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Films, Farmers and Machines: Mechanisation and motorisation in Belgian agriculture in the 1950s: a video-essay analysis

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1. Abstract

Motorisation has been a determinative factor in the agricultural development of the last hundred years. Especially after the Second World War, there was a need for upscaling farms by using machinery in different agricultural processes. This resulted in a propaganda campaign that promoted further mechanisation and motorisation, which was closely related to the concept of agricultural progress and modernity. Films and moving images were a key part of this campaign. In this video essay we analyse a 1955 film from the Belgian cinematographer Jean Harlez (1924-), which was used by the Belgian ministry of Agriculture to promote the cooperative purchase of agricultural machines. We do so by unravelling the specific themes and language of the film, as well as the visual techniques which are used in order to persuade farmers to adapt their farming practices. We argue that this case study teaches us more about how moving images and films proved to be a perfect medium for governments and farmers' organisations to promote agricultural modernisation campaigns. With this video essay we aim to contribute to a better understanding of the importance of moving images in the history of agricultural modernisation and thus open new perspectives for further research.

2. Script

Introduction

00:12

The breakthrough of moving images as a mass medium heavily shaped communication strategies in 20th century society. Perceived as highly influential and modern, it proved to be a medium of choice for governments to promote their modernisation campaigns, especially in agriculture.

In this video-essay, we analyse the interconnection between moving images and the promotion of motorisation in Belgian agriculture. After a brief overview of the evolution of this policy in Belgium and the role of moving images, we will investigate why film made such an appealing mode of communication. We do so by analyzing the specific language and codes of one specific film made in 1955, promoting the cooperative purchase of agricultural machinery, namely 'Quand Chacun Apporte Sa Part' (When everyone contributes his share).

01:02

Compared to neighbouring countries, the motorisation of Belgian agriculture was relatively slow. The introduction and diffusion of the tractor in the twentieth century is a striking example of this.

Before the First World War, the tractor was still a relative curiosity on Belgian fields. A first, cautious breakthrough followed from the 1920s. The first explanation for this is the availability of smaller, lighter, and more manoeuvrable machines, which were much better suited for the relatively small-scale Belgian farms. However, this promising start was not followed up immediately, nor on a large scale. The agricultural census of 1929 registered barely 1400 tractors, mainly owned by large arable farmers active in the most fertile regions. The impact of the tractor in Belgium was therefore negligible on a total of more than 1 million farms. Moreover, the economic crisis of the 1930s almost completely halted investment in modern machinery.

02:11

The real breakthrough for the tractor came after the Second World War, more especially from the 1950s. Between 1945 and 1965, the number of tractors increased from just 2200 to about 65,000. Step by step, the tractor also began to appear on the smaller farms. Apart from the improved reliability and versatility of the machines, as well as the shortage in labour that the agricultural sector was struggling with, the importance of promotion and marketing by producers and dealers cannot be neglected. This promotion went hand in hand with the government and the farmers' unions' objective to promote mechanisation in the early 1950s as a necessary step to modernize Belgian agriculture. This resulted in a widespread propaganda campaign aimed at convincing farmers to invest in new machines. Thanks to

this multilayered campaign, tractors became a symbol of post-war rural modernity. However, the fear of , over-mechanisation, – which meant an excess of machines and tractors in relation to the available land area and the financial means of the farmer – initially made the government resolutely opt for the cooperative path.

Film and promoting mechanisation

03:29

Moving images were an integral part of this promotion campaign and broke through as a communication tool for the government to implement their policy simultaneously with the need to modernize agriculture in the early 1950s. Governments, farmers' unions and commercial producers embraced the medium and produced a wide range of films. Very often, they also worked together. These moving images were then shown during meetings of local farmers' guilds, and from the late 1950s, broadcasted on public television.

The concept of motorisation is strongly connected to the idea of rural modernity, and it was also a leitmotif in films which did not necessarily have motorisation as their core theme. For example, in a film made by an official institution, tractors would often be used, whereas in practice this had not yet become widespread.

04:24

Promotional events for motorisation were also filmed: machine days and agricultural shows where manufacturers showcased their latest wares, as well as ploughing competitions and tractor agility competitions that were organised by the youth delegation of the Belgian Farmers' League.

These visual examples were important in familiarising farmers with new farm equipment and lowering their reluctance to embrace these new developments. The use of these moving images should be seen in conjunction with other media, such as posters, advertisements, and the written press. Tractors and machines thus gradually found their way into the minds of the many small-scale Belgian farmers and evolved from an unattainable idea reserved for large arable farmers, to a realistic consideration for improving one's own agricultural practice.

Analysing film

05:20

In this video essay, we take a closer look at the film ,Quand Chacun Apporte Sa Part', which translates into 'When everyone contributes his share', made by the Belgian cinematographer Jean Harlez. By doing a close analytical viewing of the film, we can study the code and language within the movie, the theme of which focusses on the setting up of cooperatives for buying agricultural machinery. By doing so, we unravel how the film was used as a tool to promote new ideas and policies in agriculture.

One needs to be aware that the analysis of the films' language does not say anything about the intentionality of the messages, but it does show how the commissioners and filmmakers tried, consciously or unconsciously, to achieve their goal, which was to convince small farmers to embrace the motorisation of their farming practices and the cooperative idea.

06:18

The film dates from 1955 and was made in collaboration with the Walloon farmers' organisation, Mouvement de Défense Paysanne. The story is inspired by the true story of the founding of a cooperative in the Walloon village of Solre-Sur-Sambre in the province of Hainaut, close to the French border. The farmers and residents of the village acted as actors in their own movie.

The film, lasting just under 22 minutes, was financed by the Ministry of Agriculture, which used it to promote the cooperative's purchase of agricultural machinery. According to the filmmaker's wife, the film was also shown by the Ministries of Agriculture of Hungary and Romania. Jean Harlez subsequently went on to make „Le Chantier du Gosses”, a short film about the working-class neighbourhood of Marolles in Brussels and now considered a milestone in Belgian film history, using his fee from his work on ,Quand Chacun Apporte Sa Part'.

07:22

To break down the narrative of the film, we use a classic three-act structure as developed by Syd Field in his seminal book "Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting". Field states in his screenplay theory that a film can be divided into three acts. The first introduces the characters and the environment, after which a first plot point drastically changes the life of the main character. The character is given a quest which he tries to fulfil. The second act forms the middle part and here the main character is confronted with difficulties in achieving his objective. The end of the second act is marked by the second plot point, which is the transition to the third act, in which the resolution of the conflict follows.

First Act

08:08

The first act has the function of setting the context of the countryside, the village, and its inhabitants. The village is portrayed as a traditional farming village where practices have remained unchanged for a hundred years. Modernity is yet to be introduced, and the life and work of farmers is hard and problematic: it demands a lot from the farmer and his family. Farm work progresses slowly, and the returns are highly uncertain. The physical labour of the small farmer is given mythical proportions and is symbolised by the elderly farmer, ploughing with his horse. This portrait of a hard, monotonous, and backward way of rural life is supported by the tones of a slow and calm harmonica.

The hard labour of the small farmers contrasts sharply with the life of large landowner Leon, who is also the antagonist of the story. Leon is well dressed, has workers working for him, owns several tractors, and makes his daily checks across his fields. The main character, Alfons, can only dream of having such machinery, believing they are only available to the large arable farmers.

Like a true deus-ex-machina, the idea of founding a cooperative comes to shatter this illusion. If the small farm owners were able to form such a cooperative, they would be able to modernise their agricultural practices and improve their way of life.

This marks the end of the first act, after which the dramatic question arises: will Alfons, together with the other small farmers in the village, succeed in modernizing their farming activities by founding a cooperative?

Second Act

10:17

The second act deals with how Alfons begins his quest to establish a cooperative. He is forced to make great efforts to achieve this, engaging with people from the village, and attempting to dissuade them from their scepticism. During his quest, Alfons is thwarted by the antagonist Leon, who tries to convince the residents of the nonsense of a cooperative, that it is far better to leave everything as it has always been. After numerous meetings with farmers from all over the village, Alfons eventually manages to set up a cooperative. The signing of the deed is the second plot point and marks the start of the third act, which is the resolution of the dramatic question.

Third Act

11:17

In the third act of the film, we see how, thanks to the cooperative, the farmers of the village can buy an impressive John Deere combine harvester. The landowner Leon is astonished and displeased, as he can no longer rent out his machines as he pleases. He expresses his displeasure and spits on the combine harvester and walks away. From now on, the story of the cooperation unfolds as nothing more than a success story.

The small farmers work together with the harvester, persuading the more skeptical farmers to change their minds in also joining the cooperative and, thanks to those extra members, they can then buy a hay presser, a mowing machine, and a spraying machine. Success is not only manifested in the fields. Thanks to the use of modern machines, farmers have more free time to do maintenance work and to

tend flowers in the garden. Even the farmer's wife benefits. The conclusion is now clear to everyone: the cooperative has been a success and has brought prosperity to the small farm owners, as long as they are willing to cooperate.

Conclusions and reflections

13:02

The film contains and presents four general messages:

1) Firstly, the possibility of motorisation is presented as a liberation for the small farm owners from the yoke of hard physical labour which comes with old farming practices. The benefits of motorisation are not only visible in the work in the fields; thanks to faster and more efficient work, the quality of life also increases in other areas: saving time results in space for other chores, free time, flowers, and wife and children.

2) Secondly, small farm owners are equal in power to the large landowners such as Leon when they unite and work together. The individual farmer cannot bear the cost of new machinery alone, but it is through solidarity that progress can be made. This is in line with the philosophy of the Mouvement de Défense Paysanne, which was involved in the creation of the film.

3) Thirdly, throughout the film, various counter-arguments are spontaneously discussed by the farmers when debating the formation of a cooperative. Alfons counters their arguments in favour of the co-operation and manages to persuade his colleagues to think likewise. By using this device in the film, it creates a type of 'imagined dialogue' between the farmers and the government, and the most common counter-arguments are immediately neutralized.

4) Lastly, the initial skepticism among farmers is to be expected, but it will disappear once the machines make their appearance in the fields. Once new members start to join, the cooperative allows access to even more machinery.

14:47

How do we evaluate the language and codes of this film?

The aim of the film is to convince farmers to set up and to join a cooperative, in order to connect with processes of agricultural modernisation. The filmmakers developed different strategies and tricks to succeed in doing this:

- Through this type of film, the audience sees the actions carried out by other farmers, which reduces mental barriers. Moreover, they are not actors, but fellow farmers! The vast majority of farmers in Belgium were small farm owners, who owned very little or no modern machinery at all in the 1950s. Therefore, the setting of the film and the working conditions portrayed are instantly recognisable to most viewers.
- The government is completely absent in the story. Agency is completely given to the small farm owners themselves (it is the men who take the initiative, the women are portrayed simply as performing the typical women's jobs on the farm). The idea of a cooperative comes as a sudden inspiration, and the farmers are eager to create one for themselves. The mutual trust between farmers is much greater than one which would exist between farmer and government. The only (spoken) reference to the government throughout the whole film is the comment that it would be possible to get a 30% subsidy from the Ministry of Agriculture.
- This recognisability and perceived agency of the small farmers is paradoxical. What we see is just a scripted story, which is fully engaged with government objectives. Although the story presents and promotes a bottom-up perspective, in reality it is a top-down initiative.
- Visual explanation and visual learning techniques have a long tradition when it comes to agricultural education. Film proved the ideal medium to reinforce the core message by using different techniques and appealing to specific narratives to reinforce the message.

16:51

One of the themes is the contrast between the backward countryside, in need of the introduction of modernity, embodied by the modern machines.

- Before the cooperation is founded, the village is portrayed as archaic and backward, with farmers using techniques that have remained unchanged for a hundred years. The train, as a symbol of modernity, races past the village at high speed.
- Common in the introduction is the contrast between the tractor as an elusive symbol of modernity owned by the large landowner, versus the small (elderly) farmer toiling in his field with plough and horse.
- The music contributes to the atmosphere of the film: in the beginning, a quiet, lilting harmonica is used as a leitmotif for the village, it is replaced by a guitar piece when the landowner Leon appears on the screen, and finally a rousing jazzy harmonica is played after the establishment and the success of the cooperative.
- The film makes a clear distinction between those who farm in an old way and those who use modern machines. In the opening and closing scenes, reference is made to the youth. The message remains unspoken, but it is clear: the future of agriculture and of rural youth lies in embracing motorisation.

18:23

In conclusion, we argue that despite not having all the necessary background details of individual films, the impact of the medium itself cannot be overestimated. As can be seen from the analysis of the main objectives of the film, this is a medium that makes it possible to strongly underpin a message with explicit and implicit arguments to convince.

The fact that 'real' film makers were involved in the production of these films ensures a strong narrative that reinforces the argument with a well-thought-out structure, and strong visual support, as is the case with "Quand Chacun Apporte Sa Part".

When studying these sources, from a contemporary perspective, we should not ignore the fact that moving images were still something special and uncommon in the period studied, and therefore also contributed to the power of the message.

Film was therefore an extremely interesting medium, going hand in hand with the efforts of governments throughout Europe to take steps towards the modernisation of European agriculture.

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