framed in the mainstream media and argued that this had deleterious effects on its public image and long-term survival. Although one may point to the COVID-19 pandemic—which prompted the implementation of mobility restrictions as well as limits on mass gatherings—as the event which put a definitive cap on the movement, it is also clear that it was

[84] Sebbah and Mercier, "Les défis journalistiques d'un mouvement social organisé sur les réseaux socionumériques.", 69.

already nearing its end.[85] However, the *gilets jaunes*' shadow would loom large over subsequent protests against Macron's pension and retirement reforms in 2021, with many of these syndicalist-led protests adopting forms of contestation that had been practiced by the *gilets jaunes*, such as undeclared, "wild" demonstrations. Aloys Nollet has called this the "*giletjauneisation*" of protest in France.[86] Furthermore, many members of the *gilets jaunes* transferred their energies for political engagement into other initiatives, whether running for municipal and regional positions or carrying over the work they had started with the *gilets jaunes* into new and existing political associations.[87] Thus, I contend that the *gilets jaunes* have provoked durable changes in the French political landscape. It has also stimulated new research. In the wake of the social movement, as it simultaneously echoes through new political formations and recedes into collective memory, new studies across various academic fields are being published revisiting and reinterpreting the *gilets jaunes*. By sharpening the image of the movement, these studies actively participate in reframing the movement and challenging the dominant framing I have set about describing. Therefore, in this final section, I would like to briefly and non-exhaustively summarize the scholarship that has been done to reassess the *gilets jaunes* in order to situate my own work.

To start, there have been efforts to reframe the *gilets jaunes* movement away from one with a contradictory or muddled politics to a movement which instead articulated a coherent critique of France's political and economic system. A particularly fruitful line of analysis, in my view, has been in considering the social movement as an organic response to the longstanding crisis of democratic representation in France under the Fifth Republic.[88] In *La Victoire des vaincus*, for instance, journalist Edwy Plenel imputes the movement's intensity and success to how it responded directly to the Macron government's Gaullian "denial of democracy," noting the large number of measures proposed during the protests to address governmental institutions notorious for their non-representativity, such as the Senate.[89] In *The Gilets Jaunes and the New Social*

[85] Evidenced by the precipitous drop in protest turnout after June 2019.
[86] Aloys Nollet, "Une Giletjaunisation Du Mouvement Ouvrier? Les Cas de Deux Grèves En 2019 et 2020," in *Les Gilets Jaunes: Une Révolte Inclassable*, ed. Quentin Ravelli et al. (Paris: Rue d'Ulm, 2024).
[87] Clément Parrot, "'Beaucoup y Ont Laissé Des Plumes' : Cinq Ans Après, Le Mouvement Des 'Gilets Jaunes' Ne Mobilise plus Les Foules Malgré La Crise," *Franceinfo*, November 17, 2023,
[88] This crisis is longstanding—French political theorist Pierre Rosanvallon, in *Le Peuple Introuvable* (1998), had already noted how institutions for channeling the popular will had become increasingly stymied by Gaullist presidentialism.
[89] Edwy Plenel, *La victoire des vaincus: à propos des gilets jaunes*, Cahiers libres (Paris: la Découverte, 2019), 31.

Contract (2021), meanwhile, political theorist Charles Devallennes identifies in the *gilets* jaunes' embrace of the RIC[90] an articulation of the desire for a new social contract, one which redefines the relationship between the state and citizen by transferring part of the agenda-setting power of the elites back to the people.[91] For both Plenel and Devallennes, the *gilets jaunes* signal the end of the presidentialist Fifth Republic and the beginnings of a possible Sixth Republic. Finally, Samuel Hayat has taken a different direction in his analysis of the *gilets jaunes*, arguing convincingly that framing the movement as a mere expression of generalized "discontent" distracts from how their demands, taken in their ensemble, articulate a coherent vision rooted in a "moral economy of the popular classes."[92] What all of these analyses of the movement do, importantly, is that they break with the conception of the *gilets jaunes* as purely reactive and promote instead a more positive image of the movement.

In the process of reevaluating the positive dimensions of the movement, researchers in the political sciences have shifted their attention from the mass mobilizations in the streets to the movement's other spaces of assembly. For political scientist Laurent Jeanpierre, who published an important work of political theory on the movement with *In Girum: Les leçons politiques des rond-points*, the political activity that took place on the roundabouts and the assemblies signals, along with the protests of the squares that defined the 2010s, a new way of doing politics: "a new language of protest is being experimented and searched for, one which conjugates in the same place opposition and construction, contestation of the existing and prefiguration of another life."[93] For him, the dominant framing's overemphasis on the violence of the protests, as well as its conceptualization of the *gilets jaunes* as merely "proto-political," has effectively concealed the genuine and constructive politicization that was occurring on the roundabouts.[94] In his plea for us to take the movement seriously, Jeanpierre asks us to reconceive the space of the roundabout as a "…new agora, an arena where ideas and opinions are exchanged… a space of encounters and exchanges, the rediscovery of a possibility that had disappeared from collective living."[95] Consequently, the *gilets jaunes* not only herald imminent changes for the French

[90] RIC, a direct democracy measure which would allow for citizens to propose decisions and measures and submit these to a popular vote.
[91] Devellennes, *The Gilets Jaunes and the New Social Contract*, 25.
[92] Hayat, "L'économie Morale et Le Pouvoir", 17.
[93] Jeanpierre, *In Girum*. 66.
[94] Ibid., 8.
[95] Ibid., 59.

political system, but also represent a pivot towards a new, more local register of politics. Again, this kind of analysis paints a much different image of the movement than the one circulated in the mainstream, lending legitimacy and coherence to their cause.

The more theoretical work of reframing the movement, however, crucially could not take place without the growing quantity of ethnographic research being published *gilets jaunes* functioned in their day-to-day. For instance, in *Utopie d'un rond-point*, an extensive ethnography conducted over many months on a roundabout in Crolles, anthropologists Bernard Floris and Luc Gwiazdzinski lend credence to Jeanpierre's assertion that the roundabouts were powerful spaces for political activation. For them, the circular space became a "dispositif of emancipation reposing on an alienated space," a "little theatre" on which to stage the movement.[96] However, they were not the only anthropologists present on the roundabouts during the protests. Multiple additional ethnographies have been conducted from different areas in France concentrating on the processes of politicization,[97] internal dynamics and day-to-day living,[98] and class composition.[99] There have also been a number of anthropological works interested in the creative output of the protests. For example, Denis St Armand traces the development, over time of *gilets jaunes* chants and banners marked not only by playful reversals of "official" governmental and media discourse, but also a notable sense of historical self-awareness and self-derision.[100] Meanwhile, anthropologist Philippe Artières describes the *gilets jaunes* as an "*evènement d'écriture*" (an "event of writing") where the writing on each yellow vest came to articulate a "collective individuality of protest."[101] All of these anthropological observers furnish important empirical data which testify to a movement with a rich political life. Indeed, in my view, this kind of direct observation, privileging the voice of the subject over that of the commentator, does the invaluable work of sharpening the image of a movement which had been left blurry, indeterminate—and in the process, prone to distortions—by the mainstream framing.

As I signaled at the beginning of my study, however, there were other observers present at the scene of the protests. Not exactly of the same kind as photojournalists or anthropologists,

---

[96] Bernard Floris, Luc Gwiazdzinski, and Angelo Turco, *Sur La Vague Jaune: L'utopie d'un Rond-Point* (Grenoble: Elya éditions, 2019), 190.
[97] See Bendali et al., "Le Mouvement Des Gilets Jaunes."
[98] See Bernard De Raymond et al., "Les Gilets Jaunes."
[99] See Challier, "Rencontres Aux Rond-Points: La Mobilisation Des Gilets Jaunes Dans Un Bourg Rural de Lorraine."
[100] See St Armand, "« Parce Que c'est Notre Rejet » : Poétique Des Gilets Jaunes."
[101] See Artières, "« Les Gilets Jaunes Triompheront »."

documentary-filmmakers, another kind of participant-observer, captured scenes of protests and gathered invaluable testimonial information. Yet unlike their counterparts, these participants, implicated not only figuratively but also literally in the (re-)framing of the movement with their film cameras, were perhaps even more directly implicated in the struggle over the movement's image. Accordingly, my thesis takes a look at the most notable efforts to reframe the movement through documentary film. However unfinished or partial their account, the films I consider in the following chapters attempt to listen to and consider the *gilets jaunes* on their own terms. In the process, to varying degrees, they break with the verticality of representation found in news media and avoid reproducing the symbolic violence which sends the voices and bodies of the *gilets jaunes* back out of frame. Moreover, they reveal the analogous position of the filmmaker-documentarian to the ethnographer. Occupying a position that is partially inside, partially outside of the movement, the filmmaker-documentarian finds themselves, like their anthropologist analog, bridled with a bundle of ethical and political responsibilities. In framing the *gilets jaunes*, they risk betraying their subjects, and by extension the movement, that they have chosen to film. This risk of betrayal becomes even more pronounced with subjects like the *gilets jaunes*, who by and large consciously shirk efforts to speak on their behalf.

In the next chapters, in reflecting on the approaches for documenting and depicting the *gilets jaunes*, I will also reflect on what kind of images are produced and made possible by a documentary reframing. As we will see, by virtue of the close proximity to the movement that the filmmakers adopt and the scenes they capture, extend, and organize, these films participate in the political reconstitution of the movement, even if they are ultimately late to the scene. By making sensible dimensions of the movement not accessible through the mainstream framing, they have the potential to meaningfully alter the image of the movement and reconfigure the public's relationship to it. One thing that will become clear is that the proximity of the camera to the protestors produces a space-time of encounter with the *gilets jaunes* that resembles the space of encounter of the protests themselves. However, at the same time, the filmmaker's hand in organizing these scenes is not politically neutral. Following Stella Bruzzi's assertion that "a documentary film can never simply represent the real, that instead it is a dialectical conjunction of a real space and the filmmakers that invade it," we must remain attentive to the textures of this conjunction.[102] To return to the metaphor of the photograph of the movement, these

[102] Stella Bruzzi, *New Documentary*, 2nd ed (London ; New York: Routledge, 2006), 153.

documentaries sharpen certain aspects of the image at the detriment of others, necessarily cut out some of the noise that nonetheless inheres within social reality. I hope in the following chapters to bring this process of selection to the foreground; to place inside the frame, in other words, the frame itself.

Chapter II: Urgency and Slowness, Composing Wholeness

Introduction

Cinema, and especially documentary cinema, may be appreciated for its ability to "preserve and record the affairs of the world,"[103] yet a social movement presents a particular challenge to the medium, for it is, as its name suggests, *in movement*. Although the observation may seem self-evident, movements, as spatially- and temporally-bound phenomena, often demand *urgent* movement from its sympathetic observers, especially given the preponderant role that news coverage takes in the rendering of a movement. It is therefore of no great surprise that observers of movements in the 2010s, such as those of the Arab Spring, have often tended to privilege the digital and online formats as a means of directly and quickly contesting hegemonic discourses.

But also in the past, political filmmaking has attempted in the past to answer social movement's calls for prompt, oppositional coverage. Following in the steps of documentary scholar Bill Nichols, Michael Renov shows that the Newsreel movement of the 1960s (associated with the New Left and particularly known for its anti-Vietnam-war films) sought to emulate and counter the power of broadcast television by recycling its effects of "immediacy, emotional impact, and accessibility" in filmmaking.[104] Through the production of films in the form of low-profile reportage and analysis that could be assembled and disseminated within a matter of weeks, the collective of filmmakers hoped to respond to the urgency of the historical moment in which they found themselves. As Renov puts it, these filmmakers sought to produce the antithesis of the disposable entertainment film, which took an enormous quantity of resources to produce and largely disregarded the context in which they were produced.[105] Newsreel films, by contrast, were low-budget and easily distributable, intended as tools for organizers to work with in their given context. During the late sixties, Newsreel films would quickly become an important part of the alternative media environment of the New Left, with dozens shown in New York cinemas.[106]

---

[103] Michael Renov, *The Subject of Documentary*, Visible Evidence, v. 16 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 22.
[104] Ibid., 11.
[105] Ibid.
[106] Ibid., 14.

The *gilets jaunes* movement has no cinematic analogue to Newsreel. Indeed, most of the movement's attention and energy has been directed towards digital production and online platforms, such as in the form of livestreams. Nevertheless, early on, there was an attempt to harness documentary film as a political tool, although notably, this effort came from outside the movement. *J'veux du soleil*, shot over the period of six days in December 2018 and released hastily in March 2019, is the first long-form documentary to be released in theaters covering the *gilets jaunes*, at a time when the *gilets jaunes* movement was still a major actor within the broader French media landscape, even if at that point, it had already lost some of its initial momentum. As a result of its physical and temporal proximity to the events of the protests, there is a distinctive urgency to the film's approach to the movement. Drawing on the tradition of reportage, *J'veux du soleil*, not unlike the Newsreel film, recycles the immediacy and accessibility of broadcast journalism. However, I argue that it does so with the explicitly oppositional and practical desire of remedying the movement's image, of correcting the record, and in the process, undoing the symbolic violence done against the movement. Through its use of montage sequences and cinema verité-type encounters with protestors, the film undercuts the veracity of the dominant frame and reframes the movement as a sympathetic political force compatible with left-wing interests. Moreover, as a road movie, *J'veux du soleil* attempts to connect the different roundabouts it visits, and consequently project the image of the movement as a whole. Thus, as the first section of this chapter will show, the film attempts to synthesize a composite image of the movement from its various encounters with protestors. However, as I will also show, the filmmaker's eagerness to redefine the movement leads to his own voice and persona coming into conflict with the movement's more horizontal politics of representation.

If the first section concerns the first long-form documentary to be released about the *gilets jaunes*, the second section of this chapter directs its attention to the last documentary film to date about the movement*, Les Voies Jaunes*, an ethnographic film shot over multiple years and released in 2023. *Les Voies Jaunes* bears striking similarities to *J'veux du soleil* in terms of how it moves: like its predecessor, it is also a road movie traversing through France in pursuit of documenting *gilets jaunes*. The two films differ significantly, however, in terms of approach—*Les Voies Jaunes* is more greatly aligned with the tradition of direct cinema than *cinema verité*—and consequently its relationship to time. If on the one hand, *J'veux du soleil* attempts to quickly project an image to intervene in the contemporaneous media struggle over the movement's

framing, on the other hand, *Les Voies Jaunes* looks back and moves slowly through France, lingers in the spaces that it films in order to gradually allow a "truer" and finer-grained image of the movement to emerge. Through slowness, in other words, it enables a different encounter with the of the movement, one more attuned to the plurality and diversity of *gilets jaunes* voices. And as I will also argue, this slowness is an implicitly oppositional way to reframe the movement. If on the one hand, *J'veux du soleil* seeks to counter the immediacy of the television broadcast with immediacy, *Les Voies Jaunes* on the other hand does so by calling attention to the act of viewing itself, and therefore to the dominant apprehension of the movement as image.

A first impression: portraying the *gilets jaunes* with the dignity they reclaim

Amongst the documentary films I consider in this thesis, *J'veux du soleil* stands out for the urgency with which it seeks to reframe the movement. This framing can in part be attributed to the socio-political background of its filmmakers. François Ruffin, a journalist by training and founder of the satirical publication *Journal Fakir*, obtained mainstream popularity in France for *Merci, Patron!* (2016), his previous documentary in which he challenges the labor practices of France's fashion behemoth, LVMH. Having been heavily involved in the 2016 *Nuit Debout* protests and seated as the deputy for the Somme's 1st constituency in the National Assembly since 2018 under the colors of France's left-wing *La France Insoumise* party, Ruffin was also gaining more of a political reputation for himself at the point of filming *J'veux du soleil*. While not directly involved in French politics, Ruffin's collaborator behind the camera, the documentary filmmaker Gilles Perret, nonetheless had already garnered acclaim for his socially minded documentaries such as *Les Jours Heureux* (2013), a labor history of the immediate afterwar of the 1940s, and *La Sociale* (2016), a similar film about the construction of the social security system in France. Both filmmakers therefore shared a critical stance vis-à-vis President Macron and his government and a sympathy to working-class politics. They also shared a heightened sensitivity to the discursive and imagistic construction of the movement through the media, and an awareness of the power that documentary holds as a political tool. Indeed, in the lead-up to the film's release, Ruffin tweeted that he wished that "History keep another trace of

this exceptional movement than that of BFM and white-collar intellectuals."[107] As such, *J'veux du soleil* constitutes an initial cinematic attempt at producing a counter-image of the movement, one which is more generous and sympathetic to the movement than the official discourse.

The explicitly oppositional tenor of the film's framing is established from the film's very beginning. After a short introduction to the main diegetic space of the film, in which we watch Ruffin and Perret set off on a road trip throughout France that will take them from Amiens in the north, where Ruffin is from, to the Mediterranean coast near Montpellier in the south, the film cuts to a rapid montage sequence that, in addition to serving as the introductory credits sequence for the film, establishes the cleaving opposition between two images of the movement: on the one hand, the "official narrative" of the mainstream media, and on the other, *J'veux du soleil'*s own oppositional narrative. Accompanied by the sweet, nostalgic singing of Charles Trenet's "*Douce France*," the montage alternates between violent clashes between the police and protestors and convivial scenes of *gilets jaunes* coming together in the streets. Suddenly, with a crackle of television static, the montage abruptly cuts to a thirty-second sequence which begins with President Macron's televised speech to the French public from December 31st, 2018, where he condemns the "*foule haineuse*" ("hateful crowd"). This swift change in tone is emphasized by the montage's switch in musical score, which switches out the pleasant melody of Trenet's song for the low, pulsing incidental music of broadcast television footage. The pulsing continues as the viewer is barraged with excerpts from television news broadcasts and mediatized speeches cataloguing the negative epithets thrown at the protestors: "a movement of massive destruction," "searching for chaos," "a threat against democracy," a "threat" to "jews, foreigners, homosexuals," "conspiracist," "antisemitic," "racist." A last quote from Macron's December 31st speech closes out the sequence; "it's simply the negation of France." In a matter of minutes, the initial montage sequence has rendered both the "official" fear-mongering and reductive image used to discredit the protests and set the stage for the counter-image of the movement which frames the movement as *bon enfant*. The disjunction produced by the montage is interesting in my view because it implies that these two images of the movement—or even perhaps, as intimated by Trenet's song, of two Frances—are irreconcilable. Indeed, the film asks how it is

[107] Rédaction Lille, "J'veux Du Soleil, Documentaire de François Ruffin Sur Les Gilets Jaunes, En Avant-Première à Lille," *Lille Actu*, March 12, 2019, https://actu.fr/hauts-de-france/lille_59350/jveux-soleil-documentaire-francois-ruffin-sur-gilets-jaunes-avant-premiere-lille_21989437.html.

possible for a movement that appears outwardly convivial on its surface to be so reviled: clearly, one image must be more reflective of the "truth" of the movement than the other. I argue that by setting these two images side by side, *J'veux du soleil* explicitly stages the conflict between two ways of framing the movement that are fundamentally incompatible.

In this conflict over framing, the filmmakers make it clear that they will not remain impartial. Indeed, when the opening sequence ends, we are brought back into the moving car with Ruffin at the wheel who lays out the premise for his journey. He relays what had been his initial impressions of the movement; how he first learned of the protestors through their exposure on both social media platforms and news media as a bunch of *fachos* ("fascist sympathizers") causing chaos. He then recounts that he realized that the protestors were actually "*fachés mais pas fachos*" ("angry but not fascists") after attending a demonstration: far from being ne'er-do-wells, they were in reality a group of exasperated individuals coming together to make pleas for more dignified conditions. Ruffin thus announces his solidarity with the protestors from the outset of the film, while also tacitly disclosing his intention to help cultivate the image of the movement that the mainstream media has failed to produce over the initial months of the protests. Significantly, he concludes his observations with the remark that he is not himself a *gilet jaune*; as a public figure in France, he is first of all a journalist and a politician (or a hybrid of the two—some call him a *reporter-politicien*). This outsider status is a recurring theme in the film, and already implicitly acknowledged in the very first scene: as Ruffin and Perret set off, the former jokes that his car does not even have a yellow vest as per EU regulation. In positioning himself as a sympathetic outsider, not only can Ruffin exercise his familiar role as a reporter and interpreter, but he can also perform the *ouverture d'esprit* (open-mindedness) he wishes that the wider public (and especially the left-leaning public) would exercise with the protestors. In other words, he wishes to model an encounter with the movement unbeholden by the presuppositions of the dominant frame.

Part road movie, part reportage, *J'veux du soleil* effectively attempts to simulate the filmmaker's real-life encounter with the *gilets jaunes*. Or more specifically, it tries to simulate for the non-*gilets-jaune* individual what would happen if they were to stop and talk at a roundabout instead of simply driving by and maintaining the course established for them. Ruffin and Perret stop systematically at each roundabout they find. We accompany them as they approach the encampment in their vehicle, and then on foot before shaking hands with the

protestors. The conversations that ensue between Ruffin and the protestors often turn personal. Taking place not only on the roundabouts but also frequently moving inside of the protestors' homes, their encounters traverse a wide plane of emotions; in many cases, the protestors are more jovial and joking, in others, protestors break down crying describing their living conditions to Ruffin. In all of these encounters, though, we get the sense that they are genuine. Accentuating this impression of authenticity is what media theorist Pepita Hesselberth would call Perret's "handheld aesthetics"—the shaky, close-proximity of the camera which "erases the gap between the filmed event and the event of filming."[108] These handheld aesthetics play a particularly important role in these moments to cultivate a sense of "performed immediacy" in the film.[109] This performed immediacy, eliciting a similar effect to the "liveness" of the television broadcast,[110] is what draws the viewer into the space and time of the encounters and imparts onto these a heightened sense of authenticity. This, in my view, is a conscious aesthetic strategy employed by the filmmaker duo to directly counter the mainstream media frame: in effect, the shaking, proximate camera asserts its own authenticity against the supposed authenticity of the broadcasted image, presents itself as its more legitimate counterpart. As opposed to something which contributes to the distortion of their image, an aesthetics of immediacy is used here to promote their "true" image. Again, the film raises the rhetorical question: which framing of the *gilets jaunes* should we trust, between the mainstream and the documentary frame?

J'veux du soleil appears, in my view, to provide the viewer with its own answer. One strategy that Ruffin and Perret employ to this end is to find protestors who have been subjected to unfavorable media attention and present them under a different, more charitable light. We are shown excerpts from television news broadcasts which allow us to see these protestors through the "official lens," capturing them at the height of their irascibility before we are drawn into the more peaceable spaces of the encounter. If the protestor had appeared agitated in the broadcast images, we find them much more relaxed their encounter with Ruffin, who adopts a benevolent and open-minded demeanor with them rather than a confrontational approach. The viewer is thus presented with a much more positive first impression of the protestor than the one provided through official channels. In one scene, for instance, Ruffin goes to meet Julien, a *gilet jaune*

[108] Hesselberth, *Cinematic Chronotopes*, 66.
[109] Ibid.
[110] Hesselberth draws explicitly from Stephanie Marriott's text, *Live Television* (2007), here.

who was arrested during a protest in Grenoble and portrayed as a member who was *radicalisé* ("radicalized"), a term usually reserved for terrorists. As the filmmakers enter Julien's work shed, where Ruffin picks up a wrench and jokes dryly: "Look, you have everything here to be a *radicalisé*!" Though the joke at first flies over Julien's head, who will insist on the need for non-violent protest, it disarms the *gilet jaune* and provokes what appears to the viewer as a sincere, genuine reaction. This reaction already heavily suggests that the "official" judgment of his character was perhaps misguided. Furthermore, by calling back directly to the language of the news report, Ruffin guides our attention directly to the absurdity of the mainstream framing. I contend that one of the main intentions of the film is to communicate to its viewers that the first impression of the movement that they were provided by the mainstream framing may have been deceiving. As such, we should not be too quick to judge.

In his quest for communicating authenticity, both humor and roleplaying are key tools in Ruffin's arsenal for loosening up his interlocutors, getting them to interact in front of the camera, and producing a more sympathetic and jovial representation of the movement. To a certain degree, Ruffin's role throughout the film can be likened to that of *ciné-vérite* filmmakers Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin in *Chroniques d'un été* (1961), where the filmmakers openly claim to use the presence of the camera to interact in, therewith unveil and transform rather than merely "capture" social reality. Conscious that his on-screen persona can serve as a catalyst for conversation—an awareness that perhaps comes naturally to him, given his journalistic antecedents—Ruffin has no qualms with provoking his interlocutors into a response that will show the "real" person under the yellow vest, the one that is not immediately available to the outsider on appearances alone. The camera and his persona, therefore, aim to produce a "reality effect." As a recurring bit in the film, Ruffin play-acts as President Macron to try to elicit a response from the protestors. Invited to the home of Serge, a protestor he met on a parking lot with other protestors, for instance, he asks "Imagine that I am President Macron right now, what would you like to say to me?" Serge responds: "Live like us or not at all. I propose you even better. You spend six months in my position with minimum wage, and I'll take yours. Six months, we exchange places… and we'll see who will cry first." The performative staging of this relationship between the President and the people is a rhetorically powerful strategy, as it produces an exchange that had been foreclosed by the dominant framing's symbolically violent negation of the *gilets jaunes'* capacity for speech, brought about by the factors explored in the

prior chapter. Serge here not only reveals himself as being capable of entering in dialogue with the President, but he posits a fundamental equality between himself and the latter—"I would like to see him try to spend six months in my place!" Scenes like this one in the film are not only endearing, but they also surprise the viewer by presenting an image of the *gilets jaunes* as politically coherent and capable. For me, they correspond with the film's central message that we should not take the mainstream framing of the social movement, or the *gilets jaunes*, for granted. We should, instead, revise our first impressions.

J'veux du soleil's double standard on speaking on the movements behalf

Despite Ruffin and Perret's desire to authentically portray the protestors with the dignity they reclaim, the film has also been criticized for the outsized presence that Ruffin takes in a film supposed to be centered on the *gilets jaunes*. Indeed, there are moments in which the filmmaker's performative presence, his position as *auteur* of the documentary, appears to take precedence over those of his subjects. In a reflection on the film, Anika Diallo criticizes *J'veux du soleil*'s tendency to forget its own subject: "Is it a film on François Ruffin or the *Gilets jaunes*? The answer to this question is difficult, as the filmmaker insists on interweaving the two."[111] This criticism is echoed by Dom Thomas, who in his review of the film for the left-wing periodical *Révolution Permanente*, writes that the film does not only put the popular classes at center stage, but also Ruffin, who, in his eagerness to make others talk, has the tendency to "say too much himself, to make speak rather than to listen. To create a filter, at once emotional and political, between the spectator and the subject of the documentary, here the *gilets jaunes*" [translation mine].[112] These critiques are fair, in my view, and highlight the limits of Ruffin's approach to producing "authentic" encounters with the protestors. As I will argue in the following section, in his urgency to reframe the movement, Ruffin runs the risk of speaking too much and too quickly on the movement's behalf, like the broadcast television he condemns. In effect, I contend that one can read Ruffin's provocations as an act of ventriloquism, of making the *gilets jaunes* say what he wants him to say—in other words, to reshape the image of the movement intentionally

[111] Anika Diallo, "Films documentaires : quel regard sur le mouvement des Gilets jaunes?," in *Les gilets jaunes: un défi journalistique*, by Jean-Marie Charon and Arnaud Mercier (Paris: Éditions Panthéon-Assas, 2022), 129.
[112] Dom Thomas, "« J'veux Du Soleil » de François Ruffin. Quand Les Gilets Jaunes Crèvent l'écran," *Révolution Permanente*, February 19, 2019, https://www.revolutionpermanente.fr/J-veux-du-soleil-de-Francois-Ruffin-Quand-les-Gilets-Jaunes-crevent-l-ecran.

or unintentionally in a way that conflicts with the desires and intentions of the *gilets jaunes* and aligns with his own political interests.

In order to consider this argument, I want to suggest that this conflict over the main protagonist can also be rearticulated as a conflict concerning the "voice" of the documentary. Bill Nichols has written of this voice as that "*how* the logic, and perspective, of a documentary gets conveyed to us."[113] How this more general "voice" finds form is, in part, a function of which voices get to speak in the documentary and how they get to speak. Although Ruffin and Perret give voice to an impressive number of *gilets jaunes*, the filmmakers also take a very active role in shaping how the viewers interpret their speech. Indeed, our reporter-protagonist's own perspective on the protests often takes center stage. Throughout the film, from the driver's seat in direct address to Perret and his camera, he delivers his analysis of the movement in the form of monologues. In one of these monologues, he wonders out loud whether the protests might be, in addition to debasing economic and political conditions, protests against the degrading aesthetic conditions of the peripheral France (not known for its beauty) that they inhabit. He then continues this line of thinking as he meets with the *gilets jaunes* of Dions, who have raised a banner with a painting of one of the encampment's members, promoted to the status of a mascot. Speaking out loud to those assembled on the roundabout, he declares:

> Before, it was the saints, it was the princes, it was the kings, queens, represented in big paintings like this. Now, those that are represented like this are the brands, it's Dunlop, things like Casino, Carrefour, it's all things being sold. And here, we have what's essentially an anti-publicity, and it's Marcel [the protestor depicted on the banner] in its place. And as such in a place like this, we put a painting, a beautiful painting, which restores beauty to a man, and to everyone else in the process, I wonder if this is not a kind of struggle as well against our aesthetic degradation.

Not really knowing whether Ruffin is asking a question or monologuing, the *gilets jaunes* present at the scene can only mutter in tentative agreement with him. Their unease is revealing of the ambiguity of Ruffin's position in representing the movement. Although his declaration may be meant to stimulate dialogue for the film, it also sets the terms for the encounter between Ruffin and the protestors, and for how the viewer of the documentary interprets their banner—as a primarily aesthetic, anti-consumerist statement. Furthermore, the language he uses indicates a

[113] Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, 69.

kind of slippage between Ruffin and the *gilets jaunes*. In effect, when he says, "our aesthetic degradation," he heavily implies that he shares their cause, or that he is even, in some way, one of them. In other words, he assimilates their voices and iconography to his own framing of the movement. In doing so, however, he risks speaking for the movement, subordinating it to his own ends, and by extension reproducing the verticality of political representation that the *gilets jaunes* decry.

In *Introduction to Documentary*, Nichols points out that the voice of documentary not only speaks through the voices of those featured in the documentary, but that it also speaks "with all the means available to its maker." By this, he means that the "selection and arrangement of sound and image" in the documentary also contributes to the message it conveys.[114] Accordingly, we must direct our attention to the montage sequences as a fundamental part of how *J'veux du soleil* "speaks." The role that montage plays in speaking for the film becomes particularly evident in another encounter between Ruffin and a group of *gilets jaunes*. In the same manner as the last encounter, in a half-question, half-statement, Ruffin tries to connect the *gilets jaunes* to the May '68 movement by evoking the slogan of the Jacques Doillon's cult 1968 film *l'An 01*: "*On arrête tout, et on réfléchit*" ("We stop everything, and we reflect"). Right after bringing up the slogan, a montage of scenes from the l'*An 01* interrupts the diegesis of the encounter. We are then brought back into the fold of the conversation. While this sequence may serve to make Ruffin's reference more concrete for the viewer, it also serves to link the *gilets jaunes* historically and visually to a broader left-wing tradition of political contestation in France. Reframing the movement in such a way, after all, is of strategic importance for Ruffin and his own political ambitions. For if Ruffin openly communicated his desire to give another face to the *gilets jaunes*, this change of face also tacitly creates the necessary conditions for convergence between the *gilets jaunes* and the more explicitly left-wing *Nuit Debout* movement of 2016, of which Ruffin was a prominent member. In providing another image of the movement, one that is more proximate to the traditional French left, Ruffin wipes away the smudges left by the mainstream media framing which may be keeping certain factions of the left, syndicalists, and militants from pursuing a *rapprochement* with the movement. However, as someone who also has a political career, Ruffin also stands to gain significantly from assimilating the voices of the *gilets jaunes* to his own.

[114] Ibid., 72.

While the argument I am putting forward may appear to the reader as cynical, the conspicuous timing of the film's release nonetheless supports this reading of the documentary. As Clarisse Fabre of the newspaper *Le Monde* observes, the film's passage in movie theaters fell within the campaign window of the European elections of May 2019, evoking the possibility of electoral motivations behind the hasty release date. And while some may dispute the reality of this reasoning, the perplexing ending to the film does little to dispel fears of potential political cooptation on the part of the filmmakers. Standing on a Mediterranean beach with Marie, the final *gilet jaune* with whom he meets, Ruffin reprises his role as President Macron one final time, although it becomes increasingly unclear whether he is play-acting as he announces:

> I love you! I love what you have done this autumn. It's like you've opened a breach. A breach in your consciences. A breach in the consciences of those who lived it and those who saw it and also a breach in the consciences of all the French, and a breach in my conscience as well, as President of the Republic. A breach opened with sunlight behind it. And I, as President of the Republic, I want to say that this sunlight, you have a right to it. This happiness, you all have a right to it. And I will fight for all of you, so that all the Maries, all the Loics, all the Serges, all the Denis, all the Alains, that you all have a right to this happiness!

This monologue, reciting to the smiling Marie, resembles in many respects a campaign stump speech, especially considering Ruffin's mounting political ambitions. To end the film on this note is troubling, for it casts a shadow on its true motives. The question can indeed be legitimately asked: Is the film an attempt by Ruffin to instrumentalize the movement to personal political ends? The answer is unclear. After this monologue, Ruffin will ask Marie to sing "*J'veux du soleil*" (1991), the song by the French band, *Au p'tit bonheur*, which gives the film its title and closes its credits sequence. While this action may be interpreted as the filmmaker giving voice one last time to the *gilet jaune* and imploring her to continue singing for a sunnier tomorrow, Ruffin's own political ambitions nonetheless loom like clouds ambiguously over this final act.

Ruffin's final monologue epitomizes the tension at the heart of attempting to represent the speech of the protestors; in the process, their voices might get coopted, made to say something other than what they may have intended. It is indeed difficult not to see Ruffin here as leveraging his credibility, obtained by way of his documentary encounters, to designate himself as a legitimate spokesperson or partner to the *gilets jaunes*, and possibly in contravention to the movement's desires to preserve the sovereignty over their own representation and ostensible

political "neutrality." The problem over Ruffin's position further resides in the fact that he does not only occupy the middle ground between being a journalist and politician; he is also at once an observer and interpreter of the movement. Moving quickly from roundabout to roundabout, commune to commune, and trying to decrypt the movement in real time, the protagonist cannot help but provide his own commentary on what the movement *is*. The result lends credence to Bruzzi's assertion, mentioned previously, that a documentary film is a dialectical conjunction of a real space and the filmmakers that invade it. Here, however, the "invasion of the filmmakers" does not only take the form of Ruffin's interventions, but also Perret's camera gaze, Cécile Dubois' montage, and also the form of the road movie genre itself. Indeed, as a format, the road movie also contributes to the voice of the film. It enables the visual linkage of quick encounters, incomplete snapshots of a movement *in media res*. The teleological structure of the journey, meanwhile, establishing a clear beginning and end, gives even greater importance to the film's parting message. In other words, all of these performative invasions work together to perform a directly oppositional image of the movement which, while not necessarily claiming to speak on behalf of the movement, stands in for the movement, becomes a frame for interpreting it, and provides a new impression of the movement to be accessed by the outside observer.

J'veux du soleil therefore raises, both in what it achieves and also what it fails to do, the inevitable politics inherent to the outside mediation of the *gilets jaunes* as well as the inextricability of ethical considerations from questions of representation—questions which we will encounter as we consider the documentary films which follow it. Though Ruffin and Perret's framing may succeed in renewing first impressions and warning outsiders against too quick of judgement, it nonetheless falls in the trap of its own urgency and its desire to provide analysis of the movement, leading to legitimate concerns over whose voice is really speaking. It is useful to return to the cinema of Jean Rouch once more, here, to think about the role of the filmic interpreter in matters of reflexivity. While *J'veux du* soleil's handheld, low-budget aesthetics may foreground its process and subjectivity, it seems to lack the additional layer of reflexivity which bolstered the ethical credentials of Rouch's cinema, namely, a commitment to sharing the process of the film's construction with its subjects. More generally, Ruffin and Perret's film fails to reflect on how their methods for representing the movement may come with adverse effects. All of this is not to say that the documentary betrays the movement. As I discussed in this section, the film's oppositional advocacy presents itself as a well-needed response to the media's

demonization of the movement. By stopping to listen to the protestors and allowing them to express themselves through a different frame, the film weakens the influence of the dominant framing over our assumptions surrounding the movement and allows for a different kind of engagement with the *gilets jaunes*, one that is more sympathetic and valorizing.

Les Voies Jaunes: Looking Back, Slowly

J'veux du soleil, the first major documentary film to be released about the *gilets jaunes*, finds its counterpart in the latest and potentially last documentary film to be released about the movement, called *Les Voies Jaunes*, by ethnologist-turned-filmmaker, Sylvestre Meinzer. *Les Voies Jaunes* was originally conceived in response to Ruffin and Perret's film, and visibly draws inspiration from it in its adoption of the journey format. Departing from the north and orienting itself downwards towards the south, Meinzer's camera travels in a similar direction as its counterpart even as it follows more closely the line cut by the *diagonale du vide*, the notorious band of low-density population which goes from the city of Le Havre, uncoincidentally the first location of the film, to Marseille, the last stop of the film. *Les Voies Jaunes* ostensibly holds the same premise as *J'veux du soleil*: to embark in search of the voices of those kept at once invisible and dehumanized by the dominant representational order and to make these visible, or in Meinzer's case, audible. Like Ruffin, her film seeks to create an image of the movement which is equally oppositional to the mainstream media's framing. Yet the timing of the film as well as its temporality and looks make the film radically different. It was, after all, released in early 2023. As such, its image is no longer geared towards changing first impressions. Rather, it offers a fine-grained and detailed composite meant to look back and reflect on the movement. Meinzer's film effectively reflects a shift in the role that cinema plays in the evolution of the movement, from accompaniment to commemoration. If *J'veux du soleil* is a film of urgency and unfolding, in my view, *Les Voies Jaunes* is a film of slowness and aftermath; if the former seeks to correct the record, the latter intends to create a new one.

To understand the transformation in approach to framing the movement inherent in Meinzer's film, we must acknowledge the change in circumstances which had befallen the movement at the time of the film's conception. Meinzer began recording testimonies of *gilets jaunes* at the tail-end of the protests in May of 2019, a moment when the protests were dying down. A period thick with police violence and judicial repression, the protestors she interviewed

were not filmed directly when giving testimony. In Meinzer's words "the camera was not the right tool" at that moment.[115] The decision not to film protestors reflected an ethical commitment on Meinzer's part, who preferred to share with the protestors "a moment of intimacy and trust" rather than contribute to the "accumulation of images" around the *gilets jaunes* in the context of demonstration.[116] It was only after recording testimony that Meinzer set out once more to the same locations where she had taken the audio to capture her images, a process which would continue until May 2020. The dyssynchronous relationship between voice and image is what produces the film's unconventional dispositif. Meinzer overlays voice-off excerpts of testimonies, which determine the pace of the film, over a carefully edited and dynamic montage combining panoramic vistas and fixed shots of landscapes, filmed in slow, long takes, with more intimate shots from the homes and workplaces of *gilets jaunes*, sometimes featuring scenes from their everyday lives. The film's title, which cleverly plays on the homophones "*voies*," a word which translates to "lane" or "way," and "*voix*," the French word for "voices," reflects the filmmaker's desire to imbricate speech and space. In effect, Meinzer's film appears to not only want to give voice to the *gilets jaunes*, but also to the places they inhabit, equally depreciated and ignored by the ruling classes—something which Ruffin and Perret's film only touches in passing. *Voies* and *voix* are conjugated, made indissociable from one another as a means to express that these voices did not come from nowhere. Moreover, the plural form of both words already hints at the form of the documentary's voice, one that is necessarily polyvocal rather than univocal. Indeed, as I will develop in this section, the documentary's work of reframing of the movement proceeds primarily via the voices of the protestors themselves. Traveling along the *voies* is effectively the pretext and the means by which this work is done.

The film's shift in approach to representing the *gilets jaunes* also derives from the position taken up by the filmmaker. In stark opposition to Ruffin and Perret, Meinzer never features herself in front of the camera nor provides any voiceover. As an ethnographer rather than a reporter, she maintains a curatorial relationship to the film's contents, stitching together excerpts of individual testimonies into a collectively voiced account of the movement and

[115] This quote comes from a film talk that I attended in February 2024 in Romainville, France, where Sylvaine Meinzer was invited to do a Q&A.
[116] "Les Voies Jaunes : Un Film Qui Fait Entendre La France Des Gilets Jaunes," *Révolution Permanente Brest*, December 1, 2023, https://www.revolutionpermanente.fr/Les-voies-jaunes-un-film-qui-fait-entendre-la-France-des-Gilets-jaunes.

finding images which will complement and correspond with what is said. To make the film, she cut down a total of 35 hours of testimony into a film of a little less than two hours.[117] Consequently, the film is quietly expansive in the number of subjects that it touches upon. Whereas *J'veux du soleil* captures a movement still in the midst of developing its vocabulary, *Les Voies Jaunes* intervenes at a moment when the movement had almost completed its natural life cycle. As such, the film grants more time and space for reflection as well as the inclusion of sometimes dissonant or disagreeing voices. Significantly, Meinzer intentionally populates her documentary with plural and diverse testimony, both in content and origin. Some members interviewed speak to their direct experience of the movement, others explain their personal motivations for joining, others yet provide historical or political analysis of the movement. Their testimonies cut across a vast spectrum of political inclinations, from protestors who identify most with the right or far right as well as those with radical labor backgrounds. The corpus of the testimonies, moreover, also reflects a wide range of occupations, such as a domestic aid worker, carnival worker, farmer. The encounters with protestors, in other words, are not as random as they were in *J'veux*; Meinzer has clearly tracked down a wide range of voices that will speak to the diversity of experiences and interpretations of the movement. And, only disclosing the names of her subjects in the end credits, she is intentional not to privilege one voice over another. All matter equally in producing an image of a movement that was not always in agreement nor coming from the same place.

With the intention of creating a sympathetic image of the movement to enable a *rapprochement* with the left, *J'veux du soleil* smoothes out the differences and conflicts that existed within the ranks of the *gilets jaunes*, which have been documented notably by ethnographic studies (see previous chapter). Meinzer's ethnographic commitment to faithfully reproducing social reality, however, produces another, perhaps more holistic image of the movement, one which shows the movement in all its complexity and, at times, paradoxicality. Even if the testimonies and images are only of the order of synecdoche—these experiences are elevated to the level of being representative of the whole movement—the sheer amount of the themes covered by the documentary evinces the Meinzer's desire to leave few stones unturned, to quilt together a comprehensive and authentic image of the *gilets jaunes*. Meinzer seeks to do all of this, though, without passing her own judgement; she does not do anything in her editing to

[117] Ibid.

undercut the testimony of those whose politics may appear somewhat confused. The *gilets jaunes* can speak for themselves, create their own record, and Meinzer, as an outsider, respects the distance that exists between her and the protestors. This distance also reflects the fundamental difference in methods between *J'veux du soleil* and *Les Voies Jaunes*, which is rooted in the classical opposition between *cinéma verité* and direct cinema. Meinzer's camera and presence is largely unobtrusive in the scenes she films, whereas Ruffin and Perret actively participate in the constitution of the scene. Yet, this tells only half of the story. As we will see, while Meinzer may not try to directly intervene in the image, the decisions she makes in what to film and how to set these images against the voices she records participates significantly in the reframing of the *gilets jaunes* to produce new ways of engaging with the movement.

Despite the formal ethnographic distance, I postulate that Meinzer's position is not neutral but implicitly political. The slow pacing of the film, perhaps, is the film's most overt political, as well as ethical, decision. Drawing on slow cinema as a genre, Meinzer addresses the aforementioned "accumulation of images" by slowing down the viewers' intake of images and allowing them to dwell in place. Her images, in effect, take us far away from the usual fronts of mobilization. If Meinzer does show scenes of protest, it is always from a distance, never for very long, and often meant to support what is being said. In one sequence, for instance, as a protestor testifies to how the momentum in her local group has wound down, and that without mass mobilization, "*on ne sera rien*" ("we will be nothing"), the camera films a small urban procession of *gilets jaunes* from a distance. In another sequence, the *gilets jaunes* almost seem to burst unexpectedly onto the scene. In a green patch between a rail line and a road, one of those ambiguous spaces which has come to define peripheral France, multiple shots establish our sense of place by showing us the nature trail that runs near the overpass. The camera adopts a wide shot of the landscape, and for a brief moment, everything appears calm; a man in the distance can be seen approaching by bicycle, another man walks away. The man speaking in the voice-off, who has been explaining the triggers for the movement, states "*et c'était l'explosion*" ("and that was the explosion"). Suddenly, a police escort enters the foreground of the picture, followed by the sounds of chants and pots and pans. A procession of *gilets jaunes* with flags, phrygian caps, horses, accompanied by photojournalists, slowly begins to materialize. The slowness of the take here domesticates, rather than inflects, the appearance of the *gilets jaunes* onto the scene. We are quite distant here from the liveness of the television broadcast which spectacularizes the

movement, foregrounds its conflictual nature, and forces its subjects to perform for the camera. If an explicitly oppositional framing of the movement had been of primary concern in *J'veux du soleil*, this is conspicuously absent from Meinzer's film.

In effect, *Les Voies jaunes*, which could be qualified as a work of sensory ethnography and consequently, a work of slow cinema, is wholly uninterested in participating in the treatment of the *gilets jaunes* as a visual spectacle or performance, and more broadly, with entertaining the scopophilic pleasures associated to documentary film and the "desire for the real," critiqued by Elizabeth Cowie in her work, *Recording Reality, Desiring the Real*.[118] Theorists of slow cinema have argued that the genre's politics cannot be understood without reference to its opposite, the "cinematic breakneck aesthetic" with its "ultra-fast arsenal of formal devices."[119] I would argue here, however, that Meinzer's slow cinema seeks to engage a televisual rather than cinematic counterpart; specifically, it aims to negate broadcast television's treatment of the social movement as image and to make possible other forms of engagement with it. Indeed, implicit in the film's treatment of the *gilets jaunes* is the belief that the spectacular, the being-image of the movement itself, may get in the way of listening to the protestors' voices; as a result, the choice to recur to slow cinema is an ethical one. The slowness of Meinzer's takes foregrounds the voices of her subjects, and her editing is careful not to distract from the testimony being given—her images accompany the voices and, at times, visually complement what they are saying. In one such sequence, as a *gilet jaune* recounts members of their group being arrested in the middle of the night, we are shown a long take of a dimly lit road at night with cars passing by. What is shown corresponds with what the testimony describes, even giving a visual texture to the testimony, without nonetheless overpowering or distracting from what is said. Meinzer may entangle *voies* and the *voix*, but this is not done with the intention of neutralizing the power of the latter.

That is to say, I consider *Les Voies Jaunes*' aversion to spectacle to be part of the filmmaker's wider strategy to reshape her viewers' practices of viewing and listening. Film theorist Scott MacDonald has argued that sensory ethnography, as a hybrid of documentary and

---

[118] Elizabeth Cowie, *Recording Reality, Desiring the Real*, Visible Evidence, v. 24 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 2.
[119] Asbjørn Grønstad, "19. SLOW CINEMA AND THE ETHICS OF DURATION," in *Slow Cinema*, by Tiago De Luca and Nuno Barradas Jorge (Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 273–84, https://doi.org/10.1515/9780748696031-025, 277.

avant-garde film, combines "cinema's ability to create representations of cultures and subcultures…with its capacity for retraining perception and providing experiences akin to meditation."[120] Films like Ilisa Barbash and Lucien Castaing-Taylor's *Hell Roaring Creek* (2010) meditate and dwell on a place with the intention of producing different forms of attention in their viewers, and a more self-consciously embodied spectatorship. Meinzer's film, combining slow images with raw testimony, not only produces such a form of embodied spectatorship, but also retrains what Lisbeth Lipari has termed the "listening habitus" of its viewers. Expanding on Lipari's work, Pooja Rangan has argued that documentaries "…cultivate distinct listening habits in audiences (habits we inhabit and which inhabit us) at the same time as documentary forms begin to embody and emulate these listening habits."[121] Opting for polyvocality rather than univocality, as well as establishing a porousness between the voices that speak and the environments that are shown (notably, the film chooses to always play the audio tracks from the recorded images side-by-side with the testimony), *Les Voies Jaunes* encourages a form of "haptic listening," a "radically ethical mode of listening that receives sonorous alterity without seeking to understand or master it."[122] With haptic listening, the recorded subject is no longer experienced "…merely as a dispenser of information or opinion but also as a sonorous being whose voice resounds in us."[123] This is a form of listening that is also attentive to the *gilets jaunes'* voices' textural and emotional qualities, qualities that are seldom foregrounded in the television broadcast.

The form of haptic listening induced by the slowness of the film, in my view, produces a dispossessing effect on the viewer which makes them more receptive to what is being said. At the same time that the viewer dwells within the places of the film, they also dwell in—as well as dwell on—the voices they hear (and these voices dwell within them as well), though never for too long. Meinzer lets a voice speak for as long as needed to get their points across (the luxury of looking back), before moving on organically to the next which will take us in a slightly different direction. Nevertheless, what is important is that all speak long enough to be heard as voices.

---

[120] Scott MacDonald, *American Ethnographic Film and Personal Documentary: The Cambridge Turn* (Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press, 2013), 324.
[121] Pooja Rangan, "Documentary Listening Habits: From Voice to Audibility," in *The Oxford Handbook of Film Theory*, ed. Kyle Stevens, 1st ed. (Oxford University Press, 2022), 403-C20.N71, https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190873929.013.25, 411.
[122] Ibid.
[123] Ibid., 412.

This, according to Rangan, would be an example of how documentary film participates in the process of shaping sound as voice, of making certain voices audible as voices, and subsequently in the "humanization of the ear." After all, "Voice is not a preexisting form, quality, or characteristic of a subject that is out there waiting to be heard. Voice is the product of sonic forms, linguistic traditions, and auditory practices that render sounds and gestures socially meaningful or disposable and call into being practices of listening that resonate with those meanings."[124] The immediacy of the television broadcast may have relegated these voices to the status of noise; Meinzer's film, meanwhile, gives voice to the *gilets jaunes* while also producing a corresponding practice of attentive listening that enables their speech to be recognized as such. Like *J'veux du soleil*, then, *Les Voies Jaunes* posits the *gilet jaune* as having a politically legitimate and recognizable voice. Yet perhaps to its credit over its predecessor, *Les Voies Jaunes* succeeds in doing this without having those voices be assimilated vertically to the voice of the filmmaker, and without having these voices be explicitly oppositional. They speak on their own terms—at times harmoniously, at times discordantly—and on equal footing. In this sense, the film gets closer at reproducing the horizontal ethos of the *gilets jaunes* protests themselves.

Dwelling on place

Although the voice of *Les Voies Jaunes* is resoundingly polyvocal, Meinzer's camera is the means by which the filmmaker will nonetheless supply her own voice and perspective to the movement. After all, while her images are carefully arranged to avoid interfering with and even complement the testimonies she has recorded, these are also very intentionally selected in order to convey a different visual narrative of the movement than the one that has been routinely presented. As the documentary attempts to retrain our ear, it is a meditation on and in space. As such, it proposes a change in how we engage with the *gilets jaunes* from a purely visual appreciation of the phenomenon towards one which engages the wider spectrum of the senses. The slowness of the film immerses the viewer within the everyday lived sensorium of the *gilets jaunes*, largely away from the front lines of the protest. Of course, as I have already pointed out, this is a consequence of the timing of the film's production; with the protests nearing their end and the situation in the country going back to "normal," Meinzer was turned towards the afterlife of the movement. Yet it is also natural that as an ethnographer, Meinzer is interested in how the

[124] Ibid., 409.

sensory inputs of everyday life play a meaningful role in the constitution of the social movement. The film seems to imply that if we want to fully appreciate the *voix* of the *gilets jaunes*, we also need to linger and dwell on the places along the *voies* that they inhabit, which are so important to why the movement began.

Already, in spatial terms, *Les Voies Jaunes* gives insight into a movement that was much more geographically and socially diverse than initially believed. Produced when the movement was still nascent, *J'veux du soleil* bought into the early mainstream media framing of the *gilets jaunes* as a solely peri-urban phenomenon. With the gift of hindsight, as well as the willingness to go beyond the space of the roundabouts, Meinzer's film produces a revised account of the geography of the movement. Her camera passes through a wide variety of spaces, from the industrial ports of Le Havre to the rural areas of middle France. Meinzer has explained that she sought to film "the zones outside of the roundabouts…the countryside and small cities";[125] with Le Havre and Marseille, large cities as well. And as opposed to Ruffin and Perret, for whom the automobile is the central to the spatial narrative of their film, the camera in *Les Voies Jaunes* uses the automobile more sparingly. We drive around a roundabout once, at the very beginning of the film; we also drift past the sacrificed space of industrial and commercial zones on the border of the highways. For Meinzer, the car is not the only mode of mobility present within the diagonal line. In urban spaces, for instance, the camera prefers to take public transit. The film opens with a scene inside a tram in Le Havre and introduces its last stop in Marseille with images capture from inside the metro; on our way south, we pass through several small regional train stops as well. *Les Voies Jaunes* thus reflects a movement which has grown to exist beyond the peri-urban—a nuance which Ruffin and Perret's film does not capture, given its purely vehicular premise. Though this revision may not seem important at first glance, I believe that it is another way that the documentary reframes the *gilets jaunes* against the mainstream. Framing the movement as primarily peri-urban, as Ruffin and Perret do, for me risks reducing the movement to stereotypes, or solidifying the mental image of the movement as "*beauf*," as discussed in the previous chapter. In contrast, by moving slowly and allowing the different layers of the movement to gradually appear, *Les Voies Jaunes* is able to subtly challenge many existing geographical assumptions about the movement.

[125] "Les Voies Jaunes : Un Film Qui Fait Entendre La France Des Gilets Jaunes."

While Meinzer can use sweeping landscape shots to comment on space, the filmmaker also zeroes in the small details of everyday life, providing invaluable ethnographic description in the process. The filmmaker often recurs to visual juxtaposition in her montage as a tool for communicating information to the viewer and as a means of creating correspondences between the image and the voice. In one sequence, we are given multiple angles, medium and close-up shots, of a *gilet jaune* trimming the hedges of his fence, presumably of his home. The camera slowly pans to the left, across the street, to a manor. The *gilet's jaunes* testimony, meanwhile, tells the story of being invited to the house of a bourgeois classmate and being taught how to eat "properly." The separation of worlds is communicated orally at once by the *voix* and visually communicated by the *voie*. In another sequence, the camera watches from above as a worker in a library vacuums the carpet. We listen to a testimony speaking of the fundamental disconnect between the political class and the people. As we watch the person work, the camera pans slowly across the library before then panning to bookshelves with leather-bound books with plaques above them which read "*Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres*," *"Académie des Beaux-Arts*," "*Académie des Sciences Morales et Politiques*." The voice finishes with the statement: "the solution is not political—well it is political but not in the way that it is presented to us." The juxtaposition of the vacuuming worker with the *belles-lettres* as the backdrop of political disconnect again creates a subtle correspondence between voice and image, and also quietly highlights the class divide which can even be felt in a small library in France. Meinzer's filmed observations, in other words, participates fully in in what film theorists Christian Suhr and Rane Willerslev call observational cinema's ambition of "showing the invisible."[126] By the "invisible," here, Suhr and Willerslev mean that observational cinema often seeks to transmit "that which is seen but not usually noticed," the seemingly "trivial details" of one's environment which make up the "finest grains of day-to-day human existence."[127] As an ethnographic document, Meinzer's meticulous process of observation and editing invaluably preserves a fine-grained record of the *gilet jaunes*' environment, bestowing a greater material density to the content of what is being said.

[126] Christian Suhr and Rane Willerslev, "Can Film Show the Invisible?: The Work of Montage in Ethnographic Filmmaking," *Current Anthropology* 53, no. 3 (June 2012): 282–301, https://doi.org/10.1086/664920, 284.
[127] Ibid.

In my view, the moments in which what is most "invisible" comes to the surface, however, are those when image and voice do not seem to immediately correspond with one another. Suhr and Willerslev argue that montage in ethnographic cinema "offers the possibility of breaking the boundaries of the ethnographically "thin" 2-D by delivering views of a multidimensional "thick" and if you like, super-real quality."[128] I see this as being most the case when Meinzer includes testimonies concerning police repression. Meinzer judiciously selects to convey this violence not through images matching the emotional intensity of the testimony, but rather with images which do not seem to bear any trace of this violence. For instance, a protestor gives testimony of his arrest after participating in one of the protests in Paris. As he recounts the harrowing experience of being locked up in a jail cell, the film shows images of a wind-blown field with a tarp cover rustling. His anguishing testimony whips what would be a normally peaceful landscape into a tense atmosphere—the rustling of the tarp and the quivering of leaves begin to register the violence of what is said, to express this in the visual language of the landscape. Or in another such sequence, a street medic recounts the intensity of the police repression that took place during the demonstrations while we watch images of bathers diving into the Mediterranean Sea from a cliff. Here, the relaxed atmosphere of leisure strikes a dissonant chord with what is described, producing once more an effect of tension. The blurry line of affect that bisects the testimonies and the images creates a porosity between the *voix* and the *voies*, speech and space, and in doing so reminds us: the *gilets jaunes* may no longer be as visible nor audible as when they were more present in the landscape, their voices may still not have been truly heard, but their hopes, fears, and anger remain an ever-present feature of the landscape, whether we like it or not.

Indeed, the film forces us to look at the regular spaces of the *gilets jaunes* differently; the land which appeared *prima facie* inert actually contains the dormant seeds of revolt. Far from consigning the movement to the past, as "looking back" might imply, the film acts more as a reminder of the political transformations that have occurred as a result of the movement, and the latency of their struggle. In effect, we begin to see the *gilets jaunes* in the landscape even when they are not present. The film conspicuously includes close-up shots of yellow flowers throughout the film perhaps provides a more subtle reminder of this. For Meinzer, the process of making the landscape visible goes hand in hand with making the protestors audible. Giving voice

[128] Ibid., 288.

to the protestors also means giving voice to the everyday that informs their lives, and in this case, making these present together. The film's insistence on a textured understanding of the movement, both in sensory and perspectival terms, is firmly rooted in the desire of producing another kind of relationship to the social movement, one which is slower, more based on listening and feeling than on seeing, and also more open to the diversity inherent to the movement. Unlike Ruffin and Perret's film, Meinzer's film seems to break almost completely with representations of the movement organized on the hierarchical supremacy of vision. This does not mean, however, that her images do not serve as "counter-images" to those proffered by television. If anything, these are oppositional by the other sensory details that they allow to come to the fore and by the way these images are always subordinated to the voices of the *gilets jaunes*. For it is ultimately the *gilets jaunes*, and not simply Meinzer, who are those making sense of their own movement, and they are doing so in a way that is separated from the performative bind of the media's interpellation.

While the slowness of Meinzer's documentary reframing may foster practices of ethical viewing and listening in a way that Ruffin and Perret's film does not, there remains nonetheless the issue of the timing of its intervention. Slowness in production and presentation may allow for a more ethical and precise image of the movement to emerge and consequently, another kind of encounter with the protestors; however, in the process, it also misses the moment at which the social movement is at the peak of its momentum. *J'veux du soleil* participates in the forward projection of the movement's image. *Les Voies Jaunes*, meanwhile, can only be a film of retrospection and introspection, of looking back. But this looking back is also what can serve as the basis of looking forward, to anticipating new possibilities for the movement. We get the sense through Meinzer's film that although the *gilets jaunes* may not be as visible as before, their voices are still present—in fact, the film makes them present, accessible not only to those outside of the movement, but to those inside as well. As one *gilet jaune* reflected during the film talk I attended in Romainville, the film reactivated the memories of the movement in a way that felt reenergizing, as though it was what they needed to restart their engagement. On this note, *Les Voies Jaunes* seems to converge once again with *J'veux du soleil* as a documentary film that can act as a political tool, not only for organization, but also activation.

Chapter III: Narrativizing the Movement through Proximity

Introduction

The films I consider in the previous chapter seek to depict the *gilets jaunes* through their own movement, forming a composite image of the social movement dotted by individual encounters. These further converge in that they attempt to undo the frames imposed by the dominant media narrative, either by countering them through the introduction of their own frame of analysis (*J'veux du soleil*), or by fundamentally challenging the representational foundations on which the dominant framing of the movement stands (*Les Voies Jaunes*). In this chapter, I will look at films which instead stick around the *gilets jaunes*, where the filmmakers track the development of individual protagonists in order to register the evolution of the movement over the long *durée*. My aim with this chapter is to show how, in combining an ethnographic gaze with cinematic narrative, *Un peuple* (2022) and *Boum boum* (2022) each attempt to tell the story of the movement by proxy of individual experiences, whether in the form of observing the experiences of four separate subjects (*Un peuple*) or through the filmmaker's personal experience.

This cinema of close proximity and long durée that both films uphold has the advantage of eschewing the pitfalls associated with the parachute journalism, the kind of journalism which leant itself readily to the construction of a negative image of the *gilets jaunes*. By staying physically close to their subjects, the filmmakers are able to develop humanizing and personal depictions of the *gilets jaunes*. What we see in particular here, as opposed to the films considered in the previous chapter, are images of the *gilets jaunes* that are more centered on their bodies—specifically their bodies in movement or action—than on their voices. The dynamics of a social movement transform over time, and these transform its subjects in the process. Consequently, the protestors' bodies become ciphers for making sense of this transformation. The translation of these images into a narrative, moreover, provides other interpretative schema with which to "read" the movement. They posit, in other words, alternative frames with which we can understand the *gilets jaunes* as an event. It is through this kind of bodily reframing of the movement that these films stage a more intimate encounter with the movement, an affective encounter which gives the movement a non-negligeable density.

Closely watching "Un peuple" take shape

When the *gilet jaunes* protests started in November 2018, Emmanuel Gras, a documentary filmmaker who was living in Paris at the time, went down into the streets to film. He was surprised by the people that he met—these were not the usual suspects of a classic Parisian mobilization. This motivated him to get closer to the movement and observe it where it was taking place. He took his film camera to a roundabout in Chartres, a small city geographically not too distant from the capital. Justifying his presence on the grounds that he was an independent filmmaker, he asked for permission to film. His original intention was not to make a full-fledged film; at first, Gras merely sought to meet with *gilets jaunes* and try to get a better sense of who they were, as they did not fit the usual mold of who goes out and protests. As he states in an interview to *Le Vent Se Lève*, the camera was a way to introduce himself and to make people speak, a sort of "passport."[129] Gras was already known by the French public for other ethnographically grounded documentaries, such as *Makala* (2017) and *Bovines* (2011), and his serious credentials as a filmmaker would help him gain access to the roundabout. It was only after two months of filming that he began to feel the necessity to shape a documentary film out of the images he was capturing.

The result of this extended period of accompaniment, *Un peuple* tracks the development of the *gilets jaunes* from a month into the protests, December 2018, until May 2019, and was released three and a half years after it started, in February 2022. Confronted quickly to the ambiguity and complexity of the movement, "cinema" became for the filmmaker "a tool for comprehension," a way to make sense of the movement. What specifically interested Gras was to understand not only why the *gilets jaunes* were mobilizing, but also to document "how a collective movement constructs itself as well as the difficulties of this construction, notably in the face of significant repression. I thus wanted to show portraits of individuals, but also to show the evolution of a collective."[130] Only filming the Saturday demonstrations was not an option for Gras, for whom demonstrations generally "simplified to an extreme degree" the discourses present in the movement. Demonstrations effectively only obtain "their meaning and their power" from being put into perspective with other scenes, namely, the spaces of organization like

[129] Leo Rosell and Raphaël Martin, "« L'IDÉE ÉTAIT D'APPORTER NOTRE PIERRE AU DÉBAT ÉLECTORAL » – ENTRETIEN AVEC EMMANUEL GRAS," *Le Vent Se Lève*, March 20, 2022, https://lvsl.fr/lidee-etait-dapporter-notre-pierre-au-debat-electoral-entretien-avec-emmanuel-gras/.
[130] Ibid.

the roundabout and the assembly room, as well as more intimate spaces such as the home and the workplace.[131]

For this reason, the filmmaker opts to stay close to the movement. Gras adopts a different position than the filmmakers of the previous chapter, placing himself fully inside the movement and staying put. Filmed primarily in what Bill Nichols would call the "observational mode," Gras' camera observes its social actors as though he were not there.[132] Gras provides no voice-over commentary nor inter-titles, apart from an initial text on black at text at the beginning of the film. After an initial car and drone sequence which gives us a "lay of the land" of peri-urban Chartres, the kind of space most emblematic of the genesis of the movement, we are dropped straight onto the roundabout *in media res* during a general meeting at night. As though we were a member of the crowd, we watch on as the collective votes for their representatives. This more general immersion in the group does not last for long, however. After observing the groups initial actions, like the blockade of a nearby highway toll station, Gras' camera will gradually turn its attention towards four particular individuals who begin to take an outsized role in driving the life of the collective, especially in terms of organizing and taking up positions of speech. Their individual experiences, and in particular their bodily testimonies, provide the frames through which the film charts the wider evolution of the *gilets jaunes* as a social movement.

Sociologist Brice Le Gall has pointed out in his analysis of the film that the film's "casting" of characters brings together important recurring sociological features of the *gilets jaunes*.[133] All deal with their own particular form of precarity: Benoit, who becomes one of the spokespeople for the roundabout, is a middle-aged man who was at one time homeless for eight years and who is recovering from alcoholism; Agnès, the "coordinator" of the roundabout, is a single mother who came from a family of means but who has found herself trapped in a hellish spiral of unemployment and *déclassement*; Nathalie, the planner who becomes increasingly in the group's leadership, is a caregiver whose health conditions (sciatica and polyarthritis) have forced her into unemployment; and Allan, the self-styled "journalist" of the movement, who

[131] Jérémie Couston, "Emmanuel Gras, Réalisateur d''Un Peuple' : 'L'ambivalence Politique Des Gilets Jaunes m'a Directement Attiré,'" *Télérama*, February 23, 2022, https://www.telerama.fr/cinema/emmanuel-gras-realisateur-d-un-peuple-l-ambivalence-politique-des-gilets-jaunes-m-a-directement-attire-7008947.php.
[132] Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*.
[133] Brice Le Gall, "Un Regard Ethnographique Sur Le Soulèvement Des « Gilets Jaunes »: À Propos de « Un Peuple ». Un Film Documentaire d'Emmanuel Gras," *Savoir/Agir* N° 58, no. 4 (March 23, 2022): 115–18, https://doi.org/10.3917/sava.058.0117.

completes the portrait of the movement as a younger *gilet jaune* who represents those underclass millennials for whom concerns over the ecological future of the planet and a disintegrating safety net have given rise to the now famous slogan, *"fin du mois*, *fin du monde*" ("end of the month, end of the world"). Although Gras will orient his images around these four protagonists, we almost always observe them in the presence of other *gilets jaunes* who will complete the sociological picture. In the background are many of the figures that also directly contributed to the identity and strength of the movement: the farmers, retirees, and disabled individuals who all proudly marched and occupied the roundabouts when others could not.[134] Gras may prioritize certain *gilets jaunes* over others, however he remains careful to produce a relatively comprehensive image of the movement.

As opposed to Ruffin, who offers his active analysis of the *gilets jaunes*, Gras does not introduce his characters by presenting them through a preestablished sociological lens. We primarily learn details about our protagonists, their personal motivations and feelings, through the conversations and the interactions they have with other members. Documentary filmmaker and theorist David MacDougall has lauded anthropological film's ability to bring within reach previously invisible dimensions of social life through its particular focus on intersubjective behavior.[135] Drawing on this strength, *Un peuple*'s observational approach allows for a greater appreciation of a dimension of the movement that has often remained invisible from the journalistic gaze: the concealed work of organizing and self-structuring. Indeed, from the very first scenes of assembly on the roundabout, we are already given insight into how the *gilets jaunes* go about organizing themselves. As a narrative of the structuring of the movement, the film is constituted of many such moments in which the *gilets jaunes* are in action. Whether it is in accompanying the group as they conduct operations at the highway tollbooths, watching them come to create banners and come up with slogans, or witnessing the leadership convene with other local chapters inside of a fast-food restaurant to discuss future large-scale actions, the viewer is given to see a very different image of the protestors than the reductive one which has been peddled in news media. Specifically, the film presents a group of individuals who have put

[134] Brice Le Gall, "Un Regard Ethnographique Sur Le Soulèvement Des « Gilets Jaunes »: À Propos de « Un Peuple ». Un Film Documentaire d'Emmanuel Gras," *Savoir/Agir* N° 58, no. 4 (March 23, 2022): 115–18, https://doi.org/10.3917/sava.058.0117, 116.
[135] MacDougall, *The Corporeal Image*, 269.

a lot of careful thought and work into their actions, and where collective action is determined through a healthy process of debate, doubts, disagreement, and deliberation.

As much as the choice to focus so much on the processual dimensions of the movement was a natural consequence of following the four *gilets jaunes*, it also reflects one of Gras' main desires: to produce images of the *gilets jaunes* which do not flatten them into the same stereotypes upon which television coverage relies to discredit the movement. As he stated in his interview with *Le Vent Se Lève*:

> This movement was much criticized as one of people who don't think, who don't know what they want. I wanted, on the contrary, make exist the fact that there is an aspect [of the movement] which goes in all different directions but also another where they very quickly agreed upon a project to make real changes to society… I saw them make the effort to think collectively, and it's that which I wanted to show to make exist in the film, by articulating this work of reflection, organization, and individual evolution. It's over the course of time that people transform.

The filmmaker was animated by the necessity to address a fundamental injustice in the way that the movement had been represented until that point, to produce another kind of collective encounter with the *gilets jaunes* which would "give justice" to the movement in all of its complexity. This also meant, for Gras, going to the encounter of a population that had been traditionally neglected and even stigmatized by the cinematic world. He identifies in the media's treatment of the *gilets jaunes* a pervasive and longstanding "class racism," wherein the peri-urban, white population of the *gilets jaunes* has been "…identified as totally and physically different, ugly, hideous, not knowing either how to organize with one another, nor how to speak [properly.]"[136] *Un peuple* is, in other words, a film about a "people" that has been kept at an arm's length from the rest of the population. The camera's proximity rectifies this social distance, in my view, by enfolding the viewer into the fabric of the *gilets jaunes'* social life-worlds and producing images with which the broader French population can vicariously identify and empathize. To propose a more intimate encounter between the spectator and the *gilets jaunes*: I see this as the *parti pris* of the filmmaker.

[136] Jérémie Couston, "Emmanuel Gras, Réalisateur d''Un Peuple' : 'L'ambivalence Politique Des Gilets Jaunes m'a Directement Attiré,'" *Télérama*, February 23, 2022, https://www.telerama.fr/cinema/emmanuel-gras-realisateur-d-un-peuple-l-ambivalence-politique-des-gilets-jaunes-m-a-directement-attire-7008947.php.

The filmmaker's embeddedness within the everyday of the movement has the advantage of making sensible what Edgar Morin would call the wider "emotive fabric of human existence."[137] Indeed, Gras has stated that he was more interested in the "sensations" and the "emotions" of the movement rather than its particular demands. For him, "the political question [of the *gilets jaunes*] is not expressed through ideas or analyses but through lived experience."[138] In order to convey this lived experience, the filmmaker places the *gilets jaunes'* bodies and feelings at the center of his film. The filmmaker's insistence on the *gilet jaune* body can already be felt in how he integrates other media about the *gilets jaunes* into his film. These are always relayed by the bodily intermediary of the *gilets jaunes*. In one scene, for instance, we join Allan and some other *gilets jaunes* one evening as they watch and respond to a television panel discussing the movement. In another scene, we watch from the backseat of the car as Benoit and Agnès, who are driving to the capital to participate in the Saturday protest, nervously listen to the news radio's broadcast announcing the number of policemen who will be deployed. The spectator assimilates this contextual information through the vocal and gestural responses of Gras' subjects, who become proxies for understanding the different social forces at play during the events of the movement. Apart from the beginning and end of the film, the film will never break with the diegetic space produced by its subjects—the spectator, like the filmmaker, is attached by the hip to the movement.

Staying physically close to the *gilets jaunes* effectively allows Gras' camera to capture many of the underlying non-vocalized forces which give a social movement its movement. Generally avoiding wide shots, especially during scenes of protests, Gras shoots primarily from close quarters with a mixture of close and medium shots, attuned—like a good visual anthropologist—to "the postures, gestures, tones of voice, facial expressions, and also silences" which accompany the events.[139] Early on in the film, he also takes some of his subjects aside to conduct small interviews, such as with Benoit and Agnès. These moments provide direct insight into their motivations for struggling, and furthermore work to establish the spectator's sympathy and complicity with them. Benoit and Agnès' honest admissions of their vulnerability at once humanizes them and makes their political motivations more legible. Agnès, for instance, plainly

[137] Edgar Morin as cited in MacDougall, *The Corporeal Image*, 269.
[138] Rosell and Martin, "« L'IDÉE ÉTAIT D'APPORTER NOTRE PIERRE AU DÉBAT ÉLECTORAL » – ENTRETIEN AVEC EMMANUEL GRAS."
[139] Ibid.

states to the camera that her drive to organize is powered by the realization that she no longer needs to be ashamed of her condition. Moments when the *gilets jaunes* speak directly to the camera are rare, however, and so Gras will also register their vulnerability in other ways. When the filmmaker attends a banner-making event at the house of a *gilet jaune*, he captures a side conversation that occurs between Nathalie and another *gilet jaune* about their health and unemployment. As Nathalie explains why she cannot work, camera cuts to a close-up of her extended swollen hands. The intimacy of this close-up undoes both the physical and social distance between the spectator and Nathalie while also investing her bruised body with political valence. In the process, the film draws attention to the ways in which the *gilets jaunes'* shared acknowledgement of vulnerability is forms the basis for their compulsion to mobilize. Le Gall remarks that "It's clear… that the lasting and perhaps subversive character of a social movement depends less on the prior politicization of its protagonists than on its ability to shake them out of their sense of powerlessness and invisibility – in other words, out of isolation, silence and non-existence."[140] In showing how vulnerability is at play, and not just overwhelming anger, Gras' camera nuances our image of the *gilets jaunes*, gives it a finer grain—not unlike *Les Voies Jaunes* from the previous chapter.

From the Individual to the Collective

Drawing us in so as to look outwards, *Un peuple* narrativizes the movement as a collective effort while also highlighting the singularity of certain individuals' efforts. One can effectively glean the wider trajectory of the movement through the individual trajectories of Gras' four *gilets jaunes*. This is largely thanks to the extensive personal involvement of the four in the Saturday protests in Paris. Tracking their movement from the space of the roundabout to the Parisian streets gives concrete form to the convergence between the local and the national mobilizations, while also allowing the film to draw out the parallel between the experiences of the four characters and that of the movement at large—to make the connection between "these people" on screen and the more general "people" implied by the film's title. Linking the local with the national, the film seems to operate on two different registers of different scale which nonetheless interpenetrate one another. If the close accompaniment of the *gilets jaunes* on the roundabout and in private spaces lends a more personal feel to the scenes of the larger demonstrations in the film,

[140] "Un Regard Ethnographique Sur Le Soulèvement Des « Gilets Jaunes »," 116.

the scenes in the capital conversely bestow upon the individual experiences of the four characters a certain grandiosity, one which the filmmaker will intentionally inflect through his camerawork and through the introduction of extradiegetic musical elements. As the filmmaker states, he wanted to give a "*souffle épique*" ("epic spirit") to what his subjects were doing, especially since many of them felt themselves to being part of a revolutionary movement.[141]

To take one example, as the *gilets jaunes* make their way to Paris for the first demonstration Gras films a sweeping cinematic sequence in which the camera tracks the different cars of the *gilets jaunes* as they drive towards the capital, accompanied by an electronic soundtrack which pulsates and swells, increasing the emotional intensity of the journey. The same music will return during the first documented confrontation between the protestors and the police. Accompanying Allan, who we watch livestream the events on his phone, Gras is present to the moment when the fragile peace between the police and the protestors gives way to chaos. As the music swells and tear gas is deployed, Gras' camera circles briskly around a bewildered Allan—still filming everything on his phone—who under a barrage of projectiles yells repeatedly "*Ça part en cacahouètes*!" ("It's all going to hell!"). It is notable here that Gras, despite being caught up in the action himself, chooses to maintain the camera on Allan. Centering Allan's emotional response—while making it more affectively palpable through the combination of the intensifying soundtrack and expressive camerawork—the filmmaker keeps the theme of police repression contained within a personal frame. For a brief moment, through our proximity to Allan, we can also zoom out to apprehend the broader conflict between the "people" and the State.

This last scene demonstrates the power of individual bodies to register both the internal forces that give the movement its momentum and the external forces that work to stop the movement in its tracks. With a narrative which links the events of the intimate space of the roundabout to those on the dramatic stage of the Parisian protests, the film traces the collision of these forces. MacDougall identifies this as one of the main functions of narrative in anthropological cinema. Indeed, it serves as a means to "to show how complex social forces bear upon the individual at any one time."[142] As mentioned previously, the trajectories of the four

[141] Rosell and Martin, "« L'IDÉE ÉTAIT D'APPORTER NOTRE PIERRE AU DÉBAT ÉLECTORAL » – ENTRETIEN AVEC EMMANUEL GRAS."
[142] David MacDougall, *The Art of the Observer: A Personal View of Documentary*, Anthropology, Creative Practice and Ethnography (ACE) (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2022), 27.

protagonists mirrors the general trajectory of the movement. Through them, we witness the initial *souffle épique* of the movement give way to its *essouflement* ("loss of impetus"). The group's initial successes, after all, are followed by failure. Benoit's miscommunication with the group leads to infighting amongst other *gilets jaunes* as his position as spokesperson is put into doubt. And ultimately, the mounting police repression against the movement puts the definitive nail in the coffin, at least for the participation of Gras' participants. This will become clear during the film's climax, which takes place during the now-infamous March 17th mobilization (in which many luxury shops were damaged, and shows how the same kind of physical vulnerability which had given the movement its impetus ultimately leads to its demise.

The film's climax sequence effectively makes the violence directed against the *gilets jaunes* starkly tangible to the viewer. This violence is communicated in large part here not only through the presence of our *gilet jaune* protagonists, but also by their absence. As the demonstrations get going on the much larger roundabout of the Arc de Triomphe, the smoke of tear gas and the firing of flash balls progressively separate Gras from the rest of the group. After watching Benoit, Agnès and Nathalie struggle to handle the increasing intensity of confrontation between the protestors and the police, the filmmaker will launch himself into the deep by abandoning his usual coordinates. In the midst of the crowd, pushed in every which way while protestors cough and scream from being teargassed, his camera shakily films as the police brutally beat and kettle them. These images are quite different from the more smoothly edited sequences that came before in the film. Raw and largely unedited, they resemble the images that were captured by cellphones and shared on social media platforms. And they fulfill the same role: to bear witness to the violence. For the first time, the spectator experiences the events of the film only through the intermediary of the body of the filmmaker himself, rather than through that of his subjects. As a result, not only can the violence of the event be felt more viscerally, but this violence also collapses the distance between the spectator, the filmmaker, and the *gilet jaune* subject. Indeed, for a brief moment, the distinction between all three seems to melt away.

Un peuple will not linger in this haze for long. Gras soon rediscovers his intermediaries after the violence has died down. If Gras' graphic sequence gives a sense of the gravity of the violence, his reunion with familiar faces demonstrates how the protestors have metabolized the events. The filmmaker finds a distraught Nathalie watching in shock as Allan gets lifted into an ambulance after he has been shot in the leg by an LBD round. Later, he films Agnès, Nathalie,

and Nathalie's partner as they assess the outcomes of the protests; now under fire from their fellow comrades on social media for having "discredited the movement." Both Nathalie and Agnès ask themselves whether all of their action has been for nothing. Their personal disillusionment is confirmed in the aftermath of the day's events. Around Nathalie's kitchen table, we watch the same three individuals some weeks later as they process together what has happened. Opening up about their trauma, Nathalie says that she cannot sleep, while Agnès admits to feeling ashamed of feeling afraid to return to Paris (in stark opposition to her previous embrace of "shamelessness"). Following this scene, Gras films a series of intimate interviews in the homes of Benoit, Allan, and Nathalie in which they reflect on their participation and disclose their trepidations, exhaustion, as well as the lingering hope that one day things may change. The film's diegesis ends with a close-up of Agnès staring wistfully out of her window, with an ambiguous expression etched across her face. Tired bodies might have found energy in coming together, but they have a limit to their capacity of engagement.

By observing the rise and fall of the movement's momentum through the embodied narratives of its four characters, *Un peuple* provides a pathway for understanding the movement not only as a progression of events, but also as a progression of colliding social and emotional forces. Having its intimate narratives culminate in an epic confrontation between the State and "a people" may serve a particular dramatic end. However, as we have seen, this convergence also relays individual action to collective action, particular to collective affects, shows how these are interconnected—shows the movement itself in movement, transforming over time. Gras' film thus affords a kind of depth to the image of the movement that more immediate and shallower mainstream images cannot provide. It is important to note, though, that the overall image produced by the documentary is ultimately determined by the *gilets jaunes* themselves. They are the ones who give form to this image through their actions, bodies, and speech. The filmmaker's role will be to attempt to faithfully translate, through the process of observing, filming and editing, this self-presentation into a broader representation. Gras indeed sees his function as "to take into account the other person's idea of themselves, not to restore it, but to avoid betraying it: my role is to bring depth and ambivalence to it, not to contradict it."[143] This nonetheless betrays the filmmaker's role in the interpretation of the movement. As I have shown in my analysis,

[143] Couston, "Emmanuel Gras, Réalisateur d''Un Peuple' : 'L'ambivalence Politique Des Gilets Jaunes m'a Directement Attiré.'"

Gras' makes particular editorial choices in what he chooses to film and how he links different sequences together to give existence to specific dimensions of the movement: the bodily vulnerability and sociability of the protestors. I want to propose that in the process of doing so, Gras also attempts to bring at once depth and ambivalence to the image of the movement as a whole.

After all, the film ends on an ambivalent note. As Agnès looks out of the window at the storming weather, the film creeps into its coda; while the sound of blowing wind continues to linger, the camera cuts to an aerial view of a procession of *gilets jaunes*. The same ambient music that Gras has used to give an "epic spirit" to the protests starts to swell for a final time. The film breaks into a montage of protest actions, remarkable scenes that Gras captured during the protests in Paris that are reminiscent of revolutionary scenes from the past. As the sequence reaches the peak of its revolutionary fervor on the Champs-Elysées, the music stops. The camera cuts back to the space of the roundabout. We spy the figure of a person running inside the gym adjacent to the space once occupied by the *gilets jaunes*, as well as a security camera looming overhead. The film closes on a long take of the roundabout from above: while cars continue to circulate normally as though nothing has happened, the scorch marks of the occupation darken the otherwise blank ground of the roundabout. Though the occupation may have ended, the blackened roundabout serves as a lasting physical reminder of the presence of the *gilets jaunes*. And by ending on the image of the abandoned space after the exalting coda, the filmmaker seems to be making a political statement akin to *Les Voies Jaunes*: the *gilets jaunes* may not be visible, but they still exist, whether in memory or in *absentia*, and something in France as a result has changed fundamentally. Their bodies may no longer be on the roundabouts, epic confrontations between the state and the people may no longer be occurring, but the film has reminded us one more time that these did take place; we in fact had an encounter with "a people," in all of their hope and vulnerability.

Boum boum: Putting a thumb on the pulse of the movement

Whereas Gras was compelled to go to the roundabouts and begin his slow process of observation, documentary filmmaker Laurie Lassalle takes a decidedly different approach. In *Boum boum*, Lassalle instead stays near the front lines of the demonstrations and process alongside the *gilets jaunes* marching through the capital. Week after week, equipped with only a

small camera and microphone, she gathers a large number of images and interviews. The fruit of this immersion, *Boum boum* (2022), released only some months after *Un peuple*, consequently bears a distinct feel in relation to its counterpart. The slower-paced roundabout is substituted for the pulsating Saturday protests in Paris. This atmosphere, where bodies are constantly appearing and disappearing within the mass, imposes different demands on the filmmaker's mode of observation, who must constantly move with the crowd to keep up. This already results in a more transitory approach to filming the *gilets jaunes* than in *Le Peuple*. The encounters between the filmmaker and the protestors are necessarily shorter, peremptory, as well as less familiar. Perhaps the greatest difference between the two films, however, is the way in which the Lassalle positions herself with regards to the movement. While Gras minimizes for the most part his own presence in his film, remaining strictly an observer and letting his images speak in his stead, Lassalle decides to lean on her own participation and bring herself—her body and her voice—into the picture. This difference in approach can be in large part attributed to her own relationship to the movement. Like Gras, she brought her camera to the protests as a tool for discovery; however, in the process, she also found love. Days before the initial images of the film are taken, Laurie Lassalle meets the handsome Pierrot, a twenty-something year-old idealist *gilet jaune*, while getting her hair cut. They quickly strike up a romantic complicity which will become central to the film's narrative. Their initial encounter effectively becomes the basis for the filmmaker's sustained encounter with the movement, one which seeks to tie the intimate to the political, love to insurrection, joy with anger.

As one can glean from this introduction, in the corpus of films that I have been considering, *Boum boum* is perhaps the most unconventional. Mixing a personal approach with an ethnographic one, Lassalle's film exemplifies the overlap that can exist between ethnographic cinema and personal documentary. As Scott MacDonald has pointed out, although the two may appear antithetical to one another, "…the two approaches are fundamentally two sides of the same cinematic coin, the inverse of each other."[144] *Boum boum* bears many of the traditional elements of ethnographic cinema: a particular interest for centering its subjects and observing intersubjective behavior, the recurrence to interviews. Like Gras, Lassalle's camera acts as a passport for going to the encounter of the movement: she describes in an interview to *Cinéma du Réel* that "to film allowed me to protect myself and to approach, to see through my camera what

[144] MacDonald, *American Ethnographic Film and Personal Documentary*, 4.

I would not have seen otherwise."[145] Unlike Gras, however, she is also able to get closer thanks to her lover, who becomes in many instances Laurie's intermediary for conducting interviews with other *gilets jaunes.* Acting as a kind of "native informant" who will provide his analysis of the movement throughout the film, his presence not only gives her a seal of legitimacy amongst other *gilets jaunes* but provides her with an ethnographic catalyst for producing encounters; in Rouchian fashion, Pierrot will pick conversations with protestors as Laurie turns on the camera. She approaches the movement, in other words, with a certain amount of anthropological distance, one which she explicitly avows near the beginning of the film in a restaurant with Pierrot. Turning the camera back onto Lassalle, Pierrot asks her directly whether she is a *gilet jaune*, to which the filmmaker responds with ambivalence; as a filmmaker, her personal demands are not necessarily the same as some of the more precarious protestors.

This social distance, though, does not prevent Lassalle from engaging personally with the movement. On the contrary, the personal becomes a means for probing the social. Through a poetic, self-reflexive voice-over which intermittently punctuates the film, Lassalle conducts something akin to a sensorial autoethnography of the protests. Narrating her own bodily experience becomes a proxy for making sense of the movement. As such, *Boum boum* can also be considered, in the words of Nichols, a performative documentary which brings "…the emotional intensities of embodied experience and knowledge to the fore."[146] In the film, these emotional intensities are amplified and given form by Lassalle's personal narrative of love with Pierrot, communicated in the present tense as though the filmmaker were reading from an intimate journal. The voice-over rhythms the film's events and gives a window into the progression of both her relationship and her experience of the protest. By leaning her images against the throughline of her love story, she not only renders visible and sensible the complex admixture of affects at play during a movement, but to also gives a narrative structure to the movement itself. This directorial choice is especially important given the repetitive nature of the weekly demonstrations; as opposed to the natural progressive dynamic of structuration taking place on the roundabouts, it is much more difficult to give narrative form to the street protests that repeat almost *ad nauseam*. And, by telling the movement through a love story and her love

[145] Entretien avec Laurie Lassalle, réalisatrice de Boum Boum, interview by Cinéma du Réel, March 11, 2022, https://blogs.mediapart.fr/cinema-du-reel/blog/110322/entretien-avec-laurie-lassalle-realisatrice-de-boum-boum.
[146] Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, 203.

story through the movement, Lassalle chooses to give the *gilets jaunes* not a *souffle épique*, as Gras does, but a *souffle romantique*.

Lassalle's relationship with Pierrot effectively serves as an allegory for the protests themselves, conjugating her personal experience with a more general experience of the protest. Pierrot, abound with revolutionary fervor and polyamorous, becomes a character who represents the utopian potential of the movement's thrust—the desire to build a new society with new rules, new ways of being with one another. For the filmmaker, it is basically love at first sight—an analogy that one of Lassalle's interviewees equally draws as she reflects on the proximity between political movements and romantic approaches. As with young love, joy and euphoria are the dominant affects near the beginning of the film. We see *gilets jaunes* dancing, meet two young *gilets jaunes* who met each other at a protest and quickly became inseparable. In this initial atmosphere of collective joy, we find the filmmaker carried away by the utopian thrust of nascent love: "We are in the dead of winter, and yet I feel the wind of spring. I am ready to try things in another way… live love another way and topple everything. I am your lover and your protest partner. I feel free and strong, without constraint, without the need to answer to anyone." Pierrot echoes this admixture of romantic and revolutionary desire in a text message to Lassalle, writing, "I want France to burn, and my heart as well." A feeling of elation and invincibility courses through in the exchanges between the two lovers, echoing the feelings saturated the beginning of the movement when the *gilets jaunes* were first finding each other.

The filmmaker's voiceover makes no clear separation between her experience of love and her experience of the movement. The voiceover's epistolary fragments bely how her relationship colors the way that she gazes upon the crowd: "I'm shaking, my heart's beating hard in my chest, I don't know if it's the effect of the crowd or if it's you. I only know that being here with you makes me feel happier and more alive than I've ever really been." Her account is unabashedly subjective, even compromised by her rose-tinted glasses. Her voice is as disarming as it is honest. Lassalle even at times appears to overshare with the spectator – she reads out her intimate text message liaisons with Pierrot, in which she describes touching herself to the smell of his t-shirt, impregnated with the smell of tear gas. Lassalle also shares with the spectator some of the intimate moments and discussions with Pierrot that take place in the interstices between protests. These moments provide respite from the sometimes overstimulating and violent scenes of the film and allow for both the filmmaker and her partner to reflect on what has been

happening in the streets. Here, too, Lassalle's feelings for her lover are on full display: there are multiple moments when her camera slows down on Pierrot, gazing at him through an intimate lens, including a slightly corny sequence where she superimposes Pierrot's half-naked torso onto images of fireworks, complete with a love song. Already, the film is doing something new with regards to the *gilets jaunes* movement: framing the movement through a language of love and beauty, rather than simply ugly anger. In other words, the introduction of another register of emotion, that of joy and excitement, and its entanglement with anger, reveals an emotional layer to the protests that is not visible upon a first glance.

However, as in *Un* peuple, the initial joy and the conviviality of the protests will not hold. The utopianism of the "honeymoon" phase ultimately gives way to lovers who begin to drift apart. This happens, coincidentally, at the same time that police repression is becoming increasingly unbearable. The filmmaker testifies to the change in her voice-over: "For some time, something has changed. There's tension in the air. My stomach is in knots. I'm scared again. I'm scared to lose an eye, scared that you will disappear." Lassalle's fears concord with an uptick in violent images. Although the camera has heretofore caught the occasional wound, including Pierrot's own—a hole in the flesh at the level of his tibia left by a flashball—these images become much more prevalent in the last thirty minutes of the film; Lassalle includes multiple long takes of wounded protestors who have been caught in the crosshairs of police. Lassalle's camera watches a protestor choke on tear gas before being aided by Pierrot and other protestors. She then stumbles across a protestor on the ground who minutes before had been interviewed by Pierrot. Visibly shaken, his bloodied face is wrapped in bandages after having been struck in the head by a flashball. Shortly thereafter, we see the bandaged face of Florent Marcie, a war journalist who was present when the man was shot has also received a flashball right under the eye. It is particularly the inclusion of this latter victim which shatters the illusion of invincibility, and which also signals, in some way, a return to reality.

At once, the fearlessness that she had felt at the beginning of the protests, protected by the magical thinking of love and her camera, cedes to the fear and uncertainty. Pierrot takes his distance from Lassalle, presumably away with his other lover. Lassalle's camera, in turn, becomes more and more disoriented. In takes like those in the climax of *Un peuple*, her camera shakes as she wades through the crowd, unmoored by Pierrot's absence, her voice submerged as though underwater (as we learn from an interview given to *Docu'pratique,* the aquatic sounds

that she inserts, in reality, are sounds from the protests which have been slowed down[147]): "I am alone. I hear a flash ball shot whistle by my ear. I need to wake up, to feel again this fear, the fear that this will end badly. I need to wake up. Suddenly, I come back to myself, there is only one body remaining in the middle of the crowd, and it's mine, vulnerable. I love you, but I decide to leave you. I would like to wake you up as well. Today, I walk without you in the streets and at l'´Étoile. I don't know any more to whose body I should latch on." Lassalle "wakes up" to the limits of her engagement, both in the polyamorous situation she finds herself in and the movement. A word that Lassalle had previously used to describe the sensation in her heart at the beginning of the relationship – *cogner* (meaning, in the context of the heart, "to pound") – now becomes the word to describe the way in which the truth of her relationship takes one over the filmmaker: "We wanted to deconstruct the rules of love; now, we hit up [*on se cogne*] against reality, the other woman you love." "*Boum boum*"—the sounds of exploding tear gas grenades now coincide with the anxious beating of her heart. Eventually, despite one final romantic meeting, the infamous protest of March 17th, 2019 (the same day that would also pull the brakes on Gras' cast of *gilets jaunes*), Lassalle and Pierrot will leave each other for good. Like the day of protests would be for the broader movement, their last encounter, which includes a walk in an empty, off-limits Parc Monçeau—and implied by what is off-camera, a final sexual encounter—is the last flare-up before the definitive end of the relationship.

Whereas *Un peuple* depicts the *essouflement* of the movement through its analogue of physical exhaustion, *Boum boum* does so through the metaphor of the *essouflement* of her relationship. One of Lassalle's final remarks draws a direct parallel between her narrative and the broader mobilization, and employs the same term: "Strangely, after our break-up, the movement of the *gilets jaunes* loses steam [*s'éssoufle*]." The film will end with a long shot of the ocean, as Lassalle concludes: "I will not find you again on the other side of l'Étoile. You have disappeared at present, in a rainy silence. I force myself to think: the summer will pass, the crowd will come back, our hearts will heal, and outside everything will rise up again." This open ending mirrors Gras' ambivalent ending – the "calm" has returned, yet a wound is still open; a horizon for a new mobilization is still open, or at least, the filmmaker maintains this as a possibility. Like *Un peuple*, *Boum boum* renders the full arc inherent to the cyclical nature of protest: the initial

[147] Mehdi Meskar, "Laurie Lassalle - Boum Boum," Docu'Pratique, n.d., https://www.listennotes.com/podcasts/docupratique/laurie-lassalle-boum-boum-d9ceG85_Bag/.

momentum which disturbs the existing state of affairs, the confrontation with external forces, and the restoration of the state affairs to a new state of equilibrium. Here, like in *Un peuple*, the documentary works against the dominant media frame by making this arc visible in the first place. Whereas the dominant image rendered by BFMTV gives the sense of a movement that is static, unchanging in its affects (forced to conform to the image of a generalized, inchoate anger), the mere introduction of chronicity—and by extension, evolution and transformation—kinetically charges the image of the *gilet jaunes* with a kind of motion and affective density that unsettles any reduction of the movement.

Although Lassalle uses her own personal narrative in the same way that Gras employs the individual narratives of his four *gilets jaunes* to entangle the singular with the universal, she is far less interested in taking a macroscopic view of the movement. If anything, her narrative places a microscope on her body in order to magnify the emotional dimension of the protests. As can be noted from the excerpts cited above, Lassalle's voiceover insists on the bodily experience of the protests; of Lassalle's own body, and those of others. For if Lassalle leans on her experience, it is not at the exclusion of others'. In effect, the filmmaker braids together her personal narrative with individual portraits of *gilets jaunes* gathered along the way through interviews following encounters. As a result, her body is but one of the many bodies to which Lassalle desires to give voice. She says as much when her voiceover addressees her own experience of the movement: "Before, I had forgotten my body. The struggle has given me back a body, a thousand bodies." Lassalle may center her own experience, but she does so with the explicit recognition that she is but one of a multitude. By relaying what happens to her own body, she amplifies at the same time what may be happening to those of others. This is a conscious move by the filmmaker, who clarifies her approach in her interview to *Cinéma du Reel*: "I felt love when I was in the protests, and it's that metaphor that I recount. The love story is not there to be the romantic side of the struggle, it is there to make things resonate interiorly, viscerally. I wanted to point the projector on those affects: to enter into a struggle as one does an immediate joy, to feel alive." Her narrative is but one of the many present during the protests; her body is but one of the thousand frames by which one can enter to make sense of the *gilets jaunes*.

Placing a Projector on the Body

While some film critics have—in my view, unfairly—criticized Lassalle for evincing a certain narcissism by making her own narrative central to the film, she nonetheless gathers a large corpus of interviews along the way.[148] Though usually relatively short, lasting no more than two minutes long, these interviews act as intimate windows into the various affects taking shape during the protests. Lassalle has disclosed that she would primarily start her interviews with a personal question: "Where does your anger come from?"[149] The openness of her question allows the protestor to answer as they wish, to present themselves in their own terms (this allows Lassalle, in the process, to avoid placing the protestor within a preestablished sociological frame), while the evident intimacy of the question also seeks to pry open the interior narratives which drive the protests. Their answers, as a result, can be quite moving. In one scene, for instance, the camera finds itself face-to-face with the sister of Lamine Dieng, who was killed eleven years prior by the police. As she speaks, the camera cuts to a close-up of her face. As opposed to the other interviews, where the protestors tend to look at Pierrot or Laurie, here the woman stares straight into the camera as she denounces the system that killed her brother, addressing the spectator directly—her eyes confront by letting us see the surface of a pain whose depth can only be imagined. Or in another touching interview, a pâtissier of North African descent states after opening up about his anger that if a far-right *gilet jaune* fell to the ground next to him, he would still extend a hand to pick him up. Both of these protestors' voices already go against the mold of the traditional image of the *gilets jaunes* as non-white voices.[150] They also reveal an anger that, far from being unsophisticated or overpowering, is well reasoned, grounded. The protestors know full well why they are in the streets, what is at stake when they protest, and what they are willing to put aside in order to achieve what they want to achieve. These revealing interviews are thus in and of themselves oppositional. After all, as Lassalle has said herself:

> …there was a need for new images. New images to defend ourselves against the world, against all those that they want to impose on us. As a filmmaker, it is a necessary defense and I think my anger also comes from there, of all those images and discourses that they make us swallow over time. We lack terribly images that resemble us, of interior narratives. It's with these interior narratives that we define

[148] Vincent Roussel, "Laurie Lassalle – « Boum Boum »," *Culturopoing.Com*, June 17, 2022, https://www.culturopoing.com/cinema/sorties-salles-cinema/laurie-lassalle-boum-boum/20220617.
[149] Meskar, "Laurie Lassalle - Boum Boum."
[150] It is important to remark here in passing that the sociological profiles of the protestors Lassalle will engage with is quite different from the previous films I have considered. In her mid-thirties, accompanying a younger partner who acts as an interlocutor with other *gilets jaunes*, many of her encounters will be with other younger protestors, and generally from a more urban background.

> the world and obtain the means to struggle, that we reappropriate languages, that we renew our gazes.[151]

Lassalle, in other words, fundamentally disagrees with the notion that emotions diminish the political legitimacy of the movement. If anything, these emotions are what give the political demands of the *gilets jaunes* the fullness of their meaning, make their actions make sense.

In her endeavor to "place the projector" on the affects of the movement, Lassalle's camera plays a particularly important role in the way that these are magnified. The "new images" that she captures during the protests are filmed literally and figuratively close to her chest: "I filmed faces at the level of faces, bodies at the level of bodies."[152] This results in a film whose images almost appear as though they are too close to its subjects, too personal. Her hand-held camerawork mirrors what Luc Dardenne has called the "body-camera", such as the one employed in the film *Rosetta*, which, as Hesselberth has argued, mimics corporeality in such a way as to compel us to register the encounter with the subject on screen as an immediate, physical encounter. The images produced by the body-camera seek to "touch" us, "stir a sensation in us," "induce us to become that image," and in the process, "offers us a position to "see" and feel *from*, physically, while at the same time being reminded of our own immobility and lack of agency in relation to the camera's mechanical eye."[153] Tactile, *Boum boum*'s body-camera therefore places the viewer in such a position as to experience "the event as being more real, more live," while in reality event is located in the unattainable past.[154] According to Hesselberth, it is in this disorienting position of being moved and not moving, participating and observing, being at once in the affective "now" of the scene depicted yet not being actually present to the scene that the scene becomes tangible to the viewer's body through the "affective encounter" with the film, lending a sense of presence, a "here and now."[155] At the same time, however, this sensory commitment is what makes it possible for the film to mobilize our bodies and redirect "our engagement with the film away from the level of representation and interpretation…" and instead "…towards an embodied mode of critical inquiry grounded in

---

[151] Entretien avec Laurie Lassalle, réalisatrice de Boum Boum, interview by Cinéma du Réel, March 11, 2022.
[152] Ludovic Lamant, "Avec « Boum Boum », Laurie Lassalle Filme Les Corps Des « gilets Jaunes » Au plus Près," Médiapart, June 15, 2022, https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/culture-idees/150622/avec-boum-boum-laurie-lassalle-filme-les-corps-des-gilets-jaunes-au-plus-pres.
[153] Hesselberth, *Cinematic Chronotopes*, 69.
[154] Ibid., 70.
[155] Ibid., 71.

affect."[156] As in a mobilization, in other words, the spectator's body in *Boum boum* is mobilized, made to experience the same kind of physical sensations that exist within the space of the protests.

By self-consciously situating herself as a *personnage-caméra*[157] and inscribing her own presence the many people she films, Lassalle erases the distance between herself, the spectator and the protestors, fostering instead a sense of immediate proximity. Up close and personal, the camera's frame makes the hidden emotional content of its subjects more tangible, yet in its hyper-proximity, it also suggests that there is always something during the mobilization which necessarily escapes our grasp. The bodies and voices of the *gilets jaunes* seem to spill out of the frame and surpass us. I read this as an attempt by the filmmaker to not only convey the disorienting feelings of being immersed in the protests, but to also attune the spectator to the ways in which such forms of mobilizations always contain a surplus of affects that can only be grasped through immediate and proximate apprehension. Viewing the mobilization from a distance is necessarily deceptive; one must be inside the movement, alongside mobilized bodies in order to grasp the "truth" of the protests (perhaps to be inside the protests is to bear witness to another kind of "interior narrative"). Lassalle's choice to film as though she were just another body in the crowd—with close-ups and medium shots—is also intentional. She films at the level of faces and bodies but never from above her head or from an aerial perspective, which to her reproduces "the vision of surveillance and of BFM[TV]."[158] This is why when she shows *gilets jaunes* engaging in collective action, it is almost exclusively by virtue of close-ups, such as of feet kicking down sheet metal barricades and hands providing medical care. These close-ups, moreover, place the focus on the individual gestures which, like the interior narratives, animate and sustain the movement. We must look closely at individual bodies in collective action, Lassalle implies, in order to understand the movement differently. Her intimate framing humanizes its subjects and refuses the alienating and disembodying vision of the news broadcast, opting instead for an embodied apprehension of the movement.

The choice to intimately frame the *gilets jaunes* is also an ethical choice. To the "spectacle of police repression," which Lassalle judges to have been sufficiently or even

---

[156] Ibid., 68.
[157] Lamant, "Avec « Boum Boum », Laurie Lassalle Filme Les Corps Des « gilets Jaunes » Au plus Près."
[158] Meskar, "Laurie Lassalle - Boum Boum."

excessively depicted in the media, the filmmaker prefers to show her spectator that which necessarily follows, but is not shown, from the violence. This is why the filmmaker chooses to show, instead of the violence itself, the wounds (and especially the deep wounds) left by the violence, which to her better illustrates "the gravity of what is happening."[159] Lassalle dedicates multiple close-ups in the film to the hole left in Pierrot's flesh left by a flash ball and which struggles to heal. While Pierrot applies medical strips to close his wounds, Lassalle comments "we can imagine what it does to someone's jaw." It is indeed difficult to inspect these images without wincing out of empathy, and that is precisely the point—Lassalle wants to generate empathy for the bruised bodies of the *gilets jaunes*, to sensitize her audience to the physical toll inflicted by police violence. If we are to grasp the "truth" of the movement, we must look closely at the individual bodies. In this case, one body can "speak" for multiple. The close-up on the fleshy hole in Pierrot's tibia speaks to the undeniable fleshiness of the *gilets jaunes* as a whole—a quality which is systematically missed by the disembodying gaze of dominant media, which refuses to show these images by willfully looking away.

At the same time, however, Pierrot is not like the other *gilets jaunes*; he is also Lassalle's lover. When we stare into his wound, we not only empathize with his suffering, but also see at that moment from the position of a lover in a scene of intimacy. This is another form of the affective encounter. From this position, the gravity of the wound takes on another intensity, that of unbearableness. Lassalle's love effectively becomes a frame that makes Pierrot's body, in Judith Butler's terms, grievable. This observation merits a theoretical detour. In their work, *Frames of War*, Butler demonstrates how certain interpretive frames are responsible for regulating whose life is grievable and whose is not by regulating the intelligibility of certain lives as lives and others as not. In other words, (media) frames contribute to producing a differential distribution of grievability which in turns legitimates violence against certain groups. These frames, however, can and must be challenged. As Butler states: "….it is only by challenging the dominant media that certain kinds of lives may become visible or knowable in their precariousness…War sustains its practices through acting on the senses, crafting them to apprehend the world selectively, deadening affect in response to certain images and sounds, and enlivening affective responses to others."[160] They continue: "The point is not to celebrate a full

[159] Lamant, "Avec « Boum Boum », Laurie Lassalle Filme Les Corps Des « gilets Jaunes » Au plus Près."
[160] Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?*, 1. publ (London: Verso, 2009), 51-52.

deregulation of affect, but to query the conditions of responsiveness by offering interpretive matrices for the understanding of war that question and oppose the dominant interpretations—interpretations that not only act upon affect, but take form and become effective as affect itself."[161] Although Butler writes here in response to the images of war coming out of Iraq and the War on Terror, there are nonetheless analogies to be drawn with images of protest. Mainstream, dominant frames, such as those proffered by BFMTV, "deaden" affect in response to scenes of protest, mark the bodies of the *gilets jaunes* as destructible, different. Lassalle challenges these interpretive frames by offering her own interpretive (camera) frame, which, as cinematic image, becomes "affect itself"—specifically, through her love narrative, her physical proximity to "interior narratives" and to the minute acts of love which appeal to the "aliveness" of the protest. By entangling love with anger, Lassalle seeks to make the *gilet jaune* grievable, and the end of the movement equally "mournable."

It is on this point that *Un peuple* and *Boum boum* seem to converge. Both of their documentary frames, by bringing the bodies of the *gilets jaunes* to the forefront, simultaneously give emotional texture and narrative form to the protests and its subjects. Charging the image of the social movements affectively becomes a means for actively resisting against the symbolic violence enacted by the mainstream media framing which makes the physical violence of the State against the protestors permissible. The physical proximity of the camera becomes a vehicle for emotional proximity. And by the end of each of these films, the spectator has been exposed to a series of affective encounters not unlike those engendered by the movement itself in a way that is hopefully transformative. The cinematic encounter at its best can produce genuine solidarity with the social movement. However, if this does not happen, it can still help make sense of the movement from the inside by showing the movement as movement—of bodies, actions, and affects. The introduction of these kinds of images, in my view, go a long way in unfixing the fixed image that prevents us from seriously engaging with the *gilets jaunes*.

[161] Ibid., 52.

Coda – Reframing and Deframing

In February 2024, I had the great fortune to attend, with a *gilet jaune* family friend, a screening of *Les Voies Jaunes* followed by a discussion with the filmmaker in Romainville, a suburb of Paris. Though the attendance was rather weak—the consequence of an event held in a suburb on a Thursday evening—I sat in the room with around a dozen *gilets jaunes*. Their response to the film was unanimous; all had found the documentary moving and true to their own experiences of the movement. One comment in particular struck me, though. A man who had heavily participated in the movement expressed that the film had made him feel as though the energy that had animated the protests had never disappeared, was still present latently, and that watching the film had, in his words, "recharged his batteries." Watching the film, I felt that same energy too, even though I had not been a *gilet jaune* at the time of the protests, but rather an observer from afar. That the film was able to translate the experience of the movement in such a way that this man could recognize himself fully in it and that I could better grasp the energy he was talking about demonstrates the power of the documentary frame. It also testifies to the need for mediators, like Meinzer and the other filmmakers I have discussed in this thesis, who are able to represent the movement with a sense of faithfulness and responsibility. As I have argued in my thesis, these documentary films do important political work, even if at a small scale.

Some of the filmmakers in question have had the opportunity to publicly reflect on the work that their documentaries do. For instance, Gras states in an interview to *Télérama*:

> On several occasions, I've been frightened by the mass of images siphoned by the Internet when researching this or that subject. This flow gives the impression that everything has already been shown. The role of these images is very important, they can "prove" things, and they have revealed police violence in particular. As we have seen, this frightened the powers that be, as they tried to limit and even ban their distribution with the "global security law."
> These images were not of the same order as mine. They serve to inform and communicate while the role of the filmmaker is to put thought into their images. What's more, there's often a fear of filmmakers in the face of this flow of images that I find unfounded. It's true that these days anyone can film with their smartphone, whereas the camera was once the preserve of a small category of people. But millions of human beings can write, there are hundreds of billions of texts, and literature has not disappeared under this mass of words.[162]

[162] Couston, "Emmanuel Gras, Réalisateur d''Un Peuple' : 'L'ambivalence Politique Des Gilets Jaunes m'a Directement Attiré.'"

At first, this statement may give one pause. Indeed, embedded within the filmmaker's statement may be the presupposition of superiority of one order of framing over another, with the distinction between texts and literature. However, Gras' words are valuable for the distinction they make between different kinds of images. The *gilets jaunes* produced their own images for circulation online; the documentary films, meanwhile, occupy a different position. I have suggested that the distinction between these two can be rearticulated in the language of framing. Online images circulated by the *gilets jaunes*, who mediate themselves, attempt to deframe the movement by neutralizing or undoing the dominant framing of the movement by multiplying images and perspectives of the movement. Meanwhile, documentary images reframe the movement by producing different kinds of encounters with the movement. Both the processes of deframing and reframing challenge the hegemonic frames employed by media to define social movements. In this thesis, however, I have primarily focused on the process of framing and reframing.

In framing the framing of the movement, my first chapter worked to bring attention to the practice of media framing, the necessary constructed-ness of the image of the *gilets jaunes*, and subsequently attempted to unfix their image. Bal has shown how one sense of framing, "to formulate; to shape, construct, draw up," can be used "to enclose…so that the final meaning of framing, 'to concoct or devise (a criminal charge) falsely', starts to come into sight."[163] Similarly, my reportage framed, in the drawing up sense of the word, the processes by which the *gilets jaunes* had been framed in the word's latter, duplicitous sense. The chapter also served as a frame through which we could analyze the framing practices of the documentary films considered in the following two chapters. Indeed, one cannot understand the political work that these films do without resituating them relating them to the process of media framing that works to define the movement in the first place. By engaging in formal and visual analysis of these films, I have distinguished how they bring different elements of the movement into focus. The practice of framing does not always have a constraining or reductive function. As Chapter II demonstrates, framing can also bring new elements of its subject to the fore that were previously not visible, or better yet, sensible. In effect, the documentary films I consider in this thesis evidence how the *gilets jaunes* movement were not only sustained by blind anger and violence,

[163] Bal, *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities*, 165.

but also by practical organization, complex affective attachments, as well as a plethora of hidden movements. On the move alongside the movement, the filmmakers give back to it the kinetic motion and affective density denied to it by the static, unchanging dominant framing. In a timely manner, they give a sense of timeliness to the *gilets jaunes*; a social movement is necessarily ephemeral, and consequently the word "movement" is in effect an apt descriptor for a phenomenon firmly anchored in time, with an inevitable beginning and end.

While acknowledging the situatedness of the *gilets jaunes* in space and time, however, these frames are also engaged in the present-tense activity of reinterpreting the movement. When we engage in the act of viewing these films, as I explored more in Chapter III, we are subjected to what Hesselberth calls the deictic quality of the cinematic. We are transported into the time and space of the film at the same time as we maintain a sense of our bodies in the present. As a result, the films reanimate, re(-)present, bring together the bodies and voices of the *gilets jaunes* anew, although they do something different this time around: they implicate the viewer, mobilize them and their senses. Their images not only show encounters, but they also actively *produce* encounters between the viewers and the *gilets jaunes*. If, as all these films as well as the literature on the movement tend to suggest, much of the movement's strength derived from the spontaneous encounters it produced, what the films are doing, then, is not anodyne. The documentary filmmakers, for their part, seem to be well aware of the political work their documentaries are capable of doing. As I had mentioned in Chapter II, Ruffin and Perret moved hastily to release *J'veux du soleil* in time for the European elections of 2019, with the expressed purpose of creating sympathy for the *gilets jaunes* amongst leftist militants and vice-versa.[164] Gras, too, strategically deployed his film in hopes of weighing in on current affairs: *Un peuple* was released during the campaign season for the 2022 presidential elections, and Gras explicitly stated in his interview to *Le Vent Se Lève* that he wished for *Un peuple* to "participate and contribute to the electoral discourse."[165] Though in matters of distribution, these films were plagued by the same problems that many in the documentary film industry face today—which can largely be attributed to a lack of means—they at the very least evinced the desire to pluralize

[164] Clarisse Fabre, "« J'veux Du Soleil ! » : Acte I Du Cinéma Sur Les « gilets Jaunes »," *Le Monde*, April 3, 2019, https://www.lemonde.fr/culture/article/2019/04/03/j-veux-du-soleil-acte-i-du-cinema-sur-les-gilets-jaunes_5444972_3246.html.
[165] Rosell and Martin, "« L'IDÉE ÉTAIT D'APPORTER NOTRE PIERRE AU DÉBAT ÉLECTORAL » – ENTRETIEN AVEC EMMANUEL GRAS."

the discursive landscape by reintroducing the events and issues of the *gilets jaunes* in the present tense.

We can now return to the question of the relationship between the reframing of documentary film and the deframing done by images on social media. From where does the latter process derive its power? Hito Steyerl has highlighted the emancipatory potential of what they call "the economy of poor images," with "its immediate possibility of worldwide distribution and ethics of remix and appropriation," as something which allows more people to participate in public expression.[166] In line with this, the circulation of *gilets jaunes* images, such as in the form of the Facebook livestream—a tool which members of the movement used in abundance—allowed for the widespread, viral diffusion of *gilets jaunes* narratives. Nevertheless, as Steyerl points out, this economy of images is not always emancipatory. Poor images can also be appropriated "for commercial and national agendas."[167] With the *gilets jaunes*, as much as poor images can help "prove things," their violent immediacy can also shock the viewer and strengthen the perception of the movement as a "violent" phenomenon. To those who find themselves outside the sphere of the movement, livestreamed images may moreover keep potential sympathizers who are out of the loop at a distance. The virtue of the documentary frame is that as it draws up the movement, it also draws the viewer in. It places us in the position to "think" and feel the movement differently. In this thesis, I mainly homed in on the relationship between two kinds of frames: the mainstream media frame and the documentary frame. However, more research is still needed to consider in greater depth the ways that the documentary frames and social media frames interact with one another. It may even be a good idea to start from the question: Why were the *gilets jaunes'* own images absent from these documentary films?

[166] Hito Steyerl, "In Defense of the Poor Image," *Eflux*, no. #10 (November 2009), https://www.e-flux.com/journal/10/61362/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/, 6.
[167] Ibid.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank, first, my wonderful parents who have supported me throughout my life with great care and love. My passion for learning and research did not come out of nowhere.

I would also like to thank all of those at Leiden University who supported me throughout the writing process. Of course, this list begins with Pepita Hesselberth, my advisor, who provided me with generous and thoughtful feedback. I would also like to thank Frans Willem Korsten, Nidesh Lawtoo, Cristiana Strava, and Maria Boletsi for all of their support. And dthank you to my friends and fellow scholars in the Research Master's in Arts, Literature, and Media at Leiden University.

This thesis would not have been able to be completed without the assent of Sylvestre Meinzer and the production team at SaNoSi Productions in sharing their film with me.

I would finally like to thank Marie-Christine Cerisier-Struk, who hosted me and engaged in passionate discussions about the *gilets jaunes* in Paris.

Bibliography

Artières, Philippe. "« Les Gilets Jaunes Triompheront »: Politique de l'écriture Exposée Dans Le Mouvement Des Gilets Jaunes (Novembre 2018-Février 2020)." *20 & 21. Revue d'histoire* N° 156, no. 4 (September 15, 2023): 193–207. https://doi.org/10.3917/vin.156.0193.

Back, Les. "Live Sociology: Social Research and Its Futures." *The Sociological Review* 60, no. 1_suppl (June 2012): 18–39. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954X.2012.02115.x.

Baisnée, Olivier, Alizé Cavé, Cyriac Gousset, and Jérémie Nollet. "La « violence » Des Gilets Jaunes : Quand La Fait-Diversification Fait Diversion. Les Routines Journalistiques à l'épreuve Des Manifestations à Toulouse (Novembre 2018-Juin 2019)." *Sur Le Journalisme* 10, no. 1 (June 15, 2021). https://revue.surlejournalisme.com/slj/article/view/452/427.

Bal, Mieke. *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide*. Green College Lectures. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002.

Balibar, Etienne. "Le Sens Du Face-à-Face." In *Le Fond de l'air Est Jaune: Comprendre Une Révolte Inédite*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2019.

Bantigny, Ludivine. "Un Événement." In *Le Fond de l'air Est Jaune: Comprendre Une Révolte Inédite*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2019.

Bendali, Zakaria, Raphaël Challier, Magali Della Sudda, Olivier Fillieule, Éric Agrikoliansky, and Philippe Aldrin. "Le Mouvement Des Gilets Jaunes : Un Apprentissage En Pratique(s) de La Politique ?:" *Politix* n° 128, no. 4 (March 12, 2020): 143–77. https://doi.org/10.3917/pox.128.0143.

Berlant, Lauren. *Cruel Optimism*. Duke University Press, 2011. https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822394716.

Bernard De Raymond, Antoine, Loïc Bonin, Sylvain Bordiec, Pierre Chiron, Karine Clément, Charif Elalaoui, Théo Grémion, Pauline Liochon, Quentin Ravelli, and Emmanuelle Reungoat. "Les Gilets Jaunes : Une Révolte sans Fin ?: Une Ethnographie Comparée Des Ronds-Points Pour Comprendre La Durée Du Mouvement." *Genèses* n° 130, no. 1 (April 6, 2023): 80–111. https://doi.org/10.3917/gen.130.0080.

Boum Boum. Mouvement, Les Films de l'oeil sauvage, 2022.

Bruzzi, Stella. *New Documentary*. 2nd ed. London ; New York: Routledge, 2006.

Butler, Judith. *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* 1. publ. London: Verso, 2009.

Cammaerts, Bart. "The Production of Anti-Austerity Discourses and Frames." In *The Circulation of Anti-Austerity Protest*, by Bart Cammaerts, 39–67. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-70123-3_3.

Carballo, Axelle. "Révoltes de 2005 et crise des Gilets jaunes : étude du traitement médiatique de la violence populaire dans la presse quotidienne nationale." In *Les gilets jaunes: un défi journalistique*, by Jean-Marie Charon and Arnaud Mercier. Paris: Éditions Panthéon-Assas, 2022.

Challier, Raphaël. "Rencontres Aux Rond-Points: La Mobilisation Des Gilets Jaunes Dans Un Bourg Rural de Lorraine." *La Vie Des Idées*, n.d.

Charon, Jean-Marie. "Le bilan des journalistes face au mouvement des Gilets jaunes. Les enseignments des séminaires de journalistes." In *Les gilets jaunes: un défi journalistique*, by Jean-Marie Charon and Arnaud Mercier. Paris: Éditions Panthéon-Assas, 2022.

Charon, Jean-Marie, and Arnaud Mercier. *Les gilets jaunes: un défi journalistique*. Paris: Éditions Panthéon-Assas, 2022.

Chroniques d'un Été. Argos Films, 1961.

Clavel, Geoffroy. “Gilets Jaunes: La ‘Peste Brune’ de Darmanin Ne Passe Pas.” *Huffington Post*, November 26, 2018. https://www.huffingtonpost.fr/politique/article/gilets-jaunes-la-peste-brune-de-darmanin-ne-passe-pas_135569.html.

Codaccioni, Vanessa. “Garder à Vue Les Gilets Jaunes : Stratégies Policiaro-Judiciares et Résistances Politiques.” In *Les Gilets Jaunes: Une Révolte Inclassable*, 145–58. Paris: Rue d’Ulm, 2024.

Confavreux, Joseph, ed. *Le Fond de l’air Est Jaune: Comprendre Une Révolte Inédite*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2019.

Couston, Jérémie. “Emmanuel Gras, Réalisateur d’‘Un Peuple’ : ‘L’ambivalence Politique Des Gilets Jaunes m’a Directement Attiré.’” *Télérama*, February 23, 2022. https://www.telerama.fr/cinema/emmanuel-gras-realisateur-d-un-peuple-l-ambivalence-politique-des-gilets-jaunes-m-a-directement-attire-7008947.php.

Coutant, Isabelle. “Les « petits-Moyens » Prennent La Parole.” In *Le Fond de l’air Est Jaune: Comprendre Une Révolte Inédite*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2019.

Cowie, Elizabeth. *Recording Reality, Desiring the Real*. Visible Evidence, v. 24. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011.

De Bloois, Joost. “Cultural Analysis as Reportage.” In *Future of Cultural Analysis*, edited by Murat Aydemir, Noa Roei, and Aylin Kuryel. Amsterdam University Press, 2024.

Devellennes, Charles. *The Gilets Jaunes and the New Social Contract*. Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2021.

Diallo, Anika. “Films documentaires : quel regard sur le mouvement des Gilets jaunes?” In *Les gilets jaunes: un défi journalistique*, by Jean-Marie Charon and Arnaud Mercier. Paris: Éditions Panthéon-Assas, 2022.

Dianara, Aurélie. “A Season of Discontent.” *Jacobin*, February 22, 2019. https://jacobin.com/2019/02/gilets-jaunes-france-emmanuel-macron.

Entretien avec Laurie Lassalle, réalisatrice de Boum Boum. Interview by Cinéma du Réel, March 11, 2022. https://blogs.mediapart.fr/cinema-du-reel/blog/110322/entretien-avec-laurie-lassalle-realisatrice-de-boum-boum.

Fabre, Clarisse. “« J’veux Du Soleil ! » : Acte I Du Cinéma Sur Les « gilets Jaunes ».” *Le Monde*, April 3, 2019. https://www.lemonde.fr/culture/article/2019/04/03/j-veux-du-soleil-acte-i-du-cinema-sur-les-gilets-jaunes_5444972_3246.html.

Farigoul, Lucie. “Médiatisation du mouvement des Gilets jaunes par les médias locaux : le cas de Rouen.” In *Les gilets jaunes: un défi journalistique*, by Jean-Marie Charon and Arnaud Mercier. Paris: Éditions Panthéon-Assas, 2022.

Floris, Bernard, Luc Gwiazdzinski, and Angelo Turco. *Sur La Vague Jaune: L’utopie d’un Rond-Point*. Grenoble: Elya éditions, 2019.

Fossel, Michaël. “Le Théâtre Des Gilets Jaunes.” *Libération*, April 4, 2019. https://www.liberation.fr/debats/2019/04/04/le-theatre-des-gilets-jaunes_1719392/.

franceinfo. “Les Gilets Jaunes, Ou La Longue Tradition Du Rejet de l’impôt Injuste.” November 19, 2018. https://www.francetvinfo.fr/replay-radio/histoires-d-info/les-gilets-jaunes-ou-la-longue-tradition-du-rejet-de-l-impot-injuste_3032707.html.

Ghazal, Ahmed. *Egyptian Cinema and the 2011 Revolution: Film Production and Representing Dissent*. 1st ed. Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2020. https://doi.org/10.5040/9780755603176.

Giraudon, Anne, Nara Cladera, Hugo Reis, and Benoît Martin. “Quatre Syndicalistes et Les « Gilets Jaunes ».” *La Nouvelle Revue Du Travail*, no. 18 (April 16, 2021). https://doi.org/10.4000/nrt.8505.

Gitlin, Todd. *"The Whole World Is Watching": Mass Media in the Making & Unmaking of the New Left*. Berkeley, Calif.: Univ. of Calif. Press, 1980.
Godin, Romaric, and Ellen Salvi. "Surprise: Le «grand Débat» Valide Les Choix de Macron." *Médiapart*, April 8, 2019. https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/france/080419/surprise-le-grand-debat-valide-les-choix-de-macron.
Goffman, Erving. *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*. 3. print. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard Univ. Press, 1976.
Gras, Emmanuel. Emmanuel Gras, réalisateur d'"Un peuple" : "L'ambivalence politique des Gilets jaunes m'a directement attiré," February 23, 2022. https://www.telerama.fr/cinema/emmanuel-gras-realisateur-d-un-peuple-l-ambivalence-politique-des-gilets-jaunes-m-a-directement-attire-7008947.php.
———. Entretien : Emmanuel Gras - Un peuple - BANDE À PART, February 22, 2022. https://www.bande-a-part.fr/cinema/entretiens/magazine-cinema-emmanuel-gras-un-peuple/.
———. « L'IDÉE ÉTAIT D'APPORTER NOTRE PIERRE AU DÉBAT ÉLECTORAL » – ENTRETIEN AVEC EMMANUEL GRAS, March 20, 2022. https://lvsl.fr/lidee-etait-dapporter-notre-pierre-au-debat-electoral-entretien-avec-emmanuel-gras/.
Grønstad, Asbjørn. "19. SLOW CINEMA AND THE ETHICS OF DURATION." In *Slow Cinema*, by Tiago De Luca and Nuno Barradas Jorge, 273–84. Edinburgh University Press, 2015. https://doi.org/10.1515/9780748696031-025.
Guilluy, Christophe. *La France Périphérique: Comment on a Sacrifié Les Classes Populaires*. Paris: Flammarion, 2014.
Hayat, Samuel. "L'économie Morale et Le Pouvoir." In *Le Fond de l'air Est Jaune: Comprendre Une Révolte Inédite*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2019.
Heider, Karl G. *Ethnographic Film*. Rev. ed. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006.
Henley, Paul. *The Adventure of the Real: Jean Rouch and the Craft of Ethnographic Cinema*. Chicago ; London: University of Chicago Press, 2009.
Hesselberth, Pepita. *Cinematic Chronotopes: Here, Now, Me*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015.
Howell, Chris. "The French Road to Neoliberalism." *Catalyst: A Journal of Theory & Strategy* 2, no. 3 (2018).
IFOP. "Balises d'opinion #80: Les Français et Le Mouvement Des Gilets Jaunes - Ifop-Fidducial Pour CNews et Sud Radio." *IFOP*, no. Novembre 2019 (November 14, 2019). https://www.ifop.com/publication/balises-dopinion-80-les-francais-et-le-mouvement-des-gilets-jaunes/.
Jeanpierre, Laurent. *In Girum: Les Leçons Politiques Des Ronds-Points*. Paris: La Découverte, 2019.
J'veux Du Soleil. Jour2fête, 2019.
La Croix. "Gilets Jaunes: 'Impossible Pour La CGT de Défiler à Côté Du FN.'" November 16, 2018. https://www.la-croix.com/France/Politique/Gilets-jaunes-impossible-CGT-defiler-cote-FN-2018-11-16-1300983501.
Lamant, Ludovic. "Avec « Boum Boum », Laurie Lassalle Filme Les Corps Des « gilets Jaunes » Au plus Près." *Médiapart*, June 15, 2022. https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/culture-idees/150622/avec-boum-boum-laurie-lassalle-filme-les-corps-des-gilets-jaunes-au-plus-pres.
Lassalle, Laurie. Entretien avec Laurie Lassalle, réalisatrice de Boum Boum, March 11, 2022. https://blogs.mediapart.fr/cinema-du-reel/blog/110322/entretien-avec-laurie-lassalle-realisatrice-de-boum-boum.

Le Gall, Brice. “Un Regard Ethnographique Sur Le Soulèvement Des « Gilets Jaunes »: À Propos de « Un Peuple ». Un Film Documentaire d’Emmanuel Gras.” *Savoir/Agir* N° 58, no. 4 (March 23, 2022): 115–18. https://doi.org/10.3917/sava.058.0117.

Le Monde. “Violences Policières et Discriminations : La Haut-Commissaire Aux Droits de l’homme de l’ONU Interpelle La France.” December 9, 2020. https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2020/12/09/la-haut-commissaire-aux-droits-de-l-homme-de-l-onu-interpelle-la-france-sur-la-discrimination-de-minorites-et-les-violences-policieres_6062766_3224.html.

Leloup, Damien, and Claire Legros. “Face Au Grand Débat, Des « gilets Jaunes » Lancent Leur Propre Plate-Forme.” *Le Monde*, January 21, 2019. https://www.lemonde.fr/pixels/article/2019/01/21/face-au-grand-debat-des-gilets-jaunes-lancent-leur-propre-plateforme_5412451_4408996.html.

“Les Gilets Jaunes, Signe de Cinéma.” Le Regard Culturel, n.d. https://www.radiofrance.fr/franceculture/podcasts/le-regard-culturel/le-regard-culturel-chronique-du-lundi-20-novembre-2023-9347860.

Les Voies Jaunes. SaNoSi Productions, 2023.

MacDonald, Scott. *American Ethnographic Film and Personal Documentary: The Cambridge Turn*. Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press, 2013.

MacDougall, David. *The Art of the Observer: A Personal View of Documentary*. Anthropology, Creative Practice and Ethnography (ACE). Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2022.

———. *The Corporeal Image: Film, Ethnography, and the Senses*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2006.

Mauger, Gérard. “L’État Face Aux « Gilets Jaunes »: Violence Physique et Violence Symbolique.” *Savoir/Agir* N° 48, no. 2 (October 11, 2019): 107–14. https://doi.org/10.3917/sava.048.0107.

McGarry, Aidan, Itir Erhart, Hande Eslen-Ziya, Olu Jenzen, Umut Korkut, Isil I.Egrikavuk, Dan Mercea, et al. *The Aesthetics of Global Protest: Visual Culture and Communication*. Amsterdam University Press, 2019. https://doi.org/10.5117/9789463724913.

Meskar, Mehdi. “Laurie Lassalle - Boum Boum.” Docu’Pratique, n.d. https://www.listennotes.com/podcasts/docupratique/laurie-lassalle-boum-boum-d9ceG85_Bag/.

Moualek, Jérémie. “L’image Disqualifiante de La « violence Populaire » En Démocratie: Le Cas Des Gilets Jaunes et de Leurs « clichés ».” *Socio*, no. 16 (March 3, 2022): 139–58. https://doi.org/10.4000/socio.12204.

Nichols, Bill. *Introduction to Documentary*. 2nd ed. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010.

Noiriel, Gérard, and Nicolas Truong. *Les Gilets Jaunes à La Lumière de l’histoire: Dialogue Avec Nicolas Truong*. Le Monde Des Idées. La Tour d’Aigues: Éditions de l’Aube, 2019.

Nollet, Aloys. “Une Giletjaunisation Du Mouvement Ouvrier? Les Cas de Deux Grèves En 2019 et 2020.” In *Les Gilets Jaunes: Une Révolte Inclassable*, edited by Quentin Ravelli, Johanna Siméant, Loïc Bonin, and Pauline Liochon. Paris: Rue d’Ulm, 2024.

Parrot, Clément. “‘Beaucoup y Ont Laissé Des Plumes’ : Cinq Ans Après, Le Mouvement Des ‘Gilets Jaunes’ Ne Mobilise plus Les Foules Malgré La Crise.” *Franceinfo*, November 17, 2023. https://www.francetvinfo.fr/economie/transports/gilets-jaunes/beaucoup-y-ont-laisse-des-plumes-cinq-ans-apres-le-mouvement-des-gilets-jaunes-ne-mobilise-plus-les-foules-malgre-la-crise_6115098.html.

Plenel, Edwy. *La victoire des vaincus: à propos des gilets jaunes*. Cahiers libres. Paris: la Découverte, 2019.

Prénéron, Ludivine. “Les Gilets Jaunes Face à BFMTV : Une Lutte Des Classes Médiatique.” In *Les Gilets Jaunes: Une Révolte Inclassable*, edited by Quentin Ravelli, Johanna Siméant, Loïc Bonin, and Pauline Liochon. Paris: Rue d’Ulm, 2024.
Rancière, Jacques. *The Emancipated Spectator*. London New York: Verso, 2009.
Rangan, Pooja. “Documentary Listening Habits: From Voice to Audibility.” In *The Oxford Handbook of Film Theory*, edited by Kyle Stevens, 1st ed., 403-C20.N71. Oxford University Press, 2022. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190873929.013.25.
Ravelli, Quentin, Johanna Siméant, Loïc Bonin, and Pauline Liochon, eds. “Les Gilets Jaunes Face à BFMTV: Une Lutte Des Classes Médiatique.” In *Les Gilets Jaunes: Une Révolte Inclassable*. Paris: Rue d’Ulm, 2024.
———, eds. *Les Gilets Jaunes: Une Révolte Inclassable*. Paris: Rue d’Ulm, 2024.
Rédaction Lille. “J’veux Du Soleil, Documentaire de François Ruffin Sur Les Gilets Jaunes, En Avant-Première à Lille.” *Lille Actu*, March 12, 2019. https://actu.fr/hauts-de-france/lille_59350/jveux-soleil-documentaire-francois-ruffin-sur-gilets-jaunes-avant-premiere-lille_21989437.html.
Renov, Michael. *The Subject of Documentary*. Visible Evidence, v. 16. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004.
Révolution Permanente Brest. “Les Voies Jaunes : Un Film Qui Fait Entendre La France Des Gilets Jaunes.” December 1, 2023. https://www.revolutionpermanente.fr/Les-voies-jaunes-un-film-qui-fait-entendre-la-France-des-Gilets-jaunes.
Rosell, Leo, and Raphaël Martin. “« L’IDÉE ÉTAIT D’APPORTER NOTRE PIERRE AU DÉBAT ÉLECTORAL » – ENTRETIEN AVEC EMMANUEL GRAS.” *Le Vent Se Lève*, March 20, 2022. https://lvsl.fr/lidee-etait-dapporter-notre-pierre-au-debat-electoral-entretien-avec-emmanuel-gras/.
Roussel, Vincent. “Laurie Lassalle – « Boum Boum ».” *Culturopoing.Com*, June 17, 2022. https://www.culturopoing.com/cinema/sorties-salles-cinema/laurie-lassalle-boum-boum/20220617.
Sebbah, Brigitte, and Arnaud Mercier. “Les défis journalistiques d’un mouvement social organisé sur les réseaux socionumériques.” In *Les gilets jaunes: un défi journalistique*, by Jean-Marie Charon and Arnaud Mercier. Paris: Éditions Panthéon-Assas, 2022.
Sebbah, Brigitte, and Pierre Ratinaud. “Frénésie médiatique dans la presse quotidienne française : analyse lexicométrique de plus de 100 000 articles sur les Gilets jaunes.” In *Les gilets jaunes: un défi journalistique*. Paris: Éditions Panthéon-Assas, 2022.
St Armand, Denis. “« Parce Que c’est Notre Rejet » : Poétique Des Gilets Jaunes.” *AOC*, July 30, 2019. https://aoc.media/analyse/2019/07/30/parce-que-cest-notre-rejet-poetique-des-gilets-jaunes/.
Steyerl, Hito. “In Defense of the Poor Image.” *Eflux*, no. #10 (November 2009). https://www.e-flux.com/journal/10/61362/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/.
Suhr, Christian, and Rane Willerslev. “Can Film Show the Invisible?: The Work of Montage in Ethnographic Filmmaking.” *Current Anthropology* 53, no. 3 (June 2012): 282–301. https://doi.org/10.1086/664920.
Thomas, Dom. “« J’veux Du Soleil » de François Ruffin. Quand Les Gilets Jaunes Crèvent l’écran.” *Révolution Permanente*, February 19, 2019. https://www.revolutionpermanente.fr/J-veux-du-soleil-de-Francois-Ruffin-Quand-les-Gilets-Jaunes-crevent-l-ecran.

Tournon, Clément. “Emmanuel Gras & Laurie Lassalle - Réalisateur.Rice.s.” Raconter Le Réel, n.d. https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/24-filmer-les-gilets-jaunes-avec-laurie-lassalle-et/id1537471204?i=1000590595012.

Un Peuple. Les Films Velvet, 2022.

Vermeren, Pierre. *La France qui déclasse: les Gilets jaunes, une jacquerie au XXIe siècle*. Essais. Paris: Tallandier, 2019.

Vie-publique.fr. “Mouvement Des Gilets Jaunes : Les Annonces Du Président de La République.” December 11, 2018. https://www.vie-publique.fr/en-bref/20065-mouvement-des-gilets-jaunes-les-annonces-du-president-de-la-republique.