

Algorithms, auto-média ecosystems and yellow vest co-design. Analysis of the collective: *L'Histoire des Gilets Jaunes par nous* AKA *The Story of the Yellow Vests by us.*

1. Virtual or real movement?
2. Aesthetic treatment of videos, source and property use.
3. Working method of the collective.
4. Whose point of view does the narrative take?
5. Literary sources, politics of participation and co-design ?
6. Who are the protagonists of the story?
7. The yellow vest on the international stage?
8. Why the use of images from *The Matrix*?
9. What next?

1. VIRTUAL OR REAL MOVEMENT?

The yellow vest movement begins on the Facebook platform with 1500 groups structured geographically by area (groups of communes and regions) followed by the qualifier "en colère" (*Colère 46; La France en Colère*). Like the Arab Spring in 2011, the social movement of the Yellow Vests exploded due to virtual coordination.

Taking the street is the transition from the virtual to the real. This transition is the creation of a community of struggle.¹

Today, the challenge of digital platforms is to anticipate the social movement and freeze it before it gains momentum. Our movements can be channeled and kept in a virtual state, in the realm of social networks, guarded by administrators in the icy waters of algorithms.²

Algorithms have an ambivalent role with regard to the social movement. Paradoxically, it is thanks to the proximity algorithm on Facebook that the yellow vest groups formed on a local basis. In November 2019 the Iranian state voluntarily cut off the internet to better control the insurgent uprising in 100 towns and villages. However, a well worked and regulated algorithm could be much more effective than a generalized internet cut because of its discretion and its capacity to gradually weaken the movement through the shadow banning technique.

Virtual activism is symptomatic of our participation in electoral politics, where we make ourselves believe that voting, liking and clicking are political acts.

The virtual is a tool that can take us away from our ability to act on the real, as well as enable us to act in a more coordinated and strategic way.

¹ <https://seumrevolution.noblogs.org/>

² Ibis

Our political project is to realise a position of contention in order to improve our material living conditions. We are fighting to change the conditions of existence of all and we will only succeed if we act within and against existence.

2. AESTHETIC TREATMENT OF VIDEOS, SOURCES AND USAGE PROPERTIES.

The archived images are mainly from Youtube and Facebook video streams. These are cut re-shared videos that have been appropriated and disseminated by the movement. In the final version, we will reference all the videographers in order of appearance, and attempt to highlight those whose images come up several times. To mention just one here, we can mention Julien Rogue who filmed a magnificent exchange at the Manosque roundabout.

"I'm telling you now, today we stand our ground, no matter the cost, the people of the roundabout have voted... this isn't my ego talking... today, we stand our ground."³

Digital tools are easily appropriated. The abundance of video representations proliferate in the networks of personal Facebook pages. The algorithm promotes the video of such a person because they are linked to another network node, a group (sports club; help community group; alumni groups...). The videos reach people with whom we already have social links or with whom we are renewing them.

What is striking when you look at the videos of yellow vests before the movement, is that they are already filming their lives, their families, work, weekends, village parties... Now they specialise, appear with a home-made yellow logo, join broadcasting collectives and claim to be "auto media" (citizen journalists). In making this film we witnessed the transformation of their interest for documenting the movement as well as the transformation of their individual lives. We thought of making a film centered on this subject, but we preferred to de-individualise the videographers and acknowledge their videos as common properties, part of a system of collective representation.

In addition to the archives retrieved directly from social networks, other images were collected via calls for contributions on social networks, by paper flyers, mailing lists and direct contact in protests.

We used images from regional media, images from popular culture, film fragments (*Asterix; Star Wars; La classe operaia va in paradiso; X-men; Orange is the new black...*). Two videos were made by re-appropriating images of The use of prison escape movie scenes addresses the problem of the lack of images from inside prisons, but also helps to create drama with cinematic action images.

³ Julien Rogue, REPORTAGE #yellowvests - Clashes with police on the A51 roundabout (7/01/2019)

Humans are not automatons. Images are not just a currency that makes platforms profitable, images create social links. The archive videos of the yellow vests are nodes of "conservation and circulation"⁴, of socialisation to revolutionary rupture.

Many people have gone to prison because of the release of incriminating videos. In allowing police investigators to identify individual protestors, the self-monitoring of the movement on digital platforms creates the conditions for the individualisation required for state repression.

Paradoxically, it is also thanks to the dissemination of videos that protest practices are reproduced elsewhere in the country and foreign social movements.

We have to realise that videos are weapons, and the use of any weapon must be thought about critically and collectively.

The value of an image is to be re-shared. The proliferation of videos is accompanied by continuous compression: the more a video is shared, the more it loses quality. Hito Steyerl⁵ argues that the poorer the quality of an image, the more political it is, because the reduction in size (in megabytes) allows the video to be distributed more widely and quickly.⁶

We wanted to share the practice of blurring as an inseparable practice of a film that thinks of itself as part of the movement. We blurred the people who seem to be filmed without their knowledge, which changes the qualitative relationship of the image all the more, compressing and blurring. The images are aesthetically representative of a movement that extends and defends itself.

3. WORKING METHOD OF THE COLLECTIVE.

The videos were archived, day by day, in 365 different folders, from 17 November 2018 to 17 November 2019. They were also sorted geographically by roundabout occupation and high-school blockades (over 400 locations) and thematically (union convergence; legal defense; music videos... hundreds of very random categories).

To do this, we searched "Gilets jaunes + *name of department*" on the internet, consulted local and regional newspapers, noted all the blockade points in the departments. Then we searched all the names of blockades with other

⁴ André Gunthert, *The Shared Image: Digital Photography* (2015)

⁵ <https://vimeo.com/88484604>

⁶ Hito Steyerl, *In Defense of the Poor Image*, Issue #10, November (2009)

<https://www.e-flux.com/journal/10/61362/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/>

"The poor image is a copy in motion. Its quality is bad, its resolution substandard. As it accelerates, it deteriorates. It is a ghost of an image, a preview, a thumbnail, an errant idea, an itinerant image distributed for free, squeezed through slow digital connections, compressed, reproduced, ripped, remixed, as well as copied and pasted into other channels of distribution."

keywords (e.g. *assembly; roundabout; demonstration; eviction; occupation camp*; etc) in the search engines of Youtube, Facebook and Twitter. We then refined the searches by date and duration to diversify our findings. On Facebook we can find personal accounts affiliated to local organisation groups, a goldmine of authentic yellow vest archives. These are downloaded, retitled and archived in the folders.⁷

At the start, we wanted to create a non-linear and interactive meta-narrative: with 2000 different story starting points.⁸ We wanted to show the diversity of the stories, but above all we wanted to study the junction points between different subjective narratives. To create an interactive map where we navigate the movement and discover its multiple components, forms and trajectories of yellow vests groups that intersect at strategic moments in regional demonstrations, petrol refinery blockades or assembly meetings.

In writing the narrative, whether linear or not, one has to make choices and the choices depend on the concepts one wishes to articulate. In the end, these choices are political choices which implicate the filmmakers in contributing to the trajectory of the discourse. We finally focused on a linear feature film format, while maintaining the intention to show the transformative micro-political junctions and forms of the movement.

In the process of making the film, there are times when the narrative voice and story structure are worked on separately from the archiving work. But when it comes to editing, issues of rhythm and fluidity undo the logic we had scripted for ourselves, and the editing creates new associations of ideas. You have to constantly rewrite the story to adapt to the archives and find new archives to catch up with the writing process.

We invite ourselves in the homes of yellow vests and screen the film in its "non-definitive version"⁹. We asked them to tell us how they feel about the treatment of the sequences: that day, how did you feel, what was your relationship to the movement, what were the stakes, the priorities? Do the analyses seem right to you? How would you modify them?

4. WHOSE POINT OF VIEW DOES THE NARRATIVE TAKE?

In the beginning, our intention was to share a revolutionary 2018/2019 experience to revolutionary internationals from all countries.

⁷ <https://www.facebook.com/Lesrondspointsdesgiletsjaunes/> "This page is intended to document all the yellow vests roundabouts, I stop at as many as I can on the GJ roundabouts."

⁸ *Call for Projects: The 2001 Stories of the Yellow Vests* (2021)
<https://yellowveststories.noblogs.org/post/2021/11/25/appele-a-projet-les-histoires-des-gilets-jaunes/>

⁹ The pilot film is freely available on Facebook to share in all groups and pages.
<https://www.facebook.com/ToulouseEnLuttes/videos/762948308015164>

We watched Patricio Guzmàn's amazing trilogy *La Bataille de Chile* (1975; 1977 and 1979)¹⁰ and were inspired. We realised that the chronological form applied perfectly to the yellow vests. Every day, the movement risks losing steam as a result of internal and external pressures, and is thus threatened by division. We never have enough perspective on yesterday, and we are constantly apprehensive about tomorrow.

For us, to be a yellow vest is to identify with the changing balance of power, whether it is in our favour or that of the authorities. To be a part of the movement is to defend the movement and participate in extending it. It is this point of view that we think we have interpreted in the writing of the narrative.

Many activists with experience of several social movements gave us their point of view and provided perspective, but the collective that synthesized the writings and edited the film only have the yellow vests movement as a social and revolutionary life experience.

5. LITERARY SOURCES, PARTICIPATION AND CO-DESIGN?

We borrowed several ideas from the book *La révolte des gilets jaunes : histoire d'une lutte de classes*. (2020) by the Collectif Aouh Aouh¹¹

The analysis of the labour element of the movement during the January 2019 factory strikes led to a reflection on the pragmatism of economic blockades: "in our experiences of blockading supermarkets, we discover: we are not only attacking the state and capitalism, but also the employees who depend on their work. We are discovering that in the harm we are doing to the economy, we are putting our own living conditions at risk."¹² To escape from this blackmail is to accept putting our lives in danger, to destroy the means of production and to jump into the unknown, "But will we dare?"¹³

Other literary sources have also helped us understand and analyse the movement, including Mirasol, *Soulèvement*. (2020). "The social order is precarious, the states are bunkering down, the social crisis is deepening. What is the state of the revolution? The book is divided into three parts. The first part is on the yellow vest uprising. The second part talks about the crisis of democracies in the age of algorithms, about the impasse of the aspiration to become the state. But then, what to do? Well, the revolution, of course! To

¹⁰ https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/La_Bataille_du_Chili

¹¹ The 4th cover reads: "Between November 2018 and spring 2019... After participating in the struggle and compiling numerous local press articles, the Ahou ahou ahou collective delivers a history of this unusual movement. From blockades to riots, from roundabout occupations to popular assemblies, from calls for unity with the police to the fight against repression... While each sequence of struggle seemed to erase the previous one, we retrace the sequence here. What does the revolt of yellow vests tell us about the course of the class struggle, as it has arisen and remained outside the framework of the classic political forces?"

¹² Quotes from the film *The Story of the Yellow Vests by Us paraphrased* sentences from the book of *La révolte des gilets jaunes : histoire d'une lutte de classes*. (2020)

¹³ Quotes from the film *The Story of the Yellow Vests by Us*

finally change life, to make it beautiful, to live well. But how? Part 3 proposes to take this question seriously, to talk about insurrection, the end of capitalism."¹⁴

<https://octa.zone/>

Analyses of the movement between 16 March 2019 and 17 November 2019.¹⁵

Robert Bibeau, Khider Mesloub, *Autopsie du mouvement gilets jaunes* (2019). Analysis of the manipulation by the state of the movement's anti-tax position to interpret it as a demand for a decrease in public services.

Maxime Peillon, *Cœur de boxeur*, (2019) the book helped us understand general realities about the movement as well as truths about Christophe Dettinger's life.

Je ne pensais pas prendre du ferme, (2021) Eleven stories of incarcerated yellow vests collected by Pierre E. Et Guérinet et Pierre Bonneau.

Many yellow vests have indirectly participated in the design of the film and most without knowing it. The work of source transparency will be rigorously pursued by the collective in the coming months. We cannot say that it is participative or democratic. But we can say that the film is self-organised by activists who do not care about the notion of copyright, do not legitimise institutions or the state or platforms as guarantors of material or virtual property.

This is why we have chosen to sign the film by the "Collectif de réalisation L'HISTOIRE DES GILETS JAUNES PAR NOUS", AKA "THE STORY OF THE YELLOW VESTS BY US" followed by the fictitious pseudonyms of the twenty or so participants in alphabetical order.

6. WHO ARE THE PROTAGONISTS OF THE STORY?

We don't like the traditional documentary narrative scheme, where an individualised protagonist faces problems and transforms themselves through the movement. In a historical vision, we minimise ourselves as individuals. For us, the movement is the protagonist and if individuals are mentioned it is only in order to explain micro-political realities of the movement that are only explicable with concrete examples.

The arrest of Eric Drouet is, for example, a relevant event to explain how the state individualises repression symbolically through one individual; the repression snowballs and paralyses the revolutionary discourse. The other vloggers submit to the reproduction of a discourse which calls for calm, pacifism and sometimes even the stopping of demonstrations and blockades, leading to dissociation and division.

¹⁴ <https://seumrevolution.noblogs.org/>

¹⁵ <https://octa.zone/?s=gilets+yellow+>

The character of Benjamin Cauchy has made more appearances than the president, prime minister and minister of interior, "33 appearances on BFMTV alone!" This character was preventively created by the media-capitalist machine to serve as a political recuperator. Cauchy is a far-right politician, a true caricature of populism. The media tries to infiltrate this kind of vermin into our movements, characters who help to channel revolutionary energy into the partypolitical democratic electoral process.¹⁶

Christophe Dettinger is the character in the film with the most screen-time. The events that structure his story allow us to talk about subjects including: class injustice in the context of the execution of detention sentences; the illegality of collective organisation to pay legal fines¹⁷; the hierarchy of speech in a democracy; live video as a technical means of disseminating authentic speech; strength and honour as a value of the movement; and the question of the legitimacy of fighting back. It is on this last theme that Christophe is portrayed qualitatively as a hero.

"We have a symbolic figure who can represent and defend us in the face of the conflict of interest between the population and the ruling class. Throughout the country, the conditions are right for everyone to feel that the degree of violence with which we defend ourselves can be legitimately proportional to that which we are subject to."

In an interview Macron answers a question about the video Christophe published: "The boxer, the video he makes before surrendering, he was briefed by a far-left lawyer. You can see that! This guy, he doesn't have the words of a gypsy. He doesn't have the words of a gypsy boxer."¹⁸

Macron's words allege a conspiracy, pointing to an outside influence of a fictional far left lawyer, yet these words are his own, and when you hear them it is obvious that they are his authentic words. The only influence was his wife who was filming the scene.¹⁹

The words "gypsy boxer" demonstrate a class and race prejudice that attempts to reduce Dettinger's expression to those of "people who are nothing", to a brute avatar of violence. Macron defends that speech must be hierarchical, speech is legitimate if the person is democratically elected or if they are rich.²⁰

"Dettinger's words, however, went straight to the heart of many yellow vests. Thousands of letters of support are sent to his family, and the family answers all the letters. All the messages end with the words 'strength and honour'.²¹

¹⁶ The irresistible media rise of Benjamin Cauchy by Jean Pérès, Thursday 20 December 2018 <https://www.acrimed.org/L-irresistible-ascension-mediatique-de-Benjamin#nb11>

¹⁷<https://france3-regions.francetvinfo.fr/bretagne/cotes-d-armor/gilets-jaunes-enquet-e-ouverte-contre-cagnotte-soutien-1627479.html>

¹⁸ Maxime Peillon, *Cœur de boxeur* (2019), relating a quote from president Macron.

¹⁹ Maxime Peillon, *Cœur de boxeur* (2019)

²⁰https://www.liberation.fr/debats/2019/02/13/gilets-jaunes-la-parole-declassee-de-chris-tophe-dettinger_1708945/

²¹ Quotes from the film *The Story of the Yellow Vests by Us*

7. THE YELLOW VESTS ON THE INTERNATIONAL STAGE?

The first international sequence corresponds to the dates 17 November 2018 to January 2019. "While Burkina Faso, Sudan and Zimbabwe demonstrate against the cost of fuel without the yellow vest symbol, in Iraq a new wave of anti-corruption protests reappropriate the yellow vest symbol to reignite their struggle." The narrative lists about 15 countries that are repurposing the vest. Then, "In Egypt, customs officials seize all yellow waistcoats entering the country and ban their sale. In Tunisia, a man is arrested for possession of 50,000 yellow waistcoats."²² "As with the Arab Spring in 2011, protests are breaking out in clusters. Activists are imitating each other. They are reacting to overlapping societal issues around the world. To counter the potential global uprising, the international media present the vest as an anti-environmentalist, fascist symbol. They conflate cause and reason, the cause may be an eco-tax on fuel, but that's just the final straw, the real reason for the movement is social injustice, and this one is indeed global."²³

The second international sequence refers to the struggle in Algeria in February 2019. "Macron supports Bouteflika, the Algerians support the yellow vests"²⁴ . "We learn that repression is an economy, the weapons used against us are sold abroad and even to formerly colonised countries. Security capitalism hegemonises imperialist and financial interests, the repression of struggles is part of a global security business."²⁵

The third international sequence is June to October 2019. The film exposes the uprisings chronologically, up to the 15th November 2019 in Iran. We won't talk about Colombia, which rises on 19 November 2019 because it's after the end of the film, which stops on 17 November 2019 on the anniversary of the GJs.

When we talk about Hong Kong protests in June 2019 it is to talk about the practices of struggle and the transfer of militant practices. Apart from Hong Kong, the majority of the struggles mentioned are in resistance to declining purchasing power and political corruption, so these are clearly proletarian uprisings that are rising up against neoliberalism and the consequences it has on their lives. But this is not explicitly stated in the film.

It is true that international images are removed from their particular local meaning. There is never a single explanatory thread, but the same causes can produce the same effects. During the movement, we didn't have time to understand the difference between the uprising in Lebanon, Guinea or Catalonia... we don't have time to understand the international uprisings in their singularities but we do have time to feel an energy.

²² https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/D%C3%A9roulement_du_mouvement_des_Gilets_jaunes

²³ Quotes from the film *The Story of the Yellow Vests by Us*

²⁴ Sign seen in Algiers protest in February 2019

²⁵ ibis

The wake of a movement is a beginning, a breach that can open the way. How many times have we heard the phrase, "when it gets serious, I will join in". This sentence applies. A social movement is a center of attraction, like a magnet or a blackhole, "everyone talks about it, to be in it or to fear it."²⁶

8. WHY IS THE USE OF IMAGES FROM THE MATRIX ?

The film opens with the closing lines of *The Matrix* (1999): "I know you're here, I know you're afraid, you're afraid of us, you're afraid of change. I don't know the future. I'm not here to tell you how it will end. I came here to tell you how it begins..."

The film was supposed to be released at the same time as *Matrix 4*, and we wanted to ride the popularity of the film by hijacking posters and producing "memes". Making Trinity's image an artistic leitmotif is a simple marketing choice that distinguishes the film from the dozen other yellow vest films whose posters all look the same.

The Matrix films may arouse anti-establishment sentiments, but a millennial anti-capitalist revolution did not come from the 1999 version of *The Matrix*, and has even less of a chance with the *Matrix Resurrections* (2021). The 2021 version carries a commercial and nihilistic critique of the human condition: the film shows the capacity of people to give up in the face of the industrial capitalist machine. To caricature we could say that the moral of the story is that: revolution is not possible, we are left with reformism, compromise, virtuality and abandonment...

But to think that it is our film about the yellow vests that will awaken the masses is even more delusional. We defend the idea that it is only for the revolutionary movement to continue its trajectory and to go further and further, to change the course of history.

"We're going to stop this film and you're going to see a world where the motion never stops".²⁷

Throughout the film, the identity of the narrative voice carries ambiguities. Sometimes we speak of "les" (the) yellow vests and at other times we use "on" (one). "On" is third person singular but typically includes the speaker as a part of the subject. Everyone can be found in an "on", in French the indefiniteness of the pronoun reinforces the opacity and diversity of the individuals in a whole, in a block that does not divide itself and advances masked behind umbrellas.

The sentence at the end of *Matrix* (1999), which addresses "you", we rephrased to "us", "what we do with it will depend on us (nous)". At the end of the film we now address the spectator as a "we" (nous) with whom we have shared a collective experience of identification.

²⁶ <https://seumrevolution.noblogs.org/>

²⁷ Quotes from the film *The Story of the Yellow Vests by Us*

It's not the fact we share the same conditions of existence that makes us proletarians, but it's being in struggle against our conditions of existence. We must not separate the movement from its organisation. By voice the "nous" (we and us) constitutes itself as an organised revolutionary subject.

9. NOW WHAT?

We show the film in squats, community bars, pirate cinemas etc. In Toulouse, we gathered 200 people for a screening as part of a support evening for incarcerated yellow vests. We have organised screenings in Minerve, Beziers, Pezenas, Montpellier, Rennes, St George de Lucenson, Marciac le Vallon...

On a whim we published the film on the Facebook video host on the page *Toulouse en lutte*²⁸ after the results of the second round of the presidential elections. We counted 14,000 virtual views. It was a form of communication that helped get the word out about the project and allowed us to collect larger contributions.

It should be noted, however, that it is rare for an Internet viewer to respond to our call for contributions²⁹ on the blog. If we receive contributions by email and voice messages on digital platforms, it is always thanks to people we meet on the way. This proves that it is not the Facebook algorithm, but the community of struggle that we are building that guides the project.

Until the end of summer 2022, we will collect the summaries of the debates and adjust the script to make the final recordings of all the voice-overs, then we will translate the voice-overs into Spanish and English. Make a DVD or a USB key... organise a screening tour and post the film on the internet, on big platforms or a self-managed autonomous platform?

Collectif de Réalisation

L'HISTOIRE DES GILETS JAUNES par nous

AKA The Story of the Yellow Vests by us.

@gj_par_nous (Twitter)

yellowveststories.noblogs.org

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²⁸ <https://www.facebook.com/ToulouseEnLuttes/>

²⁹ <https://yellowveststories.noblogs.org/post/2021/11/22/liste-besoin-archive-photo-video-join-our-writing-collective-by-contributing-ideas-for-edits-and-new-anecdotes.>