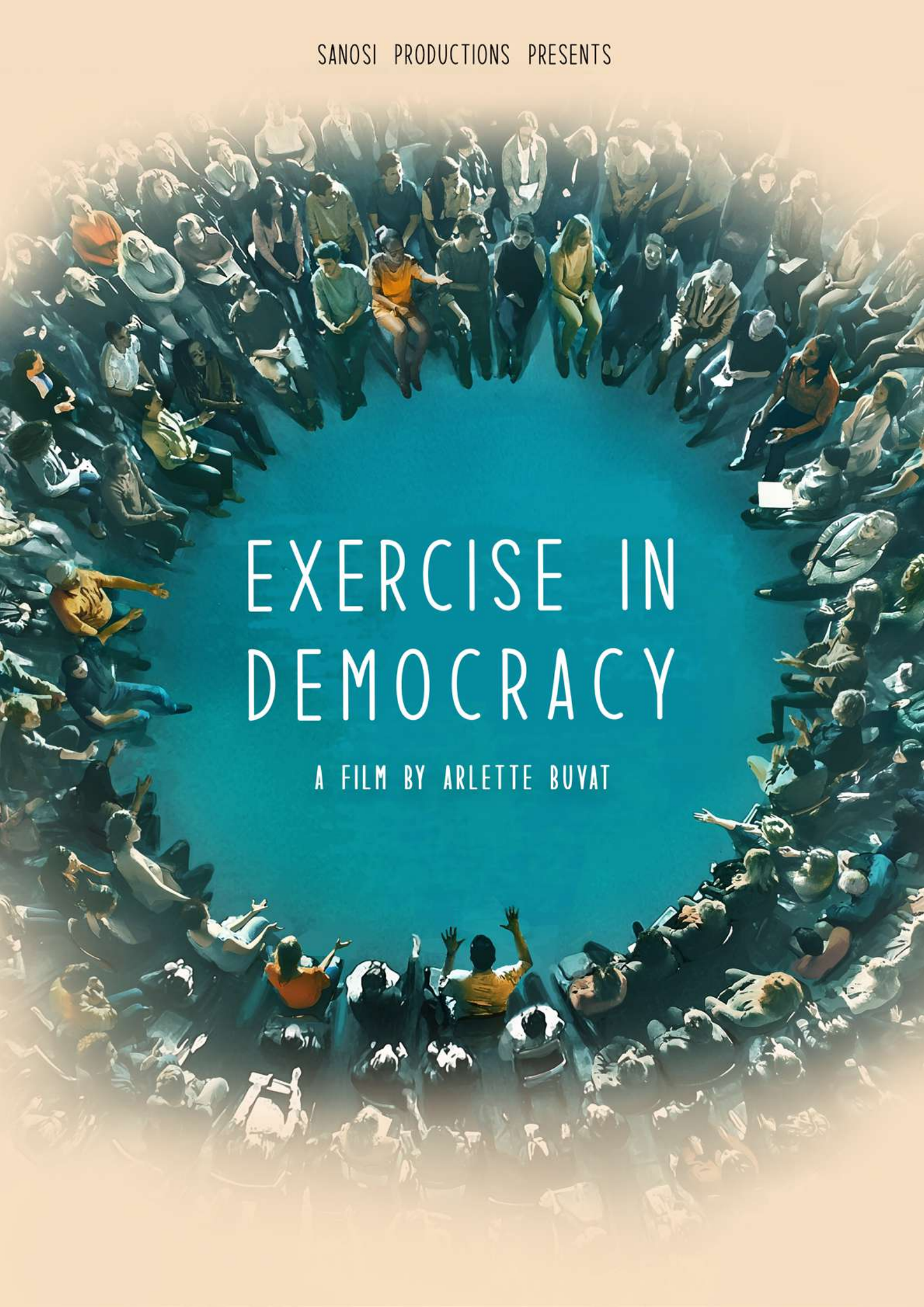


SANOSI PRODUCTIONS PRESENTS



# EXERCISE IN DEMOCRACY

A FILM BY ARLETTE BUVAT

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**FILM PRESENTATION  
BOOKLET**

## **PRODUCTION**

SaNoSi Productions  
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**YEAR:** 2025

**GENRE:** Documentary

**LENGHT:** 93 minutes



## SYNOPSIS

They are unionists, teachers, farmers, or business leaders. Despite sometimes conflicting interests, they walk a common path to formulate opinions intended to advise the government.

Welcome to the CESE – the French Republic's third chamber.

While our political system increasingly struggles to create common ground, here, differences are listened to and collective dialogue is made possible.

# INTERVIEW WITH THE DIRECTOR

**The CESE (Economic, Social and Environmental Council) was first established 100 years ago, in 1925, in the aftermath of World War I. Its mission is to provide the government with citizen-based advice on social, economic, and environmental issues. Yet it remains a little-known and rarely publicized institution. How did you come across it?**

I was writing a screenplay for which I needed input from the collective Les Économistes Atterrés, and I became close to one of its members. One day, he invited me to meet him at the CESE, where he served as an advisor under the status of “Qualified Individual” — a group Emmanuel Macron removed from the Council in 2020. I had vaguely heard of this assembly before, but knew very little about its actual role. When I arrived in front of the Palais d’Iéna, I had no idea where I was. Judging by the entrance protocol, though, it was clear I had stepped into the upper ranks of French public administration...

**What impressions did this place leave on you? What sparked the idea of filming there?**

It’s an austere, imposing place. I was struck — even stunned — by the fact that I had never heard of it. My friend was showing me around and explaining how it worked, but without really giving me a sense of why this place exists. I remember asking him at one point, “But what exactly do people do here?”

After that, curiosity took over — especially when he took me down the hallway where the groups are located. A long corridor where all the different organizations have their offices: FO, CFDT, Business Group, Associations Group, CGT, Environmental Group, and so on. That’s when I really started wondering how all these people, who seem ideologically opposed, manage to debate and work together. I started talking about it around me, and the reaction was always the same. Either people had never heard of it, or those who had spoke of it in very negative terms: “It’s the assembly for those who didn’t make it as MPs or ministers,” “A useless chamber,” “It’s just consultative, so what’s the point?” Naturally, I wanted to understand more.



# FILMING VOICES AND LISTENING

**The first part of the film invites us to discover this place without explaining how it works. What were your first impressions of this space?**

The power of speech was my first impression. When I did the initial scouting, I thought all these people were incredibly brilliant, with effortless eloquence and flawless arguments. Gradually, I believe the filming process led me to realize that perhaps it's the space given to these speeches that makes them so powerful.

People can express themselves without being interrupted, they request permission to speak, they listen to others, and what is said can be taken up again—but not distorted—rather used as a springboard to move forward and build a new speech, one that is bigger, richer... and more collective. There truly is a place for speech here.

**The film begins with voices from both young and older people, all of whom seem to share strong political awareness and thoughtful reflection.**

I wanted to give the citizens a voice right from the start of the film because they are not “regulars” at the CESE. They are randomly selected and participate for a few months, weeks, or even just a few days in the work of a commission. Their voices seemed just as powerful to me — probably because they have a space. And because they are listened to.

The very first sequence says a lot about the place and role of this speech: Léa asks an apparently naive question, “What would happen if abstentions outnumbered votes?” Sandrine picks it up: “That’s exactly why blank votes aren’t counted...” and Gérard closes the exchange with his skeptical comment about the Fifth Republic. It’s this constant back-and-forth that fascinated me. What it produces is rich, as it allows for the development of thought.

**You trained at Ateliers Varan and later studied image-making at the École Louis-Lumière. You also shoot your own films. In this film focused on speech, how did you manage to work both on listening**

**(sound recording) and image (framing, composition)? What were your directions and guiding principles?**

If I have one principle, it's that the people I'm filming know I'm filming them. That's essential for me. I give them the frame, and then it's up to them to perform within it. I tried to always face them; I often wanted to have them full-frame. It wasn't easy because in most meeting rooms, there was very little space to move between the chairs and the walls. And I had to be quick because as soon as one person turned off their mic, another would start speaking. Besides, I really liked that gesture of turning off the mic, so I often waited until the last moment to move! If I was behind them, I made sure they felt my presence — sometimes by resting my hand on their shoulder.

I had to adapt. I looked for a small, unobtrusive camera that wouldn't hinder my movements, without a tripod, of course. In meetings (which make up nearly the entire film), I was alone with a microphone mounted on the camera, which limited my framing options because if I filmed the listeners, I lost the speaker's voice.

I film with headphones on, letting the sound guide me. If a speech strikes me, I stay on the speaker's face; otherwise, I look for the listeners to have material for editing. When Pierre, the sound engineer, was there outside the meetings, filming those who listen was much easier. I even realized that sometimes, I understood better by watching the listeners than the speakers!



I also set myself a rule: once I started filming someone's speech, I wouldn't cut before it was finished. It was often quite a challenge, as a single intervention could sometimes last up to 10 minutes. But I truly felt that we were together, that I was there with them.

**Your film also focuses on a place. The CESE is housed in the Palais d'Iéna, located in Paris's 16th arrondissement, in a building designed by the architect Auguste Perret. How did you approach this place as a physical space?**

It took me a long time to film the space. The hypostyle hall really impressed me — and that's not even mentioning the monumental staircases! I began by filming the light in the hypostyle hall, the shadows it cast, the subtle shades...

Then it was the people who helped me: first, all the cleaning staff, as if they were inviting me to follow them. For me, the opening shot of the hypostyle hall tells this story, especially since it features Latifa, a woman who didn't want to be filmed during the first few months. I was filming her colleague waxing the floor when she suddenly walked into the frame.

And then there were the art students from a nearby school who came one morning. I loved filming them because their struggle

to understand the space was also mine. There, too, I was with them.

**How does this place welcome and amplify the voices of those who are there?**

The austerity of the place acts as a sounding board for sometimes poignant statements. The urgency and necessity of certain words collide with the immutable nature of the space... How can we truly hear these voices within our systemic constraints? It is this contrast that, to me, makes them resonate so deeply.

**Your film also gives an important place to silence.**

Yes, silences are spaces of resonance — moments when the words heard can settle in our minds and unfold. There is also the music, which came to tell a story I only realized late on. I believe it conveys the gravity I feel — the gravity of the geopolitical situation and what lies ahead of us.

# THE BODY AT WORK

*Exercice de démocratie is your second feature-length documentary. You directed 7.91 (including costume) in 2007, an eye-opening dive into the offices of a security company employing guards in the luxury sector, and Mise en pièces (2004), a short film depicting the daily life of an automotive parts factory. In your films, we observe both the mind and the body at work. Where does this focus come from?*

I don't really know... But it's very true to say I focus on the body at work. And I could say that the mind has gradually found its way into my work as a filmmaker. I remember that at Varan, for my first film, I was obsessed with finding a place where women in blue smocks were working. I wanted to film that, and a friend asked me, "What's with this obsession? Did your grandmother work in a factory?"

I guess I make films to try to understand something about the system we live in. I need to look at the links in the chain — how it works, how it all fits together. I think breaking down what feels to me like total injustice and inhumanity helps me to live. It's a kind of mechanics — trying to unfold things to understand them. Human and political mechanics.

**In your films, you focus on the whole by filming its parts — the mechanisms that keep the whole running. In Mise en pièces and 7.91, we see how a small grain of sand can jam the entire machine, while in Exercice de démocratie, we observe how starting from the individual can lead to the collective.**

I believe we are always trying to tell something big by starting from the small. However, I remain fascinated by how this process escapes us — or at least escapes me. I don't start a film telling myself I'm going to tell this or that story. At first, there's an intuition, a feeling that there's a story, but you have to dive in to see if the intuition was right and to understand what the story really is. It happens little by little, and the anxiety is that it might not happen at all!

For this film, it required a lot of patience because we reached an initial edit that didn't resonate with me. We had to get back to work...

## INTERVIEW WITH THE DIRECTOR

**In *Exercice de démocratie*, we observe a group working in a very horizontal way, whereas your earlier films focused on power relations. How did you approach the editing process to reflect this horizontality in the exchanges, giving each person a real place without highlighting one individual or position over another?**

With Franck, the editor, we watched 200 hours of footage. Gradually, the meetings where something was happening stood out, while others fell away. From the start, it was clear to me that there would be no «character,» and even less a main character. In fact, I'm not comfortable with the idea of «characters» in documentary films...

I film people who, through their work, create a collective space. So everyone has their place because they contribute to that collective. The confrontation is rich: when one woman talks about limiting the working hours of a social worker, it sparks a reaction from another who wonders where else the work could be limited. The first belongs to the Business group, the second to the CFDT (French Democratic Confederation of Labour). Each speaks from their own position, and we listen. The conversation flows and bounces back — these connections are what matter to me.

**The themes explored in the film — social work, cannabis legalization, and voting rights at 16 — are not universally agreed upon. The question of consensus and dissensus lies at the heart of the film.**

Yes, and this leads to a sequence I really love, where the councillors challenge these notions. One speaks first, a second expresses a different point of view, then a third offers another perspective that prompts a fourth intervention, and so on. We follow them through this collective construction. The question isn't about who's right or wrong, but how our thinking is built through this succession of voices.

This gives conflict a very different place. It exists within the CESE — fortunately — because the clash of visions, the “struggle of worlds,” is necessary for democracy. But as long as we remain in spectacular speeches and punchlines, we're not building politics; we're doing communication, which is very different. Politics is about building a common world. And democracy is about giving everyone a possible role within this political space.



# THE FRAGILITY OF THE COLLECTIVE

**How was your film project received by the institution, and how did you find your place within it? How did the people being filmed respond to the presence of the camera?**

It took a long time to get filming authorization. I began scouting in 2019, but I couldn't start shooting until late 2021. Once I had permission, I spent a lot of time explaining the project before turning on the camera. I had to meet with all the groups, inform all 175 councillors, the administrative teams, and of course the President's office. I was met with very few refusals—people seemed genuinely glad that someone was documenting their work, whatever it was.

I was free to move around as I pleased. I think they felt my gaze was respectful. I always asked permission before filming when I entered an office or another space. There were moments when I had to stop filming because someone asked me to—during cabinet meetings, for instance. I had no interest in creating a power struggle. Even though there

were a few tense moments with the President's team—during the elections, for example—I was, overall, very warmly welcomed.

**The CESE is regularly criticized, and its very existence is now under threat. Your film offers insight into what actually takes place there, beyond the official outcomes and the many opinions issued each year. Were you aware of this while filming?**

I'm not sure whether the CESE should remain in its current form, but I do know that this assembly forms a body that could protect us—the so-called “intermediary bodies” made up of unions, among others. In that respect, I'm skeptical of the push to turn this place into a purely citizen-based chamber. A gathering of citizens doesn't carry the same weight as an organized collective—we're talking about an organized civil society here. These are our safeguards against authoritarianism and chaos, because these people come from the field. They speak from experience, together, while embracing diversity.

That still defines the playing field! And in today's context, it's no surprise that there's a desire to dismantle all that. It fits with a broader trend of destroying everything collective, reducing everything to the individual.

There's also the question of information. At the CESE, people get informed, they listen to experts, they «develop a culture,» as they put it—meaning, they acquire knowledge on the subjects at hand. They think, they reflect, they build thought. Hannah Arendt said it clearly:

“A totalitarian dictatorship can rule when people are not informed.” I would add: “And when they're alone.”





# PRODUCER'S STATEMENT

I had wanted to make a film with Arlette Buvat for a long time. Her perspective has always fascinated me—she chooses to explore places and situations rarely portrayed on screen, and does so with remarkable freedom and sharpness.

With *Exercise in Democracy*, Arlette immersed herself in the heart of an institution that had never been filmed in this way before. Over several months, she shared the daily life of the CESE's advisors, attending debates, capturing passionate exchanges and at times heated disagreements—yet always constructive ones.

What moved me in her approach was her commitment to capturing collective intelligence in motion, far from the usual posturing of political spectacle. This film reveals what is almost never seen: the slow, careful work that takes place behind the scenes, where ideas are developed—ideas that may one day shape our laws. It is a space where democracy is practiced daily, in close connection with citizens and their real concerns.

Today, as the CESE faces a particularly delicate moment—challenged by new bodies created by the executive—this film takes on new significance. It raises a vital question: what place is truly given to authentic, citizen-led discourse in our society, at a time when it is increasingly threatened by individualism and the pressures of immediacy?

Through this film, I'm proud to support Arlette Buvat's valuable work, which deeply questions our ability to think together, to debate, and to reinvent what we hold in common. With power and sensitivity, her film reaffirms the crucial importance of democracy in times of great upheaval.

**Jean-Marie Gigon,**  
Executive Producer

# TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

WRITING AND DIRECTION: Arlette Buvat

EXECUTIVE PRODUCTION: Jean-Marie Gigon, SaNoSi Productions

CO-PRODUCTION: LCP-Assemblée Nationale

CINEMATOGRAPHY: Arlette Buvat

SOUND: Pierre Bompoy, Antoine Barbot et Arlette Buvat

EDITING: Franck Nakache, en collaboration avec Mariam Dequidt, Wei Yuan Song et Justine Arsène

ORIGINAL MUSIC: Fred Costa

SOUND EDITING AND MIXING: Thomas Fourel, Studio Actarus

COLOR GRADING: Antoine Polin

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ANGOA

# ABOUT ARLETTE BUVAT

After university studies in film theory at Paris III, Arlette Buvat became an editor and camera operator. She met Claire Simon, with whom she worked as first assistant director on *Mimi* (2002) and *Ça brûle* (2005). She also collaborated with Luc Moullet on *Au champ d'honneur* (1998), *Le système Szigmondy* (2000), and *Le litre de lait* (2006).

She then attended the Ateliers Varan and directed two documentary films, both selected and awarded at several festivals: *Mise en pièces* (2004) and *7,91 de l'heure, costume compris* (2007).

Teaching has always been an important part of her practice. She has taught screenplay writing at the International Institute of Image and Sound (3iS) and leads directing workshops for various organizations.



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Find the film's [info sheet](#) on our website.