

Putting the Camera in the Workers' Hands: Precarious Practice and Aesthetics in Recent French Documentary

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Abstract

The practice of workers filming their own conditions has long existed within the sphere of political documentary. At times this has sparked fierce debate, as for instance in the cultures of Cinéma Militant in France. Some filmmakers saw the practice as a naïve form of workerism that led to reactionary films, while others argued that it had revolutionary potential. Such polarised and dogmatic debates have long since subsided, and in the present era, the boundaries between worker and filmmaker are frequently blurred or non-existent, as self-filmed documentary responses to the upheavals of contemporary work are increasingly common. The current article analyses two work-centred films which were produced on very limited budgets and make significant use of self-filming: *Le Kiosque* (Alexandra Pianelli, 2020) and *La Base* (Vadim Dumesht, 2023). I draw upon original interviews with filmmakers and close readings of the films to question the potentialities of self-filming work in the current conjuncture. Avoiding deterministic arguments, I draw connections between these filmmaking practices and the aesthetics they imply, the different types of work depicted, and the broader situation of the precarious present. This constitutes a significant insight into the politics of a prevalent practice which remains under-examined in academic discourse.

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1 Introduction

The practice of workers filming their own conditions has long existed within the sphere of political documentary. At times this has sparked fierce debate, as for instance in the cultures of Cinéma Militant in France. Film-making groups such as Ligne Rouge saw the practice as a naïve form of workerism, arguing that the negation of the role of the committed director would ultimately lead to reactionary films (Grant 2016: 51-2). Similarly, filmmakers within the Cinélutte group argued against the idea that giving workers cameras would necessarily produce politically productive kinds of images. Rather, they perceived the practice as part of a broader valorisation of spontaneity that “sidestepped the real problem of representing the experience of the working class” (Grant 2016: 87).

Others, such as Les groupes Medvedkine, argued by contrast that decentring the filmmaker was something to aspire to (Grant 2016: 121; Adamson 2018: 43). For these practitioners, putting the camera in the hands of the workers was a way to move away from (individualist) *auterism* towards more collective filmmaking cultures which would “abolish the separation between expert and amateur” (Stark 2012: 127-33). Their attempts to establish collectivist and non-hierarchical relationships within the filmic production process were closely tied to their desire to refigure the social relations that pervade society more broadly. Cinematically, they emphasised a “conception of cinema as a dialogic relation between the film and the filmed” (Stark 2012: 133), and ultimately perceived elements of revolutionary potential in the practice of self-filming. Such polarised theorisations may seem out of place in the filmmaking cultures of the present day, but serve as an important starting point for my arguments below. This is because, as documentary production becomes ever more accessible, the boundaries between worker and filmmaker are frequently blurred or non-existent. As a result, “putting the camera in the hands of the workers” (Grant 2016: 4) is an increasingly common practice that emerges in response to the precarisation of contemporary work.

The current article analyses two films in which workers play a prominent role in filming their own conditions. *Le Kiosque* (*The Kiosk*, 2020) is filmed and directed by Alexandra Pianelli, the primary worker within the newsstand around which the film centres. In *La Base* (*The Base*, 2023), taxi drivers both film themselves and are filmed by the director and camera operator, Vadim Dumesh. The films engage with precarity both in terms of their production practices and their subject matter. Made on very limited budgets, they frequently rely upon low-cost recording means such as mobile phones; directors work without the assistance of supplementary film crews. In terms of the work depicted, the films centre around typically precarious employment situations characterised by instability and flux. In what follows, I draw upon original interviews with filmmakers and close readings of the films to interrogate the politics of self-filming work in the current conjuncture. Moving beyond deterministic arguments, I am interested in the ways that this practice engages with its historical and technological context; the forms and aesthetics that it gives rise to; and the ways in which it might affect the power relations that emerge in documentary production. In the final part of my argument, I direct my analyses towards a broader theorisation of this practice.

1.1 The freedoms and unfreedoms of (self-)filming

The obligation to self-film is an increasingly common part of work, emerging across diverse spheres.¹ Perhaps most obviously, the use of front-facing cameras on laptops and smartphones has become far more prevalent in the past decade – a process which was accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. In more benign forms this has facilitated collaboration beyond spatial boundaries, but the practice is also laden with the potential for insidious forms of control. In response to this situation, the European Trade Union Confederation warns of an “Orwellian” surveillance culture that imperils workers’ rights. On the other side of the equation, Monitask (Simon 2025), a company offering software to facilitate such tracking, boasts of the potential benefits to employers: increased worker productivity; better time and attendance management, for instance. These practices form part of broader trends associated with the increasing acceptance of and obligation to engage with tracking technologies both within and beyond the workplace (Moore 2018); and more generally with the growing ubiquity of camera-equipped devices such as smartphones.

1. Machado (2024) explores the ways in which images are increasingly integrated into networks of value accumulation; see also Beller (2006).

These techno-political developments also resonate in the cultural field. Most obviously, the widespread availability of digital video devices has made key aspects of filmmaking significantly more accessible, with broadly-felt consequences. For instance, self-representation via smartphones and other small cameras plays an important role in contemporary video activist practices, as for instance in B'Tselem's projects in the occupied territories of Palestine (Berdugo 2021) and during moments of social uprising such as the Arab Spring (Hermida and Hernández-Santaolalla 2018). Relatedly, mobile phone filmmaking now forms an increasingly prevalent part of broader documentary practice and aesthetics – particularly within the kinds of low-budget films examined here. Some have argued that this has enabled a diversification and democratisation of film production. For example, the documentarist Elke Sasse (2023) extols the virtues of mobile phone footage, arguing that “the technology offers the chance to document realities that were not possible to document before, in a very intimate and personal perspective” (perhaps echoing some of the thrust of Les groupes Medvedkine's argument). Taking influence from Dziga Vertov's *Kino-Pravda*, Richard Vickers argues relatedly that “the ubiquitous camera-phone ‘eye’ may offer for a unique and cumulative version of ‘cinema-truth’ to emerge” (2013: 133).

Other points of view are less celebratory. Pooja Rangan concentrates less closely on digital technology itself than Sasse and Vickers. However, she raises critical points of tension concerning the aesthetics and participatory production methodologies with which those technologies are often associated. In terms of the former, she argues that aesthetics of “authenticity” and “directness” can obfuscate the fundamentally constructed nature of documentary by suggesting access to a pure and unmediated reality. Regarding the latter, while the participatory practice of “giving the camera to the other” (2017: 1) may appear to be egalitarian, Rangan argues that it can be highly exploitative, identifying a number of films which extract apparently “authentic” aesthetic products from their participants in highly transactional ways. Rangan's focus is on interventionist humanitarian documentaries in which there are quite obvious inequalities of power between documentary makers and their subjects. While my focus here is different, the films engage with this more general terrain in several ways. First, they employ participatory methodologies (enabled by digital technologies) in order to explore and critique the impacts of digital technologies upon the sphere of work. Second, they employ aesthetics of the kind associated with directness and authenticity, while also complicating these tendencies in various respects. I will now introduce the films in turn, establishing a dialogue between them as the article progresses.

1.2 Le Kiosque

Le Kiosque centres around a newsstand that was formerly situated in the 16th arrondissement of Paris. Such kiosks were an important element of the French print media supply chain, playing a key role in the distribution of newspapers and magazines. While this holds true to a certain extent in the present day, the print media upon which kiosks rely have long been in decline, resulting in a significant precarisation of the occupation. The film narrativises this decline, as the titular kiosk closes and is dismantled in the closing minutes of its runtime. Shot and narrated by its worker-director, Alexandra Pianelli, the film casts a close eye upon the changing nature of this work. It also foregrounds the kiosk as a social institution which brings together people from diverse backgrounds. The film's *dispositif* is characterised by three main elements. First, there are outward-facing shots from Pianelli's position behind the counter, generally remaining static. Filmed on an iPhone with a wide-angle lens adapter, these segments focus on interactions between and amongst customers. Second, there are point-of-view shots filmed on a GoPro. These generally look downwards, often highlighting the physical nature of the work. Third, there are animated sequences – filmed in an environment resembling the kiosk – which bring to light a broader context surrounding the action. Occasionally, there are shots outside the kiosk, but the spatial orientation of the film is generally very narrow. Before addressing the affordances (Levine 2017: 6) of this arrangement, it is important to take a closer look at the film's commentary upon work.

2 Disappearing work

The film makes clear from early on that the employment centred around news kiosks is in the process of disappearing, or at least changing shape significantly. The nature of the work itself is presented ambivalently. In some parts, kiosk work is shown simply to be boring, with long periods of waiting around, reading the maga-

zines. In others, physical demands are brought to the surface. For instance, there is no toilet in the kiosk, a fact that is dealt with humorously but which highlights the cramped and limiting working environment. Later, Pianelli describes suffering repeated illnesses from working through the winter in an environment that provides only limited shelter. Both she and her mother also emphasise the general embodied demands which require one to behave like “a machine”. On a related note, the film draws our attention to the physical elements of the affective labour that service work requires. A sequence depicting a sexist monologue by a kiosk regular is followed by one in which Pianelli describes the gendered obligation to constantly smile on voiceover. The video track features a montage of women’s magazines, the glamorous covers of which serve as an ironic juxtaposition to Pianelli’s description of her fatigue, and the need to physically force a smile which “at its foundations is a grimace”. While service sector work is sometimes counterposed with manual labour, the film therefore suggests that divisions between the two are in reality more fluid.²



Fig. 1. – A GoPro shot, looking downwards.

While the labour itself is not romanticised, the film can be read as a kind of elegy for the kiosk as a social institution. The social nature of the kiosk was the primary factor that impelled Pianelli to begin filming the project. Indeed, it is almost the perfect environment for a humanistic documentary filmmaker, bringing people from diverse backgrounds into a shared space. While some customers prove frustrating, camaraderie between Pianelli and the community more frequently rises to the surface. Some of the most poignant moments centre on Damien, a homeless man who shelters opposite the kiosk and shares a close bond with Pianelli, but who later dies. Other scenes focus on Islam, an asylum seeker who sells vegetables near the kiosk. These confrontations between filmmaker and other embody an ethically motivated framing that is typical of twenty-first century French documentary (see Cooper 2010; Evrard 2022). Significantly, they also prompt us to consider the ways in which Pianelli’s precarious work is embedded in a broader landscape characterised by precarious relationships, and indeed precarious life.

It is important now to address the aesthetics and production of the film in more detail. Pianelli explains the rationale behind her use of a mobile phone in several respects. The most obvious pertains to the limited means available to her as a filmmaker. In turn, she relates this to the subject matter of the film. The limited means are borne out in a style of filmmaking that is technically quite crude. This is most evident at moments when hands enter the frame, or during a scene in which Pianelli jokes with a customer about a “divine light” that emerges in the backlit shot of him due to the rudimentary aperture control on the phone camera. Pianelli describes an instinctive connection between these aesthetics and kiosk work: “[g]iven the smallness of the workplace and the sort of poverty of the place, it [the aesthetic] fitted in well, and it linked to the discussions

2. In this way it resonates with classic theorisations of emotional labour. For instance, Arlie Hochschild describes such labour as “the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display” (1983: 7). See also Panse (2014).

happening in the street”.³ Beyond this, the film’s *dispositif* can also be interpreted as an attempt to come to terms with technological change. First, its production process aims to work through the implications of digital technologies for documentary filmmaking (something to which the film sometimes draws attention, as described above). This forms part of a more general attempt to understand the effects of technological change upon the sphere of employment (using the example of kiosk work as a hermeneutic). At times this takes on a playful tone, but it also responds to a more deeply-felt uncertainty (see Steyerl 2011) that is embodied in the limited amount of information made legible by the low-resolution imagery. What therefore emerges is an intertwinement of production processes, aesthetics, and narrative preoccupations in their relation to precarity.

The film’s engagement with the more general field of mobile phone footage also deserves attention. While such footage is frequently associated with immediacy and directness (Jouini 2025; Ruchel-Stockmans 2021: 143, for instance), the film’s use of phone footage conveys a different impression.⁴ Part of this is due to the temporal distance between the closure of the kiosk (2008) and the release of the film (2020), but Pianelli also describes the long duration over which filming took place, which enables the film to develop narrative arcs which reach beyond the immediate present and, relatedly, to situate itself within a much broader context (of which more shortly). We should also consider how the static camera – frequently positioned behind the kiosk counter – contrasts with the handheld nature of much mobile phone footage. For commentators such as Thomas Nail, digital images have a fundamentally “migratory” (2019: 67) or mobile nature. These are ideas that Angela Jouini (2025) channels in her discussion of the close relationship between spatial mobility and mobile phone filmmaking. *Le Kiosque*, on the other hand, frequently uses static mobile phone footage, while also operating within a very confined space. Indeed, at one point when the camera does leave the confines of the kiosk, it stops working – leaving us with only a blank screen. The film’s relative *immobility* can be interpreted in two ways. Partially, the lack of movement and very limited framing can be seen to reflect and implicitly critique the limited horizons of an increasingly precarious present. On the other hand, this immobility could also be interpreted as an attempt to re-ground a sense of stability in a world in flux. In any case, the film shows us that deterministic narratives are insufficient to explain the relations between technology, aesthetics and politics.



Fig. 2. – A typical shot from behind the kiosk counter.

How does the small-scale production impact the film otherwise? Firstly, the collapse of the boundary between filmmaker and worker allows for an intimate exploration of the labouring process. To emphasise the mechanical nature of kiosk work, for instance, the camera focuses closely on the coin trays behind the counter, to

3. The kiosk shut in 2008, and the footage takes on a slightly different tone in the present day, in which early digital photography has attained a certain nostalgic appeal.
4. Both Jouini’s and Ruchel-Stockmans’ accounts allow for more nuanced interpretations while also emphasising the immediacy and directness of mobile phone footage.

show how generations of hands have marked them. Without wanting to fetishise an uncritical conception of “authenticity” or “truth”, it is clear that this approach gives rise to a different perspective than the classic workplace documentary formats – the interview or the labour process film – both of which typically separate worker and filmmaker. This is a concern I will develop in my analysis of *La Base*, which draws extensively on footage shot by its worker-participants.

Pianelli also notes that the small camera setup puts participants at ease. In doing so, she acknowledges the ways in which her work resonates closely with one of documentary film’s primary concerns: the relationship between filmmaker and Other. In our discussion of the power relations between documentary participant and filmmaker, Pianelli expresses a position which resonates with the broadly Levinasian ethics that inform a significant strain of contemporary documentary filmmaking and theory (Rangan 2017: 12-14; Nash 2011; Renov 2004: 148-67). She states, “I always put myself on the same level as the people I film”, and that, as a filmmaker, “your responsibility is [...] to film [the participant] in their alterity”. An important scene casts further light on these issues. A conversation is taking place between Pianelli and Islam, the asylum seeker. When he asks if the film will be published online, he quickly hides his face, presumably concerned about the possibility of being apprehended by the police. This fleeting moment highlights the contradictory nature of the close forms of access made possible by these filming practices, resonating within and beyond the ethical field. While they offer the potential of filming the Other in a relatively uninhibited way, they may also give rise to material consequences that escape the confines of an ethical contract defined by respect for the Other’s alterity. Again, the political nature of the relations between filmmaker and (worker-)participant becomes a closer object of my analysis below.

3 The possibilities of precarious documentary

So far, I have emphasised the narrow spatial and compositional focus of the film, as well as the sense of uncertainty that its aesthetics embody. However, the film’s focus is not myopic, nor is it overwhelmed by its uncertainty. This is because it also situates its action rigorously within a broader sociopolitical context, something which is most evident in the animated sequences that intersperse the mobile phone and GoPro footage (see Fig. 3). These sections cast light upon the unequal power relations between press companies and the kiosk operators, the latter of whom are unable to choose the products they sell and are constantly owed money by the wealthier companies that supply their products. By using jerky stop-motion techniques and cardboard models, Pianelli aimed to “stay in the paper universe – in the poor universe of the kiosk”, but the sequences clearly reach beyond the confines of the individual kiosk, towards the more general economic contours of the neoliberal present.

Elsewhere, the film draws attention to the rise of far-right politics through a series of intradiegetic news headlines; the impact of internet shopping upon the broader sphere of work; the precarious situation of retirees; and strike action at the press companies. Its final moments also pay tribute to “those who fight”, including most obviously Damien and Islam. The film’s critique of precarity is closely bound up with precarious aesthetics, but it also shows that limited means implicit in low-budget documentary practice do not necessarily imply a turn away from the broader situation. While its political charge is often secondary to its exploration of the interpersonal, the film draws attention to the interrelations of multiple socioeconomic forces, developing a nuanced understanding of both precarious work and its enabling context. However, the question of how the situation might change remains out of reach.

3.1 *La Base*

La Base also confronts the changing nature of work. The film focuses on two transit centres (or *bases*) near Paris-Charles de Gaulle airport, at which taxi drivers wait to be dispatched to various terminals. Over the course of the near eight-year filming process, the first site is demolished, forcing drivers to relocate to a different one. By the end of the film, the COVID pandemic is setting in: planes are grounded, and work seems to be disappearing before the drivers’ eyes. Throughout, the licensed taxi drivers attempt to come to terms with ever-greater competition from competitors on platforms such as Uber. As in Pianelli’s film, the change



Fig. 3. – A series of the animated sequences.

depicted here is technological, sociopolitical, and also generational – many of the drivers are beyond middle age, with their occupation coming to seem like a relic in the age of platform capitalism.

Also in common with *Le Kiosque*, the film makes significant use of smartphone footage. This is interspersed with a number of tracking shots taken on professional equipment, generally accompanied by drivers' words on voiceover. The production processes of *La Base* differ in important ways from those of Pianelli's work, however. First, Dumesh is not a taxi driver, and is therefore filming work that is not his own. Relatedly, he is not the only camera operator: the film draws extensively on footage that the workers have filmed themselves, therefore engaging with the practice of "giving the camera to the other" (Rangan 2017: 1). This gives rise to a different relation between filmmaker, participants, and work, something which will be a key focus of my analysis. As per my approach to *Le Kiosque*, I will begin by addressing the film's commentary on work itself, using this as an entry point to its production practices and aesthetics.

4 Work and non-work

The film is much more interested in the disappearance of work than the specifics of the labouring process. Indeed, paying customers are entirely absent from the diegesis, and the primary working activities we see are therefore adjacent to the labour of driving (washing cars; waiting for customers, for instance). In this regard, the film's action resonates with classic examples of workplace documentary, in which the downing of tools during strike activity allowed for the workers' voices to be heard. An important difference is that a strike constitutes a deliberate and agential halt to production, whereas the taxi drivers have little choice but to not work, something which reflects the fraught political situation that they find themselves in. While taxi work itself is shown to be an isolating activity, the long periods spent not working allow for various forms of collective behaviours to emerge. For instance, drivers play pétanque, grow vegetables on a shared patch, and pray together. The first base seems almost like a micro-society with markets, a makeshift gym and a busy canteen, inhabited by workers from diverse cultures.⁵ The liminal situation of the base – somewhere between work and non-work, where drivers can do what they want but are constantly watched over – was the primary factor that attracted Dumesh to film there.

The quotidian activities at the base often seem banal, but are underpinned by profound socioeconomic change. The most abrupt change within the film's narrative is the move from one base to the other, which constitutes an uprooting of the drivers' community. A more insidious development is the growth of platform-based taxi services (technically known as private hire services). At a key moment, a driver receives a phone call attempting

5. This is not always harmonious: the film highlights racist graffiti in the toilets, targeting drivers at different companies.

to convince him to move to Uber. A subsequent conversation encapsulates the more general situation: the licensed taxi drivers at the base undergo significant training to “learn Paris by heart”, and have the right to determined hours of work. Uber drivers, on the other hand, operate on a self-employed basis, lacking the protections implicit in a more regular employment contract (see Dubal 2017a; 2017b on self-employment). The taxi drivers’ rates are set centrally, according to local legislation, whereas private hire drivers are able to undercut those rates. The growth of platforms therefore constitutes a significant precarisation of the drivers’ profession, undermining their working conditions as the platforms engage in a race to the bottom (Ravenelle 2019; Rosenblat 2018; Gazier 2020). The film sometimes gives an impression of resistance to this change. A sequence homes in on posters protesting the “Americanisation” of Europe, for instance, and at one point drivers assemble around a speaker with a megaphone, attempting to establish some kind of solution to their forced displacement. These moments are only fleeting, however, and fail to cohere into a greater force.



Fig. 4. – The political assembly.

The film’s concern with these workplace developments gives rise to a broader questioning of an increasingly precarious human condition. Fear of human obsolescence is repeated at several points, notably during the film’s opening sequence. On voiceover, a driver describes an imagined future in which the earth is populated by ghosts, with machines having taken over the activity of work.⁶ This resonates with the concerns about the fragility of life expressed in *Le Kiosque*, but takes on a more existential tone here. Ominous electronic music plays in the background, while the video track features a tracking shot that circles around the airport (filmed on a professional camera, rather than a phone). The movement of this shot can be interpreted as an embodiment of the kinds of change described on voiceover, but it remains unclear what is driving that change, as the camera operator remains anonymous. On a formal basis, this opening scene captures the way in which precarity is experienced as a loss of control over one’s situation, setting the stage for the action which propels the film. A later sequence follows the same formal pattern, but this time depicts a COVID-stricken base that has been emptied of drivers, thereby implicitly affirming the narrative introduced in the opening moments. Like Pianelli’s film, then, *La Base* generally suggests that there is little prospect of halting the descent into precarity. As indicated, traces of political resistance do emerge at points, but any question of collective action is effectively absent by the end of the film, as work seems to be dematerialising before the drivers’ eyes. The precise causes of precarisation are difficult to grasp, but for many of the drivers, the mobile phone serves as a pertinent emblem of the seemingly unstoppable change that they experience. This leads us towards a more detailed discussion of the film’s engagement with technology.

6. It is beyond the scope of this paper to explore this point in detail, but both Smith (2020) and Benanav (2020) offer valuable correctives to narratives which see technology as an omnipotent power in and of itself.

5 The dialectics of technology

Dumesh notes that the use of mobile phones in the production of the film was initially dictated by practical concerns: filming is not permitted on the base, so it was necessary to be able to do so on a clandestine basis. As the filming progressed, the participatory format began to take root, enabled by the ease of use and ubiquity of phone cameras. A fortuitous coincidence is that, as in *Le Kiosque*, the use of mobile phones in the production process relates closely to the subject matter of the film. In a similar way to Pianelli's film, many scenes self-reflexively foreground the role of the phone as a recording apparatus. At several points, for instance, workers ask Dumesh how to frame a shot, or whether the phone is recording. These moments allegorise their broader efforts to come to terms with technological and sociopolitical upheaval.

While the mobile phone is pinpointed as the embodiment of enforced and unwelcome change, it also functions as an important means of expression for the workers, thereby taking on a dialectical quality. Specifically, many of the workers were attracted to participate in the documentary by the opportunity to build an archive of their work before it disappears. Jean-Jacques, one of the most prominent characters, argues that “we need to film everything because this really will be demolished”, for instance. This introduces a further dialectical tension. As we have seen, digital imagery has frequently been associated with “mobility” (Nail 2019). Many have also argued that the proliferation of images throughout society contributes to a broadly-felt sense of their transience and ephemerality (Hight 2018: 26).⁷ However, the imagery also embodies the promise of stability and permanence by giving the drivers the opportunity to reassert ownership over their memories of work. While the recording apparatus has arguably become more immaterial, registering images in binary code rather than on physical film, *La Base* suggests that the material connotations of the digital image have not been left behind but rather continue to play an important role within the cultural imaginary (see also Martínez Luna 2019; Hight 2018: 23-5).



Fig. 5. – Jean-Jacques frames a shot.

Another significant tension emerges through the film's engagement with the mobile phone as a device which facilitates both individualism and collectivism. Mobile phones are personal devices (as opposed to the traditional phone situated within a collective space), and the film is arguably constituted of a series of individual narratives. Within the diegesis, the ubiquity of the mobile phone facilitates the individualisation of (self-)employment that is foundational to the growth of the platforms. Yet the mobile is also “a social object”, as Roger Odin (2012: 164) reminds us, facilitating connections as well as individuations. The film's construction reflects this, assembling its individual narratives into something approaching a collective experience.

7. Reinforcing a sense of mobility, the footage in the film is drawn from diverse locations: the base, taxis in motion, drivers' homes, and even a trip to Morocco.

How does this relate to the film's more general engagement with work? We have seen that the film often foregrounds technologically deterministic narratives of decline: fears that machines will render workers redundant and, in more extreme fashion, eventually displace humanity altogether. By contrast, the dialectical tensions I have identified suggest that these technological developments are open to contestation and change, embodying latent potential as well as a threat. The drivers' time spent not working is often experienced as boring and frustrating, as well as reflecting a broader situation of political weakness. Yet it also enables them, armed with their phones, to engage in forms of collective self-expression which perhaps carry the potential – however obliquely – for a different organisation of society. The film clearly does not resemble the kind of revolutionary cinema that Les groups Medvedkine had in mind; in fact, its overall tone is markedly pessimistic. However, it also shows that the practice of “putting the camera in the hands of the workers” carries with it an element of potential.

6 Power and production

It is important to qualify some of these points by addressing the power dynamics implicated by the more active role of participants within the production. We have already encountered both celebratory (Sasse; Vickers) and more cautionary (Rangan) accounts of documentary participation. I will return to each of these perspectives at points, but it is also worth introducing two further points of view which more explicitly confront the power dynamics of documentary. The filmmaker-theorist Jean-Louis Comolli, who has written extensively on the question of filming work, argues that “the cinematic relation is always somewhat playful” (1998: 24). He contends that in documentary production,

[a] ‘two of us’ is created, an ensemble that’s not stated as such. If we come to use the term ‘contract,’ it is understood as a ‘moral contract’ that *should and does remain implicit, tacit, unspoken*. For in this ‘contract’—which is not one in any legal or commercial sense of the word—lies the whole documentary relation (1999: 45, emphasis mine).

By contrast, Silke Panse perceives the work of the documentary protagonist as a value-productive activity, founded upon pronounced inequalities of power:

Marx observed that in capitalism the worker loses the right to control the value and the product of her labour. This lack of rights extends to the working documentary protagonist in the image. By working materially and immaterially in images, we not only produce a product that we do not own, or generate a smile we would otherwise not have, but our image is also exploitable as a product we do not own. (2014: 187)

While Comolli warns against the use of juridical or contractual means within documentary production, Panse advocates for greater legal rights for documentary participants so that their labour is recognised as such.

La Base is a film which casts light upon both of these perspectives. From its opening, we gain a sense of a playful kind of co-creation between Dumesh and the drivers. After the release of the film, participants were often present at screenings; during interview, Dumesh describes his ongoing relationships with them in ways which resonate with Comolli's description of the collaborative and perhaps also solidaristic nature of the documentary relation. On the other hand, and coming closer to Panse's perspective, the drivers clearly perform various kinds of work, without which the production would not exist: filming themselves, spending time with Dumesh, and so on. Dumesh works through closely related positions in our interview. First, he highlights “the power dynamic which I think cannot be escaped, even if you're working [...] in co-creation,” attributing this to class disparities, inequalities in technical prowess, and the fact that directors frequently represent an “outside gaze [...] onto [a] community”. Subsequently, however, he rejects the kind of absolutist position taken by Panse: “it's just condescending to say: these poor people, they don't know anything. And we come with our cameras and we're so powerful. That's bullshit”.

Several strategies were put in place to attempt to mitigate some of the potentially exploitative aspects of the film's production. First, participants were paid for their work in the film. Second, they were not asked to sign release forms until they had seen the final cut, so that, in the words of Dumesh, they could “exercise some control over [...] the images they produced”. Participants were also able to withdraw from the production

process (or simply to not show up to filming appointments), with minimal (if any) material consequences. This shows that attempts to transplant theories of the capitalist wage relation straightforwardly onto documentary production – as Panse does – are likely to fall short, as documentary participants typically have much greater freedoms than most waged workers (see also Comolli 1998: 22).⁸ On a slightly different note, it also bears mention that *La Base* avoids the obfuscatory tendency of participatory documentary to claim to reproduce an “unmediated reality” (Rangan 2017: 2). Rather, it clearly makes reference to documentary *performance* and *construction*: characters quite openly play roles for the camera (see Marquis 2013), and the interventionist presence of the director is not hidden.

Certain relationships within the film complicate this image of transparency, however. In particular, Dumesh describes conflicted feelings about his relationship with one character, Madame Vong, who features prominently in the film's last third. Vong often films herself in selfie while describing her work as a taxi driver to an imagined audience, as if attempting to emulate the position of a social media influencer. Dumesh explains the semi-scripted nature of these scenes, but also acknowledges: “I’m still not sure whether she maybe believed that, you know, beyond the film, we would actually go out and build [...] an online followership for her”. Ironically, this example points towards the deeply-embedded appeal of the kind of platform-based, entrepreneurial work that the film critiques. It also suggests that participants may project their desires onto documentary filmmakers in ways which can give rise to problematic and potentially exploitative relationships (see Piotrowska 2013: 45-53). More generally, Dumesh's account exposes the difficulty of maintaining ethically and politically equitable relationships in documentary filmmaking, even where significant attention is paid to the ethico-political implications of production.

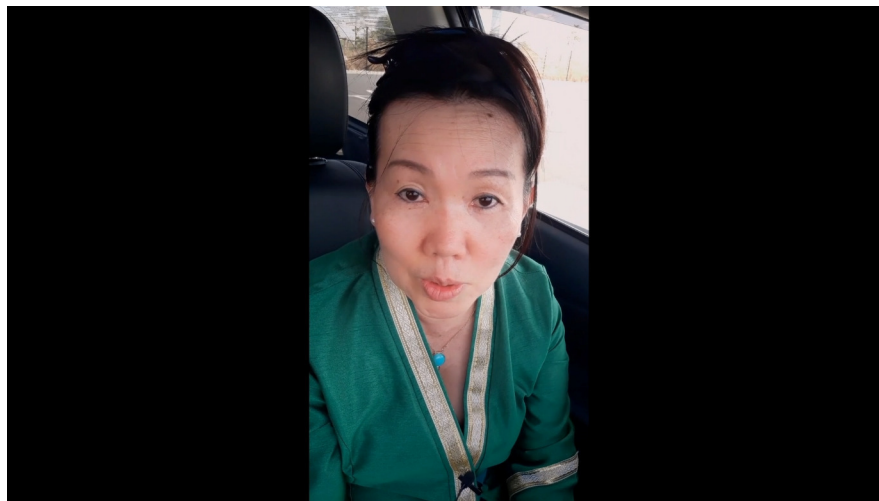


Fig. 6. – Madame Vong in selfie.

Ultimately, this leaves us in a situation where neither Comolli's nor Panse's theories are adequate on their own. On the one hand, the documentary relation is generally more equitable than the typical wage relation. In the case of *La Base*, for instance, the drivers hold much greater power as participants (in relation to Dumesh) than as workers (in relation to their employers and work-related institutions more generally). Further, the documentary contract (whether formal or informal) must allow for unexpected occurrences. The fact that participants' behaviours and performances escape the boundaries of a strictly-enforced contract is an important aspect of documentary, as Comolli argues. This becomes particularly clear in the practice of “putting the camera in the hands of the workers”, which fosters a degree of autonomy which other methodologies often do not.

At the same time, documentary participation can clearly be exploitative, and a supposedly “playful” relation between filmmaker and participant can quite easily mask this. Putting the camera in the hands of participants

8. This is not to deny the many examples of highly exploitative documentary practice. The recent film *Subject* (Camilla Hall and Jennifer Tiexiera, 2022) focuses on some high-profile examples.

under the guise of giving them autonomy might even be considered as a means of extracting free labour. While it would be dogmatic to argue that this is the case here, the connections between documentary participation and the kinds of “immaterial” or “affective” (Oksala 2015) labour increasingly demanded in the contemporary workplace should not be ignored altogether. In a more constructive sense, while a straightforward Marxist framework is not directly applicable to the documentary relation, the production of *La Base* also shows how foundational principles (payment of participants, for instance) can and should be implemented, even in low-budget productions. With these thoughts in mind, I will now angle my analysis towards a broader-reaching theorisation of “putting the camera in the hands of the workers”.

6.1 The broader picture

Le Kiosque and *La Base* represent only two instances of self-filmed work within the contemporary labour landscape. Other pertinent French examples include *Le Télétravail du sexe* (Carmina and Prune, 2024), filmed and directed by two sex workers; *La Guerre des centimes* (Nader Ayache, 2019), which centres on Deliveroo cycle couriers; and the ethnographic films produced by the association Périphérie, which feature various kinds of work. Outside of a French context, interesting films include *Out on the Street* (EG, Jasmina Metwaly and Philip Rizk, 2015), *Leaves Fall in All Seasons* (SA, Ahmed Mater, 2015) and *Union* (US, Brett Story and Stephen Maing, 2024). In the light of my analyses above, I will now return to the aims established in my introduction: to situate the practice of self-filming work within the current conjuncture; to examine the aesthetics and forms that it gives rise to; and to probe the ways in which it impacts the power relations that emerge in documentary production.

Starting at the most general level, the prevalence of self-filmed work reflects a situation in which people of diverse backgrounds are increasingly comfortable with communicating through film (Odin 2011: 166–69). This derives in part from the proliferation of images within the increasingly blurred spheres of work and leisure, and – relatedly – their integration within contemporary networks of value accumulation. The ubiquity of easy-to-use, affordable cameras (often integrated into mobile phones) is a key component of the material infrastructure which underpins these developments. This general situation brings with it practical advantages which also carry political potential. First, it is conceivable to make a film with little or no supplementary crew, and at a very small cost. The widespread use of camera phones also allows for participatory forms of the kind seen in *La Base*, in which camera operators have no formal training. This trend has also enabled greater levels of self-representation within the video activist practices that constitute an integral element of the contemporary documentary scene. Thinking more specifically about filming work, self-filming affords a level of discretion that enables filmmakers to access workplaces without permission – a key issue in the field (Machado 2024: 158). All this generally amounts to a democratisation of production which has led to a diversification of work-centred documentary in recent years, posing particular advantages for filmmakers without institutional backing or permission to film within workplaces. This diversification is only partial, however: on a narrative basis, certain subjects (the former Fordist worker) continue to be prioritised over others (rural precarity, for instance). More generally, while the practice of self-filming opens up possibilities in the sphere of production, there are still significant inequalities and obstacles in terms of funding, distribution and exhibition.

The filmic forms and aesthetics that self-filming gives rise to are diverse. While I have concentrated on feature-length films intended for cinematic release, we can also identify self-filmed footage of work in short films, web films, journalistic films, as well as on social media. Given the connections between digital technologies and the contemporary prevalence of self-filming, it is important to re-engage with questions of media specificity at this point. In many examples, filmmakers use the format and aesthetics of digital media to self-reflexively engage with forms of work which require increasing levels of image-based surveillance or related forms of digital tracking. As we have seen, *Le Kiosque* and particularly *La Base* put self-filming to this purpose. Similarly, *Le Télétravail du sexe* uses film to critique the demands of online sex work, and *Union* uses self-filmed sequences within Amazon warehouses in ways which subvert the surveillance demands imposed on workers. In these instances, self-filming constitutes an attempt to turn the tables on the power relations of contemporary work, as those who are filmed and surveilled take on more agential positions behind the camera. Webcam and smartphone aesthetics therefore come to take on different meanings. In a similar complication of the qualities typically associated with digital imagery, self-filming work frequently takes on an archival function

in the context of contemporary cinematic documentary. This stands in contrast to the supposed ephemerality of digital imagery, returning us to the dialectical nature of technology that the contemporary practice of self-filming emphasises. My analysis has demonstrated that digital technologies do not simply embody an advancing precarity, but also offer the opportunity to resist and disrupt the dominant aesthetic and cultural forms of the present conjuncture.⁹

Finally, it is important consider the impact of self-filming upon the power relations of the documentary production process. In the case of small-scale productions such as *Le Kiosque*, the situation is straightforward: self-filming collapses the boundaries between worker and filmmaker in ways which generally simplify the power dynamics of production. As my argument above has shown, however, things become far more complex in the case of films which implicate multiple filming participants, such as *La Base*. What becomes clear in these instances is that participation itself does not necessarily equal a more equitable distribution of power. If anything, putting the camera into the workers' hands can complicate matters, potentially leading to exploitative practices. Further, while the participation enabled by recent technological developments might allow for a "cumulative version of 'cinema-truth'" (Vickers 2013: 133) to develop, the collective voice that emerges is strictly delimited by who chooses to participate, and potentially also by different interpretations of the formal or implicit contracts involved in the process. In traditional cinematic formats of the kind addressed here, the ultimate power over representation lies in the editing room (most often in the absence of participants).

Putting the camera in the hands of the workers offers no guarantees, then. However, under the right circumstances, it carries significant elements of potential, primarily by catalysing workers' creativity and self-expression. Cinematically, this often gives rise to polyvocal films which might preserve our memories of work, critique it, or unsettle dominant narratives. More importantly, the dialogic and collaborative nature of this model of production also points towards different organisations of society more broadly. Even if self-filming does not necessarily imply a horizontalist collapse of power relations, it can still constitute a collective experiment in meaning-making that resonates with the hopes of radical filmmakers such as those of Les groups Medvedkine. In the context of increasing precarity, the prospect of revolution – or even resistance – often seems distant. Nonetheless, the practice of putting the camera in the workers' hands implies that our collective capacity to imagine different working relations remains intact.

Ethical approval

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from CER-CY (protocol number 202502 – 002).

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9. Not all contemporary films employ aesthetics associated with the digital. *La Guerre des centimes* is an interesting example of a film which focuses on platform work associated with digital surveillance, but which rejects digital cameras in favour of 8mm film.

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