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Audrey Evrard, *Precarious Sociality, Ethics and Politics: French Documentary Cinema in the Early Twenty-First Century*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2022. 298 pp. Halftones, notes, bibliography, filmography, and index. \$88.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9-78-1786838421.

Review by Joseph Mai, Clemson University.

The past several years have seen a spate of excellent books on French-language documentary cinema. [1] Audrey Evrard's *Precarious Sociality, Ethics and Politics: French Documentary Cinema in the Early Twenty-First Century* is an important addition to this list, expanding our knowledge of contemporary documentary films and elaborating a groundbreaking perspective through which to view them.

Evrard is well-versed in sociological and psychological analyses of contemporary capitalism: its shape-shifting exploitation of outsourcing and vulnerable labor, its erosion of organized labor rights and organization, as well as our growing understanding of the psychological and emotional damage of management practices and social isolation. Evrard is also attuned to the “new political desires” (p. 8), tactics, and visibilities (e.g., *la nuit debout* or *les gilets jaunes*) that arise from this context. Much of her dissection of precariousness comes through detailed readings of an impressive corpus of films. The filmography cites nearly 100 titles, ranging from works with minimal budgets to aesthetically complex works made by award-winning *auteurs*. I hope it is not too pedestrian to point out that for the researcher in French cinema this painstakingly curated filmography is already a valuable tool, and I have discovered several thought-provoking films through this alone. At the same time, Evrard avoids getting bogged down by organizing each chapter around in-depth analyses of a restricted number of rich works.

*Precarious Sociality* focuses on the relations between subject, filmmaker, and viewer, beginning with a series of inquiries about how precarity affects us whether we witness it in the street or in a film: “Where do we stand in (relation to) this ‘crazy society’? The question remains the same whether we are in front of [the] camera or looking at the screen” (p. 4). Evrard thus frames this cinema as ethical, “reasserting responsibility and the desire to be in community with another being as the core engine of a political and moral commitment to justice, recognition and radical equality” (p. 6). By attending creatively and directly to the needs, affects, voices, desires, and (political) actions of the precarious these filmmakers change the way viewers perceive the social world. Following an observation of Jacques Rancière, Evrard lays claim to the cinema as a way of changing the “cartography of the perceptible,” putting the viewer into an embodied and ethical relation to images that show experiences in new ways (p. 15).

This framework structures a fresh and productive rethinking of the politics of documentary film. For Evrard, the radicality of contemporary documentary “stems from its dis-identification from politics to embrace political differentiation, a vital step towards ‘new possibilities of collective enunciation’” (p. 15). Contemporary documentary unties the knots of politics to refasten them in a different way. It is unbound, for example, from the figures of “collective solidarity as they existed in the past” (p. 16). I understand this to refer at least in part to teleological narratives of working-class heroism and (mostly) failure, which can be rigid, weighed down in melancholy or nostalgia, and distracting from “new possibilities” and political desires. Evrard focuses on how contemporary filmmakers condemn social wrongs of the contemporary world while seeking out dynamic images reflecting new potential solidarities.

Chapter 1 provides an example of this shift in perspective with relation to the telling of working-class history. Take for example Michelle Perrot’s essay on *Les vies ouvrières* in Pierre Nora’s *Lieux de mémoire*, which opens with the pessimistic tone I have mentioned: “...dans le paysage de la France d’aujourd’hui, le monde ouvrier s’efface sans laisser beaucoup de traces et sans qu’on cherche tellement à les conserver.”[2] In this chapter, entitled “the vanishing factory,” Evrard revises this sense of loss by revisiting the trope of the closed factory. The films analyzed here do look back; but, by engaging with a “reflective” use of nostalgia borrowed from Svetlana Boym, Evrard emphasizes a resistant use of this feeling (pp. 26–27). Her close analysis of Luc Decaster’s *Rêves d’usine* shows how the film breaks with teleological history to approach a “spectral” or haunting temporality associated with a Derridean notion of justice (p. 34). Marcel Trillat’s *Silence dans la vallée* criticizes globalization and asserts local knowledge in the Meuse valley, despite his acknowledgement of the dissolution of a social bond constructed (rather paternalistically) around the factory space. Jérémy Gravayat’s *Les hommes debout* mixes archive, documentary, and fictional representations in the space of an abandoned factory in Lyon’s Gerland neighborhood, revisited by a former worker, but also inhabited in the present by a young migrant and a homeless man. In these films, the factory does not come to us only through hazy memories of a working-class history which ends with the *événement-fermeture*; they are dynamic spaces of justice and new solidarities.

Chapter two examines the contribution of documentary filmmakers to a contemporary political theatricality. The chapter is organized around ship-building and cleaning and showcases Evrard’s ability to unpack the always mutating forms of exploitation of contemporary capitalism through close readings. The shipyard is what Evrard calls a “metonymic space,” contiguous to and “imbricated in the cargo economy and the dismemberment of collective solidarities” (p. 73). Filmmakers like Trillat, Jean-Marc Moutout, and Sabrina Malek and Arnaud Soulier enter the shipyard, sometimes clandestinely, to detail the movement of shipbuilding overseas, the exploitation of vulnerable migrant workers, the pervasive use of outsourcing, the creation of different worker “classes” (with different color-coded uniforms), and many other wrongs. The chapter borrows from Michel de Certeau a useful distinction between “strategies,” which assume a “subject with will and power” and the “tactics” of the “non-powerful” forced to adapt (pp. 80–81). Traditional unions have strategies, whereas the precarious shipyard workers rely on a tactical pragmatism. In these darker works, despite the effect of giving voice, tactics of resistance have limited effect. They are somewhat more successful in the cleaning industry films, where Evrard turns to work most often completed by women, women of color, and migrant workers, socially invisible. Evrard examines three films that emphasize the creative actions of cleaning women and effectively become “complicit with [their] active politics that consists of seizing visibility (*mise en visibilité*)” (p. 88).

The filmmakers discussed in chapter three (Laurent Hasse, Régis Sauder, and Thomas Faverjon) have a personal attachment to the industrial spaces they film, and thus their films explore “familial, regional, and cinematic filiations” (p. 94). Sauder’s *Retour à Forsbach*, inspired by Didier Eribon’s *Retour à Reims*, brings Sauder back to his hometown in Eastern France, where he explores personal and collective memory, economic depression, changing demographics and architecture, the stress between those who stay and those who leave, and other social tensions. The film mingles Sauder’s personal memory with collective history, past with present, giving an image of a “we” through an “I” (p. 96). The chapter also contains a richly detailed reading of Faverjon’s *Fils de Lip*. As Evrard explains, the often-told Lip story—one of the “victories” of labor yore—is nearly always concentrated on the successful early phase of the labor action. Evrard helpfully unpacks the various militant “circles” involved in the actions to show how these recountings emphasize male “historical figures,” outside activists, and a “myth” of self-management. In his return, Faverjon discovers a different story: his mother’s activism during the strikes, the exclusion of women’s voices, and a later, less successful stage of action in 1976. Evrard also unpacks how, unable to tell the story through traditional interviews, Faverjon utilizes montage, split-screen technique, the discovery of his mother’s personal “archive,” and other cinematic techniques to cut through the official narrative. Evrard suggestively contrasts innovative telling of a woman activist’s story to previous figures of “in subordinate women,” such as in Hervé Le Roux’s well-known 1996 documentary *Reprise* (p. 130).

Chapter four draws from care ethics as a perspective on ordinary workplace injustices, inspired by a tradition of thinking about care running from Carole Gilligan through Joan Tronto and, in the French context, Sandra Laugier and Pascale Molinier. Evrard’s readings of the unique films of Sophie Bruneau (with Marc-Antoine Roudil), in collaboration with the consultants of the “Health and Work” group, are, for me, some of the most perceptive in this book. Evrard begins with the importance of work to individual identity and well-being, especially in the French context, only to explore, through Bruneau’s work, the corrosive, even humiliating effects of ordinary abuses. In *Ils ne mouraient pas tous mais tous étaient frappés* (2005), which takes its title from a book by one of the doctors, Marie Pézé, Bruneau films the consultation room, her *dispositif* bringing the viewer directly into the clients’ articulations of everyday suffering caused by inappropriate work tasks, bullying, disrespect, and managerial practices. Evrard shows how Bruneau’s subtle but very creative shifts in *mise-en-scène* can emphasize either the subject’s articulation of vulnerability or her political assertions, as in Bruneau’s short *Mon diplôme, c’est mon corps*, bridging the gap from care to politics.

The final chapter brings together films by the veteran Denis Gheerbrant, Raymond Depardon’s well-known works on rural France, and Agnès Varda and JR’s very well-known *Visages, villages*. This chapter takes a geographical approach, revisiting France outside of Paris. Evrard evokes Derrida’s work on friendship and Deleuze’s on time to describe an ethical and deterritorialized standpoint in these filmmakers. The point of this ethics is to provide hospitality for the other, to touch upon the other in her or his spatial and temporal existence, in order to perceive new possible social solidarities. Depardon expresses this through the concept of *errance*: in various films, Depardon wanders through the creases of the French territory, creating friendships, returning year after year to revisit rural communities, or providing hospitality in his camper, with Claudine Nougarat to record voices and sounds of his interlocutors. In discussing how Depardon draws near these people in their own spaces, Evrard gives a sound description of the original way he and Nougarat use framing, portraiture, sound, and movement. Evrard’s reading

of Varda and JR's *Visages, Villages* covers similar ideas of hospitality, difference, and voice. For Varda and JR, the young male street artist and the aging female filmmaker, differentiability and solidarity spread in every direction, toward the people they meet on the road, but also between the two of them, through their friendship and collaboration.

In these chapter descriptions, I have tried to convey Evrard's wide theoretical palette coupled with her related concern for the ethics of care and difference. Evrard avoids mashing these films and the precarity they represent into a predetermined narrative of political loss or social fragmentation. Her perspective is not fragmented, but kaleidoscopic, a real "approach" (to take a title from Depardon), *drawing nearer* to the many facets and entry points of a social phenomenon without attempting to over-define it. Instead, Evrard looks elsewhere, following the filmmakers along their ethical path toward the invisible sufferings—but also the interconnections, and the political desires and tactics—of those experiencing precarity, isolation, or marginalization. With its breadth of scope, its original perspective, its ethical attentiveness, and its fine readings of film, *Precarious Sociality* is an important articulation of the radical project of many documentary filmmakers today: to renew and empower social documentary for a more engaged contemporary audience.

## NOTES

[1] These works have explored the ethics of documentary [Sarah Cooper, *Selfless Cinema? Ethics and French Documentary* (London: Legenda, 2006)], contemporary creative documentary [Alison J. Murray Levine, *Vivre Ici: Space, Place, and Experience in Contemporary French Documentary* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2018)], the development of social documentary from the twenties to the sixties [Steven Ungar, *Social Documentary in France from the Silent Era to the New Wave* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018)], the ethics of care [Grace An and Catherine Witt, *Ethics of care in Documentary Filmmaking since 1968*, special issue of *French Screen Studies* 22.1(2022)], and monographs on a number of individual filmmakers. This is of course an incomplete list of works and does not include numerous articles and relevant books on non-documentary social cinema.

[2] Michelle Perrot, "Les vies ouvrières," in Pierre Nora ed., *Les Lieux de mémoire*, 3 vols (Paris: Quarto Gallimard, 1997), III, 3937.

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