We (*Nous*) from France: Conserving “the existence of ordinary lives”

David Walsh
10 July 2022

Alice Diop’s *We* (*Nous*), a French documentary, loosely follows a suburban train line in and around Paris, drawing out the lives of some of the mostly working class men and women encountered along the way. In addition to that, Diop brings in a deer-hunting party among the elite, a ceremony honoring Louis XVI (executed in 1793), memories of and thoughts about her mother and father (immigrants from Senegal) and other features of contemporary French life.

There are intriguing sequences. A worker from Mali, who lives in his beat-up truck, speaks by cellphone to his mother at home, even while he continues to tinker under the hood of a vehicle. He has not been back to Africa in two decades. We’re all doing well, he says, but “they’re mean to us here,” when we’ve only come here “to earn a living.” France, he explains, is “too cold for me.”

Diop’s father came to France from Dakar in 1966. He worked in one factory from 1966 to 1970, then found another job. “I was never out of work” in 40 years, he says. The older man, now dead, tells his daughter on camera that the result of his life in France was “positive.” The traces on video of Diop’s mother, who died in the 1990s, are fainter, more frustrating, tantalizing.

The filmmaker also follows her sister, a health care worker, as she visits older people, patients, black and white, in working class neighborhoods. One man misses his wife, who died a year earlier. “I never wanted to be alone.” A lively older woman wonders why the filming is taking place. Diop’s sister laughingly suggests, “Because I’m famous.” “Because you’re beautiful,” the other woman puts in.

The conversation with this woman is one of the most interesting. She explains how she met her husband. She worked in a café, but on one occasion, she was very depressed and determined to jump off a bridge into the Seine. “I nearly drowned myself. … he grabbed me.” Her future husband lived on next to nothing, he was sending nearly all his earnings to his family in northern Italy. The woman remembers details of her life with great precision and emotion.

The camera also takes in the memorial museum dedicated to the Drancy concentration camp, where Jews were held before deportation to death camps during World War II. The film explains in a title that “From 1942 to 1944, around 10,000 children were interned in the Drancy camp before being deported.” The documentary includes moving letters from some of the detainees. The French bourgeoisie collaborated with the Nazis in these crimes.

Diop interviews writer Pierre Bergounioux, who reads aloud from his diaries. Bergounioux, along with referring to his reading of Marx, observes that vast swaths of humanity have been excluded in the past from art. The “dominant castes” of kings, princes, warriors appear in literature. Diop explains to the writer that she wants “to conserve the existence of ordinary lives,” which go unregistered and unrecognized. With the help of digital cinema, Bergounioux suggests, ordinary people might have a “secondary existence.”

Other sequences are less interesting, less pointed. Images of neighborhood kids, girls playing cards, boys sliding down a short hill on cardboard, teenagers listening to music. There is too much mere registering of facts in *We*, too much passivity. Not all of the elements of everyday life are fascinating, even though they are rarely seen. The moments that suggest something of the great drama of social reality and history make the film come to life, then it generally subsides.

Diop was apparently responding in particular to a

concrete situation, the terrorist attacks in Paris in 2015 and their aftermath. She noted in an interview that *Libération*, the daily newspaper, had run a headline, "We are one people." And, Diop said, "I asked myself who this 'we' was for them … What 'people' was the newspaper talking about?" The whole film, she adds, "is contained in this question: what is this 'we'?"

The writer-director told the interviewer that the aim of the film is "to right the wrong done to all the people who have been overlooked, and to give voice to 'small lives.' Lives that have disappeared without a trace, as my parents' did." She alluded to her "obsessive need to collect and preserve the traces of all these lives, to prevent them from disappearing and to archive them in French history. To send a strong, and political, message that they are part of it."

The subject of the film, Diop insisted, went beyond the issue of the immigrant suburbs. To her credit, she commented that during the George Floyd protests, "I was deeply moved and comforted to see French youth in the streets, whites, Blacks, Arabs, Asians, twenty-year-olds, all of them French, born here, with roots here, and who were demanding in unison the right to equality. It was extremely moving."

The desire to represent the unrepresented, to acknowledge those who do not count for the media and the establishment, is entirely legitimate and praiseworthy. The rejection of the spurious notion of "one people" is also correct. But Diop will surely recognize that the notion that society is divided, decisively and irrevocably divided, is not a new one.

Divided how? Between immigrant and non-immigrant, black and white, young and old? Such differences and tensions undoubtedly exist, but they are not the fundamental ones, as Diop's film itself suggests. Some 175 years ago it was established scientifically that in every society "oppressor and oppressed," regardless of ethnicity or nationality, stood in constant opposition to one another, conducting "an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight."

It is good to pay tribute to "small lives" and want to see them recognized as significant and meaningful, at a time when the human rubbish that lives at the top of society, the billionaires and their celebrity hangers-on, take up so much of the media's attention. In modern times, the working population has never been so excluded from art and film. So Diop's film is welcome from that point of view.

However, as noted above, merely recognizing that working class people exist and have thoughts and feelings is not enough of a breakthrough. Consistently and richly, extensively and artistically, bringing out the contradictions in the present state of affairs, whether in documentary or fiction—which would inevitably include grappling with the objectively existing facts and conditions that must lead to the current situation *breaking up*—would be an even bigger help.