

David Dufresne's *Un Pays qui se tient sage* (2020) and Contemporary Documentary

Activism

David Dufresne's *Un Pays qui se tient sage* (2020) offers a critique of French police violence, particularly in relation to the Gilets Jaunes protests. The film is set in a viewing space where participants (including protesters, sociologists, lawyers, and police representatives) analyze footage of the protests, which primarily consists of mobile phone recordings shot by the protestors themselves as well as television reports from the mainstream media. This article argues that rather than understanding these images as representations of pre-existing events, they should instead be understood as politics in action. Drawing on critics such as Aurora Hoel, John Durham Peters, and Jacques Rancière, the article proposes that documentary film scholars move away from the idea of images as representations (Hoel's paradigm of 'images-of') and towards an understanding of images as 'civilizational ordering mechanisms' (Peters).

***Un Pays qui se tient sage* (2020, David Dufresne) et le documentaire activiste contemporain**

Avec *Un Pays qui se tient sage* (2020) David Dufresne nous offre une critique de la violence des forces de l'ordre français, en particulier dans le contexte des manifestations des gilets jaunes. Le film se déroule dans une salle de visionnage où divers participants (y compris des manifestants, des sociologues, des avocats, et des représentants de la police) analysent et débattent des images filmées pendant les émeutes, soit par les manifestants sur leurs téléphones portables, soit par les journalistes des chaînes grand public. Au lieu de considérer ces images et ces discussions comme la re-présentation d'un événement passé, l'article propose de les comprendre comme étant elles-mêmes de la politique en train de se faire. S'appuyant sur des textes d'Aurora Hoel, John Durham Peters et Jacques Rancière, l'article suggère qu'il est temps pour les études documentaires de passer de l'idée de l'image comme

re-présentation (le paradigme de 'l'image-de' (Hoel)) à celle de l'image comme 'mécanisme d'agencement civilisationnel' (Peters).

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Let me begin with a few passages from two different interview books, in which the interviewees reflect on the notion of representation. The first comes from a 1997 interview with the cybernetician Heinz von Foerster, published as *The Beginning of Heaven and Earth Has No Name*:

I can still remember the big motto in the Stanford School of Journalism that said, “Tell it like it is.” When, to my horror, I saw that motto, I walked in there and said, “Listen, ladies and gentlemen, it is as you tell it, and that’s why you’re responsible for ‘it.’” (2)

Von Foerster’s background is in quantum mechanics and mathematics, and his argument here is about the nature of reality: reality is, we might say, *actualized* in the act of telling (or, of observation). This should not be mistaken for the subjectivist or solipsistic idea that we can make up any reality that suits us; rather, the point is that reality does not lie out there, waiting to be represented by us. ‘It’ and ‘we’ are co-created in the act of observation and telling. Von Foerster’s argument is not only about images and words, and nor should it – tempting as it may be for scholars in the humanities – be immediately brought back to debates about truthful representations versus simulacres or about realism versus postmodernism. However, his ideas have implications for how we think about the role of words, images, and journalism. Furthermore, when developing the ‘it is as you tell it’-position, he briefly turns to film:

Here someone might object, “But we can substantiate this or that; we have witnesses.” Then listen to their accounts again a few days after the so-called incident: Then the car was driving fast, turning left, turning right, a lady was at the door, but no, it was a man, child,... Everyone tells a different story. A good movie in this vein, by the way, is *Rashōmon*. A woman claims that she has been raped and that her husband was killed by robbers. And she manages to gather witnesses to the murder, and then they all tell their stories. Each has a different story – and they all fit. *Rashōmon* is my idea of “Tell it like it is” versus “It is as you tell it.” (2)¹

Let us now consider the second book-length interview, *En quel temps vivons-nous?* (2017), a conversation between Eric Hazan and philosopher Jacques Rancière. Rancière is well-known for his writings on film and aesthetics (and for emphasizing that aesthetics and politics must not be thought of as distinct spheres), but at the beginning of *En quel temps vivons-nous?*, he discusses the idea of representative democracy. He explains that in his view ‘the people’ does not pre-exist political events. Politics is therefore not about representing the will of the people, rather it is the event that produces the people. Taking issue with what he calls ‘la logique pseudo-radical’, a leftwing politics that claims to speak for the people, Rancière writes:

Cette logique [pseudo-radical] partage exactement la vision officielle des choses: elle est fondée comme elle sur la présupposition que le système représentatif est la simple expression d’une réalité sociale sous-jacente. [...] Mais le peuple n’est pas le grand corps collectif qui s’exprime dans la représentation, il est le quasi-corps qui est produit par le fonctionnement de ce système. (13)

Von Foerster and Rancière belong to very different academic disciplines and are pursuing very different projects,² yet in the passages above, they both subscribe to what we might call an enactive understanding of reality (von Foerster) and the people (Rancière). And, in both cases, their emphasis on processes of actualization goes hand in hand with a critique of the idea of representation (and the idea of something pre-existing) – von Foerster in journalism and film, and Rancière in politics. If I begin with von Foerster and Rancière, it is because the present article is about journalism, images, and politics, and because the article seeks to approach images outside the representational regime. Specifically, I will examine how images and politics shape one another, and the real, and I shall argue that images are, as John Durham Peters writes about media more generally, ‘civilizational ordering mechanisms’ (*Marvellous Clouds*, 5).

This argument will be developed through a study of David Dufresne’s *Un Pays qui se tient sage* (2020), a documentary which sets out to criticize the transgressions of the French state (and, in particular, its ‘forces de l’ordre’). While I study how *Un Pays qui se tient sage* constructs its critique, I will not get caught up in debates about representation – about ‘tell[ing] it like it is’ versus ‘it is as you tell it’. However, I hope to suggest that it is possible to distance oneself from the goal of ‘tell[ing] it like it is’, without opening the floodgates for manipulation and fake news. In other words, von Foerster’s despair about the motto of the Stanford School of Journalism is less outrageous than it may at first seem. Clearly, he is not arguing that we have no responsibility towards the real; on the contrary, ‘you are responsible for it’. We might even read von Foerster’s tone to suggest that the ambition to re-present the real can, at times, serve as a means of shirking one’s responsibilities (‘I am just showing things, how they are’).

The article begins with a brief description of the film’s set design (its *dispositif*), before drawing out what I consider to be its main argument. In a second part, I then home in

on what the film tells us about images. How do we read (violent) images, how do they feed into events, and how do they shape events? Finally, I offer a brief comparison with Ra'annan Alexandrewicz's *The Viewing Booth* (2019), a film which shares enough common ground with Dufresne's to enable me to draw out a few very strong differences. While both directors design a black box environment that affords a concentrated viewing experience, I shall argue that their understanding of these viewing spaces – and by extension, their conceptualization of the relation between film and world – are very different.

1. Dufresne's argument

As should already be clear, *Un Pays qui se tient sage* is a political film. During the first half of its 90-minute running time, it focuses on the Gilets Jaunes protests that took place in France between 2018 and 2020. As the film progresses, Dufresne increasingly zooms out and incorporates footage concerned with police and state violence more generally, evoking, for instance, the cases of Rémi Fraisse, Malik Ousserine, Zineb Redoune, and Steve Caniço who were all killed by the French police between 1986 and 2019. A journalist by training, Dufresne previously made a TV documentary about the 2005 riots in Paris's suburbs which erupted when Bouna Traoré and Zyed Benna were electrocuted during a police hunt (the police was later cleared of all charges). As an investigative journalist, Dufresne also worked on 'L'affaire de Tarnac',³ and on American prison culture through the making of an interactive computer game. In brief, using many different media, Dufresne's works focus on violence and power, states and citizens.

Un Pays qui se tient sage is set in a viewing room dominated by a big screen. In the darkness in front of this screen we typically have one or two citizens either standing or sitting on freestanding chairs. Filmed in clair-obscur lighting, these participants discuss what they see and debate general questions about the state and police violence. Some participants

recount their involvement in the Gilets Jaunes protests. We see the images they are looking at, which mostly consists of footage from smartphones and excerpts from national television stations. Some of these images are violent: we see arms with missing hands, protesters bleeding from the head, and cheeks perforated by rubber balls. About twenty-five citizens participate in the film; many appear several times, always in the same groupings.

Who are these people? Initially, the participants remain unnamed and we know nothing about their background. Spectators may of course recognize some of them, and occasionally their professions become clear through discussion, but we mostly listen to the different points of view, without being able to pigeonhole the speakers. Approximately twenty minutes into the film, Dufresne presents a silent sequence with portrait shots of the participants. This sequence is repeated at the very end of the film as a form of credit roll, but here small texts inform us who the participants were: protestors, their family members, representatives of the police, a lorry driver, sociologists, lawyers, journalists, authors, and historians. We also get a list of people who declined to participate (other representatives of the national and Parisian police), and of those who were not allowed to participate, including representatives of the CRS and the national security services. We never see the filmmaker or anyone else from his crew, although in one scene the frame of an interviewer's glasses is visible.

On three occasions, selected participants are given a piece of white A4-paper, which they unfold, read aloud and comment on. This first happens at the beginning of the film: 'L'état détient le monopole de l'usage légitime de la violence. (Max Weber)'. A second piece of paper is unwrapped 46 minutes into the film. This sheet presents a longer passage from the writings of the bishop Hélder Câmara (1909-99), a well-known socialist critic of the Brazilian military dictatorship of the 1960s-80s. Câmara's text theorizes three forms of violence: (1) institutional violence, as exercised by a repressive political system such as the dictatorship he

opposed; (2) revolutionary violence, which responds to the first type of violence; and (3) the repressive violence of the state (military and police), which reacts to the second type. Câmara's sentences emphasize that it is hypocritical to condemn revolutionary violence, and respond with repressive violence, if one ignores the first, foundational institutional form of violence. Towards the end of the film, the final piece of paper gives us the twelfth paragraph of the 1789 *Déclaration de l'homme et du citoyen*: 'La garantie des droits de l'homme et du citoyen nécessite une force publique: cette force est donc instituée pour l'avantage de tous, et non pour l'utilité particulière de ceux auxquels elle est confiée'. Analyzing this sentence, emeritus professor of law Monique Chemillier-Gendreau emphasizes its latter part: state violence must serve the common good. As indicated by all these sentences – and the presence of scholars and intellectuals – this is an academic film in which words play a key role. The participants reference thinkers such as Hannah Arendt, Michel Foucault, and Jean Genet. We even have a policeman who (very freely) quotes Pasolini: 'Comme le disait Pasolini: "Je préfère le CRS parce qu'il est fils d'ouvrier plutôt que l'étudiant casseur parce qu'il est fils de notaire"'.⁴

Turning to what I called the film's argument, let us revisit the passage from Weber's famous 1919 lecture on *Politics as Vocation*, which gives the film its English title, *The Monopoly of Violence*: 'l'état détient le monopole de l'usage légitime de la violence'.⁵ Dufresne's participants discuss how far the idea of 'legitimate physical violence' can be stretched. What if the state appears to abuse its privilege? And what if citizens no longer feel that they are being protected by the police or the CRS, instead believing that the state has lost its legitimacy? One discussant argues that this has already happened, and that French society is on the verge of collapse. Other participants note that there are zones where the state and the police are no longer considered to be legitimate. Some discussants specify that the Parisian suburbs have long served as 'laboratories' for French state violence – testing grounds for new

forms of repression. Representatives of the police reject this view, and instead argue that the police are merely carrying out their duties (so there is no issue of legitimacy), and that they are defending themselves against the attacks of protesters.

In other words, the film presents a multiplicity of voices and viewpoints. Nevertheless, it still constructs an argument, with two key moments shaping its development. The first is the introduction of ‘l’affaire Benalla’. Alexandre Benalla was a deputy officer in Macron’s security team. He was not a policeman or a part of the CRS, but on 1 May 2018 he donned a police helmet and armband, and was filmed beating up Gilets Jaunes protestors on the Place de Contrescarpe in Paris.⁶ The film presents these images, introduces the man who recorded them, and recounts his difficulties in getting mainstream media to take an interest in the footage. Eventually they did, and Benalla’s name became the root of a noun – ‘la benallisation’ – designating the process by which the ‘forces de l’ordre’ increasingly ignore all legal frameworks, operating like a paramilitary gang.⁷

Secondly, the film reminds us that the United Nations found it necessary to caution Macron, seeking reassurances about the nature of the French state’s response to the Gilets Jaunes protestors amid concerns that transgressions were taking place. Using excerpts from mainstream media, the film shows how this critique provoked strong, nationalist reactions in France with commentators in disbelief that the UN would suggest that the country of the *Déclaration de l’homme et du citoyen* could be out of line with those principles. This builds to the final scenes in the film. We see footage from a memorable press conference during the Gilets Jaunes protests, where Vladimir Putin pretended to worry about Macron’s use of violence, pointing out that in Russia there is no fighting in the streets, no police violence. Putin’s critique gave Macron an opportunity to stress that France is not an authoritarian regime; unlike Russia, it allows its citizens to protest, and unlike Russia, it sees dissensus as a key part of a democratic process. While the argument that dissensus is constitutive of

democracy is undoubtedly true, Macron's mini-lecture rings hollow at the end of the film.⁸ By this point, we have learned that peaceful protestors are showered with teargas from the moment they start walking, that the CRS alters their approved routes, and, more generally, that the police acts as if they have carte blanche to prevent citizens from exercising their constitutional right to protest. In this sense, the film ends with a warning: the French state is increasingly jeopardizing its own legitimacy. As Chemillier-Gendreau puts it, while France cannot be called an authoritarian regime, it has undoubtedly become a state with authoritarian tendencies.

That said, it is worth recognizing that although the film clearly warns against the authoritarian tendencies of the French state, it still allows multiple voices to be heard and thereby creates a polyphonic narrative. This becomes evident if one compares *Un Pays qui se tient sage* to Dufresne's novel about the Gilets Jaunes protests, *Dernière sommation* (2019). In the novel, Dufresne similarly crosscuts between various agents in the protests – a young protester, a journalist, a policeman, a politician – but since these voices have less autonomy than the participants in the film, *Dernière sommation* appears less polyphonic. Or rather, and to frame this idea more affirmatively, the film is a better example of the politics of dissensus – the political culture for which it advocates, and which, according to Dufresne's argument, is currently under threat.

2. A new image culture

What role do images play in these conflicts? The film and its participants offer numerous answers to this question. First, we encounter the well-known argument about the democratic nature of smartphone images. For instance, the science-fiction writer Alain Damasio explains that whereas we once lived under the logic of the panopticon, a logic of surveillance in which the state dominated its citizens through its monopoly on the gaze, the gaze now belongs to

citizens as well. These citizens can challenge power by filming it, creating what Dufresne, borrowing from the Canadian academic and engineer Steve Mann, has elsewhere referred to as ‘sousveillance’ (see *Police* 14).

Furthermore, while the state was previously able to control or at least monitor the distribution-networks, citizens now disseminate their *sousveillance* through networks other than those of mainstream media. In this regard, Dufresne’s film functions as a bridge between two zones: alternative media networks and mainstream venues such as major cinemas in France. The film aims to bring these alternative images to the attention of a wider audience – and Dufresne is aware that in doing so, he not only offers unknown images to a segment of the French population but also transforms these images by reframing them.



Fig. 1: Journalist Taha Bouhafs, in front of his own footage of Alexandre Benalla.

[Alt text: Filmed from the back, journalist Taha Bouhafs stands in front of his own footage of Alexandre Benalla. The image of Benalla dwarfs Bouhafs.]

Indeed, at the time of the film's release, Dufresne often emphasized that one of his key ambitions was to give cinematic legitimacy to the kind of 'poor images' (Hito Steyerl) featured in the film – and, by extension, to the people who filmed them. A crucial part of this has to do with scale⁹: by projecting smartphone footage onto a big screen, the images change, become cinematic and acquire a different form of legitimacy. The film's viewing space is carefully designed to highlight these issues of scale. We see participants positioned in front of the screen, dwarfed by the images they watch. In some cases, the film's participants view footage of themselves, gesturing towards and interacting with their own images. Furthermore, participants become projection surfaces, enveloped in light, as if wearing the images on their skin. One must imagine the *mise en abyme* produced when these images are viewed on a big screen: in a movie theatre, spectators would watch a participant in the film, often larger than themselves, who would still be dwarfed by the projected camera footage, in which they may themselves appear. As a result, cinemagoers would be doubly overwhelmed by the images.

In this manner, the film begins to move beyond the logic of representation, eroding what the Norwegian art historian and media scholar Aurora Hoel calls the idea of 'images-of'. Reflecting on her participation in the Stone Art Theory seminars in the early 2000s, Hoel writes the following about the colleagues she encountered there:

the majority seemed to converge on the conceptual figure—the fundamental theory of the image, so to speak—that the image is an image-of. This conceptual scheme frames the image as an entity that stands in or substitutes for another entity that serves as its model as well as its purpose. So, what is the problem? There are many. To keep it short: when the image is defined as an image-of, it is deprived of its constitutive force and formative powers. (Hoel 2011: 153)

This idea of the image-of has long dominated documentary film studies, even the scholarship that focuses on strategies such as performativity and reenactments. To give just one example, Bill Nichols presents documentary film in terms of the image's ability to 'reproduce the likeness of what comes before it' in a way that 'compels us to believe that it is reality itself re-presented before us' (2017: 29). While Nichols's framing draws attention to the rhetorical power of documentary images ('how an image 'comp[els] us to believe'), the hyphenation ('re-presentation') still signals fidelity to the 'the image-of' paradigm. For Hoel, by contrast, images are 'less things and representations than events and relations'. Documentary images, like all images, make a difference, and they should be allowed to make this difference (Hoel speaks of 'differential images'). In the paradigm of 'images-of', on the other hand, an image can at best hope to be transparent. This is why the 'image-of' framework can be called iconoclastic:

Defined as an image-of, the image as such is conceived as derivative, and its object is accorded ontological priority. [...] Hence, the valuation of the image hinges on whether or not one believes it capable of providing access to its model (is the image transparent or opaque?). I will not even start to enumerate the contradictions and aporias to which this setup gives rise. Instead, I'll fast-forward to the main point: in this setup, if the image is to remain truthful it has to efface itself and coincide with its model [...] Strangely, the archaic idea that mediacy and human intervention somehow rule out truth is still with us. (Hoel 2011: 153-4)

It can be argued that this desire for transparent images (this iconoclasm?) haunts older writings on documentary images also – for instance, when Nichols asserts that 'when

documentary films are at their best, a sense of urgency brushes aside our efforts to contemplate form' (1991: x).

Dufresne's film highlights how images become environments and actors – which shape and constitute, making certain kinds of behavior possible and other kinds impossible. One participant touches on this when he argues that 'L'enjeu de la représentation de la manifestation fait partie de la manifestation'. The sentence highlights the fact that the protests were organized in such a way as to produce compelling images. One way to illustrate this, as certain participants do, is to consider the setting of the protests. Many demonstrations took place in highly symbolic and cinematic spaces such as La Place de la République, La Place de la Bastille, and not least at that monument to state violence (as one participant puts it) which is L'Arc de Triomphe.



Fig. 2: The allure of the cinematic.

[Alt text: The Arch of Triumph in Paris, surrounded hundreds of yellow vests, black smoke drifting across the sky.]

With this form of *mise-en-scène*, one may now wonder what happens to the idea of ‘representation’. Is ‘representation’ the best word to describe a situation where the production of a certain image (yellow vest protestors around L’Arc de Triomphe) is in fact what structures an intervention? This phenomenon of *images shaping events* not only impacts the organization of the protests; it can also be observed in the viewing room when discussants watch and debate together, simultaneously shaping and being shaped by the images. A third layer emerges when the film’s spectators watch and debate what the participants say. At all these levels, we find ‘events and relations’; these images can be thought of as helping us *actualize* a particular situation through a complex interplay between images and human beings, rather than re-presenting a reality that comes before us.

These comments call to mind many other writings that challenge the notion of representation, giving to images a constitutive role in the production of reality. We may think of Gilbert Simondon’s theory of the image cycle (1965-66) which Peter Szendy (2021) recently brought closer to the domain of art and visual studies. Similarly, we may think of Peter Snowdon’s (2020) engagement with the role of camera phone footage in the Arab spring.¹⁰ One concept that has proven particularly successful as an alternative to the representational understanding of images is ‘operational images’. This term, originally coined by Harun Farocki for a series of writings, films, and installation works at the turn of the century, has generated rich and complex debates (see, for instance, Eder and Klonk (2017), Hoel (2018), Parikka (2024) and Beugnet in this volume). All these critics emphasize that images act on us and shape debates, creating (rather than only representing) political events.

Dufresne is of course aware of these shifts in our image culture. This is clear from the important scene which gives the film its French title. In camera phone footage that quickly went viral, we see how approximately one hundred high school students in the Parisian banlieue have been rounded up by the police and are forced to kneel (for four hours). On the

soundtrack, we hear the voice of the policeman who films and takes pleasure in dominating the students: ‘voilà une classe qui se tient sage’. When these images began circulating on social media, spectators were shocked by the sight of a policeman humiliating the students in such a sadistic manner. But the outrage produced by the video was not just a matter of representation (about what could be seen and heard in the film). It also had to do with the fact that the policeman felt so much impunity that he not only bragged about the abuse but also shared the video with ‘friends’ who then shared it further. Add to this the fact that the images on screen echo other recent, significant moments of ‘photogenic’ power abuse, such as the infamous Abu Ghraib photos, and the video of Syrian security forces abusing a teenager who had written anti-Assad graffiti on the wall of his school in Daraa. It is easy to see how, at several different levels, the film’s title-scene demonstrates that images act, shape behaviors, produce events.

To sum up, Dufresne’s participants and the film itself display a multilayered understanding of the role of images for contemporary political activism. This understanding is not without its inconsistencies and blind spots. For instance, while there is optimism about the democratizing effects of *sousveillance*, one must also acknowledge that citizen videos (unless stripped of geolocation data) also enable the surveillance of those who perform the *sousveillance*. Nevertheless, it is undoubtedly true that the camera phone (in addition to being a goldmine for companies like Apple and Samsung) has made it more difficult for a regime to control not only the population, but also its own representatives, including the CRS and police. As one participant notes, the state is still struggling to find its place within this new media ecology. *Un Pays qui se tient sage* thrives on this entanglement of images, events, and the shaping of political discourse, and in so doing suggests that mediation is a process that flows through images, events, and people, in that process undoing conventional logics of sender and receiver. This idea is almost literalized at moments when the light from the

projector makes participants merge with the images, creating what could be called *humanimages*.



Fig. 3: Humanimage

[Alt text: Sociologist Fabien Jobard caught in the projection light, blending with the image].

3. Meta-documentary and anthro-po-cosmomorphism

So far in this text, I have argued that *Un Pays qui se tient sage* offers an argument about the French state becoming increasingly authoritarian, as well as a reflection on how images play a constitutive role in political conflicts. It is important to note that there is no distance between the political argument and the argument about images. The screening space where the participants debate is also a place where they are flooded with images, wear images, and merge with them. To develop this point, I will conclude with a brief comparison between Dufresne's film and Ra'annan Alexandrowicz *The Viewing Booth* (2019).

Upon first viewing, the films appear quite similar. Like *Un Pays qui se tient sage* – and perhaps even more so than Dufresne's film – *The Viewing Booth* is a film about political

images and interrogates their powers of persuasion. At Temple University in Pennsylvania, where he was a PhD student, Alexandrowicz invited students with an interest in Israel (most of whom were Jewish, like himself) to watch news reportages about the Israel-Palestine conflict from various media sources. Twenty of these videos had been posted online by the Israeli Human Rights organization B'Tselem, which specializes in documenting human rights violations by the Israeli army in the occupied territories. Another twenty videos had been downloaded from the sites of the Israeli army and from what Alexandrowicz calls 'YouTube channels that are more on the conservative, right-wing side'. Watching these images in a viewing booth whilst wearing headphones, the students were invited to describe what they saw. Meanwhile, the director sat in an adjacent studio, looking at the same images and communicating with the students. Alexandrowicz quickly homed in on Maia Levy, a conservative, right-wing student. In a first interview, we see how she aligns the videos she watches with her political convictions. For example, when watching what she perceives to be anti-Israeli news reports, she perceives acts of manipulation and fabrication but overlooks, as Alexandrowicz later points out, that the Israeli soldiers in the footage are armed.

Six months after the first interview, Alexandrowicz brings Levy back into the viewing booth. This time, he makes her watch the previous interview, encouraging reflection on the way in which she first responded to the footage. As Alexandrowicz says when explaining to Levy why he brought her back, 'I am a filmmaker, and I have made films about this as well, about the occupation. When I listen to you, I understand that you are the viewer that I have been making those films for'. As a Jewish filmmaker, he hopes his images have the power to change perceptions, including those of very right-wing Jews. But Alexandrowicz's second interview does not produce the desired result: the conversation is respectful, and Levy occasionally recognizes that she framed the videos in a biased way, aligning them with her preconceptions, yet Levy and Alexandrowicz do not find any common ground. A tempting

conclusion might be that documentary images have limited powers of persuasion. But of course, this conclusion is too simplistic because Alexandrowicz did not scrap his project. Quite the contrary, he released the film, no doubt hoping that other viewers might be more receptive (and perhaps even that Levy, upon rewatching, could still change her mind).

There is much to say about *The Viewing Booth*, but I will limit myself to a few remarks in the relation to Dufresne's film. Both films offer sociological investigations centered around viewing experiences, with the ambition of thinking carefully about the role that images play in political processes. Furthermore, the *dispositifs* of the two films are not dissimilar: in both cases the directors design a studio space that allows for concentrated viewing in a black box environment. But what happens in these environments is very different. *The Viewing Booth* has – accurately, I think – been described as a ‘meta-documentary’.¹¹ It is a film about what it means to watch images, a film that loops back on itself, with Levy returning to the studio to watch and think about her first interview.¹² With Alexandrowicz himself playing a key role in the film, *The Viewing Booth* ticks many boxes that prompt us to reach for the prefix ‘meta-’. The separateness of the studio space allows for this self-reflexive dimension; and it is also this separateness – the unbridgeable distance – that haunts the film's key relationships between viewing booth and political reality, and between the two people in the studio.¹³ Significantly, the studio is not a shared space: Maya and the director sit in separate sections (with a door between them), Alexandrowicz wears headphones, he studies Maya's responses on a monitor, and they communicate through microphones. The most important questions therefore are: is it possible to overcome the distance between image and reality? Is it possible for Levy and Alexandrowicz to find common ground? Dufresne's film, on the other hand, is not ‘meta-’. Not only are Dufresne and his crew hardly shown in the film, despite all the philosophical and sociological arguments about the status and impact of images, *Un Pays qui se tient sage* does not aim for

self-reflexivity, it seeks to do politics. Dufresne's black box does not create distance, rather it helps us to see how the political field is being constituted. We see images washing over the participants, who interact with them, talk about them, connect them to events, compose events, and are moved by images and words. They reflect on images and are reflected by them; in that process the participants become humanimages. To borrow a key term from Edgar Morin's *Le Cinéma, ou l'homme imaginaire* (1956), in Dufresne's film, cinema appears 'anthropo-cosmomorphique' (188): the world and human beings shape one another through their participation in the medium. The film thereby shows us that 'tout tourne autour de l'image, parce que *l'image, ce n'est pas seulement la plaque tournante entre le réel et l'imaginaire, c'est l'acte constitutif radical et simultané du réel et de l'imaginaire*' (Morin 1978: xi, italics in original). Here Morin (and Dufresne, I argue) join up von Foerster and Hoel, as they all share the conviction that images, human beings, and their worlds shape each other – and that images are therefore composing the world. It is precisely this understanding of the image, and of media more generally, that the representational approach risks occluding. In other words, whereas Alexandrowicz's question of 'can images change our perceptions?' has little purchase outside the paradigm of the 'image-of' (it presupposes a distance that needs to be overcome), Dufresne's lack of interest in this question involves the recognition that images are always part of process of actualization, they are always differential.

It is perhaps unsurprising that a maverick, activist journalist, who is making a film that criticizes the president, would lean toward the idea of 'It is as I tell it'. An activist approach lends itself to this affirmative stance because politics often happens when people say to themselves 'it is as I tell it' and 'I am responsible for it'. For activist filmmakers, the idea of 're-presentation' (the task of shaping 'images-of') may therefore appear too removed from the world in which they know their films are deeply imbricated. And because the representational approach to images is so dominant in Western culture, the activist approach

is frequently seen as a move away from film altogether: filmmakers or critics either celebrating or lamenting that activist film isn't film at all. One example of this tendency is Frédéric Lordon's enthusiastic endorsement of François Ruffin's *Merci Patron!* (2016), a film that played a key role in the formation of the 'Nuit Debout' movement in France: 'Ça n'est pas un film, c'est un clairon, une possible levée en masse, un phénomène à l'état latent' (Lordon 2016: 28). However, a different way of thinking this relation between film and reality is to insist on activist films being films, and to add that this makes them no less real and political, because the distinction between aesthetics and politics, as Rancière argues, does not hold up to scrutiny. Therefore, rather than thinking the activist film as a film that explodes its way out of the re-presentational, we can think of it as a film that reveals something about images and films more generally: so-called representational images are always also differential action-images. As mentioned, Rancière argued that politics is not about representing a pre-existing 'will of the people', it is the event that produces the people, which therefore come to be in the act of protest. What I have argued here is that this 'production' depends on images, and that images therefore are what Peters called 'civilizational ordering mechanisms' (2015: 5). Dufresne's film is a way of assembling the world and of committing to a form of telling ('it is as I tell it'), while recognizing not only the inevitability of opposing views, but also their importance.

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¹ Von Foerster's argument deserves fuller treatment than can be given here. His sentence is also to be understood in relation to quantum mechanics, in which the observation of an object '*actualises*' the interrogated object (Stengers 2003: 38). Drawing on Karen Barad's *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (2007), I have – in an article about Chris Marker, jointly written with Daniele Rugo (Lübecker & Rugo 2023) – previously examined the implications of the quantum mechanical challenge to 'representationalism' for documentary film studies. Some of the methodological reflections underpinning the present article were therefore generated in a dialogue with Daniele, and they will be developed more fully in our forthcoming volume *Images of Unrest: Documentary Film and Political Violence*.

² I recently had the pleasure of being in conversation with Rancière, and I therefore mentioned my 'quantum mechanical' understanding of his theory of the people. Rancière did not show any interest in establishing such a link to the sciences. He cannot, of course, be expected to share the interests of all his interviewers.

³ In 'l'affaire de Tarnac' (2008), ten people – including Julien Coupat, co-founder of the journal *Tiqqun* – were arrested, accused of terrorism and sabotage against several TGV-lines by the French state. In the end, all charges had to be dropped, and for many the *affaire* became emblematic of a state refusing its citizens the right to protest.

⁴ This seems to be a very free variation on Pasolini's famous 1968 poem-letter ('The Italian Communist Party to the young!'), following a confrontation between students and police. In this text, Pasolini wrote: 'When yesterday at Valle Giulia/ you came to blows/with the policemen/I sympathized with the policemen!/Because the policemen are the children of the poor/They come from the suburbs, rural or urban.' And 'At Valle Giulia, yesterday,/there was a fragment of class struggle:/and you, friends (although in the right) were the rich ones,/while the policemen (who were in the wrong) were the poor ones.'

⁵ Weber's text is more precise: 'the state is the form of human community that (successfully) lays claim to the *monopoly of legitimate physical violence* within a particular territory' (33, emphasis in

original).

⁶ ‘L’Affaire Benalla’ (more accurately known as ‘Les Affaires Macron-Benalla’) was a scandal that kept giving. After the Contrescarpe incident, Benalla was eventually fired. However, several months later it turned out that he had not been asked to hand in his diplomatic passport, but had in fact been meeting with African leaders, such as the president of Chad, on behalf of the French. Further investigations uncovered that, during his time at the Élysée, Benalla had established business relations with Russian oligarchs, at least one of which believed to have ties to the Russian mafia. See also David Dufresne’s remarks on the affair in the collective volume *Police* by Amal Bentounsi, Antonin Bernanos, Julien Coupat, David Dufresne, Eric Hazan and Frédéric Lordon, Paris: La fabrique, 2020, p. 12.

⁷ I borrow the word ‘gang’ from a French policeman. After another infamous incident of police violence, the 2017 rape of a young man called Théo Luhaka by a police officer, ‘un policier livrait au *Parisien* cet aveu tranquille: “nous appartenons à un gang, quoiqu’il arrive nous sommes solidaires”’ (comité invisible: *Maintenant*, Paris: La fabrique, 2017, p. 115).

⁸ Chemillier-Gendreau associates the idea of dissensus with Machiavelli’s notion of *tumult*, but it can also be linked to Rancière’s writings on dissensus and democracy. Rancière is a logical point of reference here, even if he is not mentioned explicitly in the film, some participants seem to draw on his work. For Rancière, ‘Democracy is not a system of government, but the always conflictual and disruptive manifestation of the principle of equality’. Therefore ‘there is no such thing as a democratic state’, democracy is tumult or dissensus. See “‘Don’t they represent us?’: A Conversation between Jacques Rancière and Ernesto Laclau” (online).

⁹ On scale-variations see also Martine Beugnet (2022).

¹⁰ In *The People is not an Image*, Snowden writes the following about the formative powers of videos during the Arab spring: ‘These videos, then, do not “document” or “describe” the new forms of community and collectivity that began to emerge in the Arab world in 2010-11 [...]. They simply *are* those forms of community and collectivity in action, and in the process of being enacted, and of

refusing those strategies that would enable their capture by a regime of *representation*' (93, emphases in the original).

¹¹ The term 'meta-documentary' appears in the announcement of a workshop on 'Contested Forms. A Workshop on Documentary, Trust and Conflict', organized by Laliv Melamed and Vinzenz Hediger at the University of Frankfurt 2022. See <https://contrust.uni-frankfurt.de/en/event/contested-forms-a-workshop-on-documentary-trust-and-conflict-2/>.

¹² In making part of a film, and then bringing the participants (himself and Levy) together to watch and discuss again, Alexandrowicz is of course borrowing from Edgar Morin and Jean Rouch's *Chronique d'un été* (1961). Morin and Rouch also presented their film as a failure; 'it did not bring the participants closer', Morin regretfully observed.

¹³ Watching Alexandrowicz's film today, only four years after its initial release (but in the wake of the many recent violent events in the Middle East) what seems to be missing from *The Viewing Booth* is a reflection on what the film understands to be 'a moderate Jewish' position: for instance, which period do the images that Levy watches relate to? Why? Despite its self-reflexivity, and even though he appears all the way through, Alexandrowicz is arguably much less present in his film (and much less explicitly political) than Dufresne is in his. In this sense, the meta-level not only invites an interesting and thought-provoking ethical reflection on images and cultural practices, but we may also feel that this meta-level allows Alexandrowicz to hide his politics behind ethics.