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Experts in the Field: Rhetoric and Aesthetics in the Agricultural Documentary

Thanks for inviting me here me to talk. I also want to thank the Museum of English Rural Life in Reading for supplying the films we are going to watch today. These are *Ditching* and *Foot and Mouth*: both of them come from the Museum's extensive collection of agricultural documentaries, which has recently been catalogued and digitised for preservation. It is through the Museum's efforts to make viewable copies from the collection that many films have become available to scholars like me for the first time.

For this talk, I chose two films – one from the forties and one from the fifties – to see what sort of continuity there might be in the agricultural documentary over more than a decade.

*Ditching* was directed in 1942 by Margaret S. Thomson. Thomson, who grew up in New Zealand, has been all but forgotten here in the last forty years – in her homeland she is remembered chiefly because she was probably New Zealand's first woman director. However, during the 1940s, her agricultural films were favourably, if not widely reviewed and in the 1950s, her documentaries on children and childcare were particularly admired. Thomson made her agricultural films under the auspices of the Realist Film Unit, which was established by the famous documentary filmmaker, Basil Wright and his brother Lawrence and managed by John Taylor in the 1940s. Like Taylor and Wright, Thomson was a friend and disciple of an even more famous documentary maker - John Grierson.

*Foot and Mouth* was directed in 1955 by Lindsay Anderson. It is his only agricultural film. It was soon after making this that his sociological documentaries attracted attention as part of the Free Cinema programme in the National Film Theatre, and he then became a respected feature filmmaker with films like *This Sporting Life* and *If*.

So these are rarely seen films, but they have links to more famous aspects of British film history. Agricultural documentaries like these have often been ignored by

historians, who prefer documentaries about urban conditions, because they see them as more progressive.

However, the generic conventions which *Ditching* and *Foot and Mouth* used are as important as each of the directors' individual styles and this partly where their interest lies. Far from being old fashioned or reactionary, the styles of each these films were very much of the eras in which they were made. *Ditching* and *Foot and Mouth* belong to a subgenre of agricultural documentary – the instructional farming film, used to teach young farmers specialist skills and to circulate Government information on protecting farms from disease and nuclear fallout. The instructional film was the dominant form of agricultural documentary in the 1940s and 1950s, when these two films were made. The instructional film in general developed as a form throughout the 1930s, as films began to be screened in venues other than cinemas. Agricultural instructional films such as *Ditching* and *Foot and Mouth* were distributed to specialist nontheatrical audiences. So they would, for example, have been screened at farmers' clubs.

Agricultural documentaries were made in the 1930s, but when The Ministry of Information began to oversee documentary production during the war, the number of instructional films in production increased dramatically and their tone became consistent with government policies on agriculture. This did not only reflect the fact that Government propaganda had become widespread during the war. The films were also a response to problems caused indirectly by the war. The conscription of men who were experts in various domestic fields left gaps of knowledge – so films were used to teach their wartime replacements.

Now, removed from that sense of urgency, and in an age where government information can be disseminated through television and the internet, it can be all too easy to laugh at the dogmatic tone of such films. However, if we analyse the films carefully and see them in relation to the era in which they were produced, their complexity becomes apparent. Although neither of the films were made primarily to be consumed as works of art, they both use cinematic, literary and painterly techniques in order to make their arguments more forceful and persuasive. Art and propaganda go hand in hand. So, in order to understand how the films work, we need

to consider the relationship between aesthetics and rhetoric in them – we need to think about how attractive qualities are used to persuade the viewer.

I'm now going to screen the films. While you watch them, try to think about how they may have appealed to the farmers of the time.

## **Screening**

### **Slide 1**

The texture of *Ditching*'s cinematography is arguably its outstanding feature. In many respects, though, *Ditching* is an archetypal agricultural film. Comparing it with *Foot and Mouth* will help to highlight the ways in which Lindsay Anderson mobilised the conventions of the subgenre.

Integral to instructional films like *Ditching* is the use of free indirect discourse. This is where voiceover narrator's choice of words seems to refer to something the character might have said. So Bill's instructions are relayed to us via the voiceover narrator, rather than through dialogue between the two men. The absence of synchronised dialogue is due partly to technical difficulties with recording sound on location, but it is also related to the film's distribution: 35mm prints were often reduced to 16mm prints for nontheatrical audiences, resulting in considerable loss of sound quality. The sound in instructional films in the 1940s and 1950s needed, therefore, to be sparse so that the soundtrack was not too badly affected. This does, however, have its consequences in terms of the representation of the working man: Bill does not speak for himself. This can be seen as an ethical problem, but in the instructional film, where rhetoric matters above all, the result is also stylistically effective: Bill's authority is tied to the authority of the narrator, who is unseen. Such layering of discourse can be found in *Ditching*'s images, too.

*Ditching* is often emphatically literal – thus the title and the type of instruction it refers to is underscored by a shot of a completed ditch.

### **Slide 2**

However, the film also uses symbolic imagery. This shot seems to show Bill's arrival on site, as he places his pickaxe and spades in the ground ready for the day's work. But at the same time as we shown this, the voiceover says 'after the rush of harvest is over'. The image therefore also symbolises the end of that rush, with tools being put down. At the same time, this shot has clearly been choreographed. The composition is too perfect: the men walk into the shot and place their tools just in front of the camera. The pickaxe completes an attractively composed image, with its diagonal breaking the vertical lines of the spades.

Above all, the shot establishes the importance of the spades as dramatic props. A fence is used as a theatrical backdrop behind the spades. This applies to most of the shots in the film – the deeds of the expert in the field are placed against a curtain of trees or a fence, a backdrop which excludes all extraneous information. So it is as if the ditchers are actors on a stage. The shot embodies the film's rhetoric Expert ditching seems inextricable from theatrical and painterly aesthetics.

### **Slide 3**

The spade continues to be deployed throughout the film as a prop with which the relationship between the expert Bill and his apprentice, Frank can be pleasingly dramatised. When Bill starts work, he demonstratively picks up his spade. When Frank makes a mistake, Bill leaves his spade – pointedly in frame – to take up Frank's spade in order to show him how he should be using it. When Frank has been corrected, the two men are shown digging in harmony. Shots of the men coming back to their spades link scenes rest with those of labour, and also punctuate different types of task.

### **Slide 4**

The frame is constantly like a theatrical stage. Frank is not fully seen until he is introduced by the voiceover – at this point he then enters the frame. All the viewer needs to think about is laid before him or her within the frame: it is not only fences that exclude extraneous information, but also the edges of the frame. This is part of the way in which the spaces in instructional films can be contrasted with the space in

the mainstream fiction film. In the fiction film, we focus on the contents of the frame, but at the same time we are encouraged to imagine the world around it. Our desire to keep watching the film is elicited in this way: for example a character gazes off screen and we wait for a point of view shot to show us what they have seen. We want to see what they are looking at and the film satisfies us by showing it to us. Characters' deeds out of our view can be just as important as the things we see.

In *Ditching*, however, Frank only matters when he walks into frame: the world of this film is concentrated in each image only. Nonetheless, some point of view shots are used to emphasise Bill's good work. Here, the point of view we share is clearly Frank's. Frank's function as a sidekick is not only to dramatise the ditchmaking, but also to act as a surrogate for the viewer. His presence motivates the close-ups of digging. He is also a sign of the filmmaker's tact. With a surrogate character for the viewer, the film is indirectly didactic: so it is Frank who is directed how to dig properly, not the audience. If Bill is very much the figure of authority, who performs in the landscape, his authority is dramatised in the film's simple tale of an experienced expert and a novice. The film is therefore less condescending to its farmer audience than it could have been. You can imagine a very different film, in which an expert on screen simply shows the viewer what to do.

## **Slide 5**

Instead, *Ditching* offers its information in the more digestible form of a story. The film presents what were presumably several days' work as one day, during which Frank learns how to dig a ditch properly and we are shown several things. The film draws to a close with the end of the day's work.

The drain diggers are introduced within this structure – when Bill and Frank break for lunch, we are shown, in the meantime, the drains being dug. So this aside is carefully motivated. While the characters rest, we see an interim drama. The shots of Bill and Frank at lunch also convey the sense of a healthy balance between work and rest. In this way the film's drama resembles the type of idealised farming imagined by the poet of Ancient Rome, Virgil, in his poems collected under the title *The Georgics*. Virgil's ideal farming narrative has become a conventional type of rural story and the

film exploits this convention. Not that the film needs to assume its viewer will know what *The Georgics* are. The balance is simply part of the implied satisfaction and fairness of the job.

There is a coda to the film's drama. After the men finish work, they walk off frame. The current shortage of such experts is mentioned and we are introduced to a solution - a ditching machine and a group of land girls. Significantly, the lack of experts is broached when Bill has left the frame and Frank remains. The implication is that it is younger ditchers like Frank who are in short supply – men who have been sent to war.

### **Slide 6**

The sense of the present and its problems is offset by earlier references to the past: that is, the usefulness of pipes lain in the nineteenth century. The land as a vessel of history is a recurring theme in fictional and nonfictional landscape films alike. In *Ditching* these shots are lent authenticity by the plans and maps, which also help to place the ditches in a wider geographical context. Such maps are common devices in agricultural instructional films. This sequence also exemplifies the tight layering of rhetoric in the film: the animated shot links the abstract cartography with a shot of a real field, through the lines which appear over that image. The shot is framed according to the aesthetic conventions of landscape painting or theatrical sets, with the trees forming a backdrop. The combination of agricultural geography and this painterliness unites persuasion with attractive imagery. There is a sense of unity of style and argument throughout the film.

On the other hand, *Foot and Mouth* is concerned with competing interpretations and uses contrasting editing tactics to shock the viewer.

### **Slide 7**

Consider the way shots are joined together for impact. The image of a calf's mouth being forced open to drink milk is probably just a shot of a normal feeding session. But the narrative and the editing make it look like an assault: after what we have been told, we assume the milk is infected. The following shot of a train, its whistle

screeching conveys the impression of the milk being forced down into the calf, the calf screaming in pain and shocks the viewer into realising that the feeding of the calf could spread the infection over the country.

### **Slide 8**

The film combines the image of a gun held to a cow's head with a farmer watching: the sound of shot which bridges the edit suggests that not only has the camera tactfully cut away from the killing, but that the violence is also being done to the farmer.

These kinds of shot combinations are not unusual. Anderson has drawn on the style of editing favoured by Soviet directors in the 1920s, such as Eisenstein, a style of editing known as montage.

But the film uses repetition to question whether tragic events are inevitable. I'll explain what I mean by this:

### **Slide 9**

These shots are initially not shown one after the other. The Harding brothers fail to notice the significance of the dribbling and soreness of foot affecting one of their cows at the same time.

### **Slide 10**

A dissolve from the lorry to the infected cow's foot makes it clear that their decision to allow the other two cows to go to market will lead to the transmission of the disease.

### **Slide 11**

So the foot and mouth shots are then repeated - this time one after the other. The voiceover asks rhetorical questions: 'Shouldn't those symptoms have meant something to him? That soreness in the foot and the salivation with it? Foot...and...mouth. Hasn't he ever heard of foot and mouth disease?'. A questioning process is introduced here by which a different combination of elements can produce

a different interpretation. The film now makes the connection that the Hardings failed to make between the sore foot and the dribbling mouth.

The film reduces the risk of patronising its audience of farmers by making the voiceover a questioning voice rather a simply didactic one. The rhetorical questions assume the viewers know the answer and therefore are not as ignorant as the Harding brothers. In this documentary, rhetorical questions play more or less the same role as Frank in *Ditching* – they make the didacticism of the film less obvious, albeit in a more complex way than *Ditching*.

Like *Ditching* the voiceover in *Foot and Mouth* uses free indirect discourse, but it does so to place the Hardings' decisions in doubt. It suggests a series of questions and doubts which should replace ignorance. This questioning process extends to the narrative structure. The beginning and end of the film offer two alternative narratives. I will look at each of these briefly.

### **Slide 12**

The first begins with a painterly image of Friesian cows in a picturesque landscape – similar to the paintings of John Constable. The voiceover and poetic imagery combine to form a symbolic image: a November mist enshrouds the farm and thus anticipates the confusion and ignorance of the Hardings.

### **Slide 13**

The camera then assumes a higher position, distancing the viewer from the Hardings, reinforcing the sense that the audience is more knowledgeable than they are.

### **Slide 14**

In the second version, towards the end of the film, the tale begins with a backstory which reveals the events leading up to the infection: first images of swill amidst an unattractive environment. Just as painterly images are used elsewhere to idealise the farm, here dirt and mess reinforce the sense of a nasty disease lurking. There is



another rhetorical question – ‘It seems a little enough thing – just a bone for the dog. What’s the harm in that?’ Again this is free indirect discourse, with an ironic inflection. We hear what this foolish man might be thinking. A commonplace rhetorical question – ‘What’s the harm in that?’, is given a different meaning by the narrator, who goes on to speculate that ‘Perhaps this is how foot and mouth came to Bury farm.’ The dog then carries the bone from the filthy, cluttered zone of infection, through Bury farm’s barbed wire and invades a Constable-esque field similar to that seen at the start of the film. Idealised beauty is infected with a filthy disease.

### **Slide 15**

Several shots are then repeated, as the second version of the narrative ends with Harding safely quarantining his own farm before the infection spreads. This time he makes the connection between the mouth and foot symptoms, as is clear from the shot of the cow’s head followed by one of its foot.

There are two points to make here. The first is to note the sustained contrast in the film between the aesthetically pleasing, painterly landscape of a healthy farm with the filthy zones in which infection is has taken hold. However, a complacent reliance on that picturesque image and its poetic associations is linked with ignorance and careless behaviour. The second time round, it is clear that the aesthetics of the healthy farm are protected by general scientific knowledge of the virus.

### **Slide 16**

This sense of two possible outcomes is underpinned by other contrasts across the film’s narrative. In the first version of events, dissolves superimpose government warnings over the Hardings’ ashamed faces – it is as if the notices reprimand them for their ignorance. In the second version, a pan left from a painterly depiction of a field reveals such a sign, this time as wise protection against the virus rather than as a reprimand for stupidity.

### **Slide 17**

This can be compared with the highly expressionistic slaughter scene, in which there are cuts away on the sound of execution to empty fields, which in this particular shot looks like a deserted battlefield, with its abandoned barbed wire fence. Ten years after the war, this would have been a highly suggestive image.

The language and imagery used by *Foot and Mouth* are fairly typical of the postwar instructional agricultural film. In *Foot and Mouth* there is a 'war' against an 'outbreak' of foot and mouth, fought with a battle: the language of wartime is used even in a film that is not about it.

### **Slide 18**

The maps, with their attacking arrows are clearly military in style. There is an expansion as the global extent of the foot and mouth 'war' becomes clear. However, the world map is associated with one of the experts in the film. The involvement of such experts, the film suggests, can lead to a different form of mapping. In the second version of the narrative, after the Hardings have helped to contain the virus, a detailed district map is used by the veterinary service to restrict the disease to the locality. As in the Second World War or the cold war, responsible behaviour of citizens is seen as a aiding the war effort and reducing the scale of loss. So the rhetoric of wartime is used to reinforce the film's argument.

### **Slide 19**

Indeed the repetition of the sounds of execution conveys a sense of successful expulsion of the virus. The sounds of shots, which were once heard over images of English animals being slaughtered, are now displaced onto images of foot and mouth in other countries.

### **Slide 20**

The film's image of an expert in a field, with a confident face and official brown coat, contrasts with images of the Hardings' uncertainty, but the structure of the film suggests that the expert's authority is best supported by the farmer's faith in his own

doubts. Anderson literalises a metaphor – he says – ‘Keep the question always in the back of your mind.’ There is then a dissolve, to another image of Harding – his head positioned just at the back of his head in the previous shot. Anderson continues: ‘Remember: suspicion is enough.’ Uncertainty becomes part of the film’s instruction.

So what can an analysis of these two films tell us about how we should interpret the kinds of agricultural documentaries held by the Museum of English Rural Life in its collection?

Anderson’s *Foot and Mouth* is a complex film and shows much of Anderson’s ingenuity as a filmmaker. Through its process of questioning it avoids the simple straightforwardness of *Ditching*. However, there is a clear continuity from *Ditching*, which suggests that both films used techniques common to the genre of the agricultural instructional film. *Foot and Mouth* clearly resembles *Ditching* in its use of free indirect discourse. Both films deploy conventions of landscape painting and more scientific approaches to consolidate their rhetoric. With this in mind, the force of these agricultural documentaries owes much to their hybridisation of aesthetic forms.