“*L’Amour est dans le pré*”: Cultural Representations and Social Hierarchization of Farmers”

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Abstract

In this paper, we analyze socio-cultural representations of farmers conveyed by a popular French reality TV program called *L’Amour est dans le pré* which features “real” farmers and is filmed in the countryside. Our objective is to determine the place and role assigned to farmers within contemporary French society. To study *L’Amour est dans le pré*’s televisual representation of farmers, we use Blanchard and Bancel’s articulation of the concept of “human zoos,” and, more specifically, its implications regarding reality TV. Based on content and discourse analyses of the Portraits episodes of season 7, we intent to engage competing representations and ideological appropriation of farmers in a French context, and, more broadly, to identify how this reality television program illuminates tensions in reconfigurations of nationhood in contemporary France.

We show that on the one hand, the program challenges generic, geographical and social conventions with its carefully choreographed on-site interview, strategic post-production editing, and finally, its interactive weaving of subjectivity and objectivity, representation and observation that generates a sense of proximity and immediacy between farmers and viewers. On the other hand, we demonstrate that the program reinforces and perpetuates a dichotomized national identity with its visual and discursive idealization and marginalization of farmers.

Keywords: Reality television; Cultural Representations; Rural Imagery; French Farmers; Othering.

Introduction: Rural France, a polysemic category

Although now overwhelmingly urban, France holds a unique and complex relationship with its rural and agricultural roots. In the French collective imaginary, the phrase “rural France” conjures up romanticized images of bucolic landscapes, grazing animals, picturesque villages and peasants/farmers working to feed and shape the land. Parallel to this romanticized vision, a much less affirmative picture circulates in the media, casting contemporary French farmers as destroyers of the environment (Hervieu and Purseigle, 2008), partners to large, capitalistic corporations, and plagued by declining rates of marriage, ultimately predicted to vanish as a socio-cultural category. Whether perceived as uniquely connected to the land, trying to pass on and maintain their tradition and family farm, or as agri-businessmen, French farmers constitute a **polysemous** social category that is alternately *venerated* or *rejected*.

What these competing representations reveal about rural France in general and agriculture in particular, is the role peasants/farmers play in how contemporary France defines itself (Carol Rogers, 1987). Both Carol Rogers and Hubscher suggest that debates about peasant identity are not so much about France’s peasants and its past as they are about France’s **national identity** and the contemporary period (Carol Rogers, 1987; Hubscher, 1997). Because rural France is a contested site (of memory) in which peasants act as a “potent cultural category” and a polysemic symbol, they play a central, rather than marginal role in French contemporary society and history (Carol Rogers, 1987).

The connection between nation formation and farmers has generated a diverse and extensive body of work in the social sciences, mostly focused on how, over time, rural France evolves and shapes France’s society and culture. Historians traced the changing status of French **peasants in history** (Weber, 1976; Barral, 1998; Duby, 1993), rural sociologists their shifting marital status and transforming profession (Giraud, 2013; Hervieu and Purseigle, 2008), while anthropologists turned to the discrepancy between their dwindling population and their highly symbolic cultural value (Carol Rogers, 1987).

Beyond the social and historical place of farmers in France, the larger issue that these scholars raise is that of **representation**. Whether French farmers are believed to embody an idealized France or a

disenfranchised France, they are consistently the *objects*—rather than the subjects—of cultural representations. In history, Weber notes that descriptions of nineteenth century peasants originate from “outside [of rural France] sources”: writers, members of the church, army, national education system, police force, or administration, politicians, economists or even landowners (Weber, 1976, pp.7). Also a historian, Barral cautions against interpretations based on a corpus of subjective and often ideologically charged accounts from « witnesses » external to the peasant milieu (Barral, 1998, pp. 3/15). He favors instead a more nuanced approach that acknowledges the cultural specificity and heterogeneity of France’s peasant population. Finally, he remarks that combined with prevalent illiteracy, the linguistic diversity among peasants prevented them historically from mastering or controlling the (French) dominant codes of representation. In anthropology, Carol Rogers observes the « voicelessness » and « lack of agency » in representations of peasants (Carol Rogers, 1987, pp. 61): Always represented--rather than representing—they are defined by a reductive discourse (Hubscher, 1997).

In sociology, Bourdieu famously elaborates on the objectification of peasants. According to him, they are an **objectified** social class. For peasants, there is no self-representation, only objectifying representation in which « dominated [social] classes do not speak, they are spoken of¹ » (Bourdieu, 1977, pp. 4). For Bourdieu, self-naming is indicative of self-definition issues among the peasant community: *paysan*, *cultivateur* or *agriculteur*, each term implies a different professional identification and identity (Hervieu and Purseigle, 2008). It also suggests that peasants do not control the production of their image. Rather, the « peasant » image is externally generated by the dominant, urban, bourgeois social class. However, through aestheticization and theatricalization, peasants are forced to coincide with this forced (self) image. Through appropriation, they end up adopting the normative, othering perspective.

In this paper, we examine the images of a popular reality TV program called *L’Amour est dans le pré* (*L’Amour*) to determine the place and role they assign to farmers within contemporary French society. This

¹ Les classes dominées ne parlent pas, elles sont parlées (authors’s translation)

attention on **media and mediating** discourses on agriculture in France shifts the scholarly debate from defining farmers to studying the role of media in representing them. Rather than simply asking “Who *are* the farmers?” the question becomes “Who *describes* the farmers?” Following other media studies scholars (Coulomb-Gully, 2012; Fürsich, 2010; Macé, 2000), we contend that mass media in general and television in particular, do not simply reflect social reality. Rather, they contribute to its construction, and they reveal existing power relations and tensions within society. More precisely, mass media construct views and images of reality with specific ideological connotations. These media images stem from the intersecting (and sometimes conflicting) views of the different individuals involved in its production, and from the need to appeal to mainstream audiences.

In the polarized context of idealization, marginalization, national identity, and mediation that we described above, *L’Amour* features “real” farmers and is filmed in the countryside.² To study *L’Amour*’s televisual representation of farmers, we use Bancel and Blanchard’s articulation of the concept of “human zoos” (Bancel et al., 2004; Blanchard et al., 2011) and, more specifically, its implications regarding reality TV. By focusing on the M6 reality TV show, our immediate goal is to engage competing representations and ideological appropriation of farmers in a French context, and, more broadly, to identify how this reality television program illuminates tensions in reconfigurations of nationhood in contemporary France.

While investigating the intersection between agriculture, reality TV and national identity in *L’Amour*, we attempt to answer the following questions: Does the M6 program unite or divide France? How does it portray farmers to fulfill this purpose: through the representation or the *self*-representation of farmers? What place and role does it assign rural France in contemporary society? What are the social and cultural consequences of this representation? Does it elicit identification or distancing? And, finally, what does it reveal about France as a post-colonial nation?

² The program is produced by Fremantle Media France and is adapted from the British program *Farmer Wants a Wife*. Broadcasted on channel M6, it airs on primetime from 9pm to 11pm, primarily during the summer, with the exception of the first (Portraits) and last episodes (Que sont-ils devenus?), airing respectively in January and in June the following year. Since 2010, the show has been hosted by Karine Le Marchand, a French television host in her mid-40 and from a French and Burundi background.

Idealization and Marginalization

A review of the existing literature on representations of agriculture and farmers in France suggests conflicting perceptions of rural France. Studies from a diverse body of work in social science—including historians, rural sociologists and anthropologists—consistently show that representations of rural France and farmers oscillate between idealization and marginalization.

To encapsulate the historical connection that ties the French to their “peasants,” anthropologist Susan Carol Rogers significantly relies on positive terms “[N]oble savage, salt of the earth, wise keeper of the French patrimony, or authentically French Everyman” (Bertho 1980 as cited Rogers, 1987, pp.57). The list highlights how, in the French collective imaginary, “peasants” embody France’s national identity and history, combining a unique connection with nature (“noble savage”), and the ability to perpetually keep and pass on this “natural” land (“patrimony”), thus preserving and perpetuating France as a nation.

Scholars suggest that the dual role of French peasants as cultivator and keeper of the land/nation was solidified early on by two measures: the 1798 implementation of universal conscription for the army under Napoleon followed by the mandatory national military service in 1872 (Barral, 1998) and the 1881 creation of the *Ministère de l’Agriculture* (Hervieu and Purseigle, 2008, pp. 663). These political and social measures furthered the symbolic status of French peasants within France by legally granting them physical ownership/responsibility of/for the land. Later on, Maréchal Pétain’s claim that “la terre” was “la patrie” or that “the land” was “the nation” advocated for a return to agriculture to regenerate Nazi-occupied France (Barbas, 1989; Boussard-Decaris, 2004/1980).

The historical alliance between agriculture, nation and politics endures in contemporary France, and is especially activated during presidential elections, when rural images become powerfully evocative, and sometimes determining tools (Hervieu and Viard, 2011). In fact, Candidates Mitterrand (1981), Sarkozy (2007), and Hollande (2012) all featured a rural background on their campaign posters. The suggestive power of rural images is attributed in part to cultural representations of peasantry in France: Over the ages,

French culture has produced and disseminated prolific, iconic representations of peasantry that shaped the French collective imaginary (Chevrel and Cornet, 2008; Hubscher, 2011; Weber, 1976). Historians documented how, whether through literature or art, nineteenth and twentieth French culture in particular played a major role in shaping positive, yet reductive perceptions of peasants, often presenting them as “noble, hardy, brave, courageous, valiant” (Weber, 1976, pp. 20).

It is this romanticized and nostalgic vision of France’s rural space that geographer Armand Frémont has explored in his reading of “the land” (la terre) as a “*lieu de mémoire*” (site of memory) (Frémont, 1997). According to Frémont, France’s rural space endures in the collective imaginary of the French as an idealized space because of the discursive images that link it positively with aesthetics with history. In fact, this cultural valorization also attaches moral qualities to France’s rurality to endow it with “core values” and identify it as a space and time of natural beauty and communal felicity (Reed Danahay, 2002, pp. 95). Thus, as suggested by Rogers, in France, agriculture and rural life stand both “as powerful loci of nostalgia and fantasi about a lost past and as potentially potent emblems of national or regional identity” (2002, pp. 475).

From a historical perspective, this idealization of France’s rural space coincides with increased industrialization and urbanization, leading to “romanticized” visions of rurality (Reed Danahay, 2002). However, while these aesthetic and moral qualities position rural life positively as the geographical and moral antithesis to the emerging working class and the city, they also define it negatively as the temporal contrast to modernization and, ultimately, contemporary France. Rogers points out that, historically there have been two conflicting images of peasants/farmers in France’s cultural discourse—idealizing and marginalizing (Carol Rogers, 1987; 2000). Weber famously documented how nineteenth century peasants in France were often represented as backward, uncivilized “savages” or “beasts” living in symbiosis with their “natural,” uncharted environment (Weber, 1976, pp. 3). According to the historian, period accounts list the following behavioral, biological, moral, and social defective traits to describe peasants: brutality, physical unattractiveness, untrustworthiness and—already—the inability to find a spouse (Weber, 1976, pp. 11).

Currently, also contributing to the social marginalization of agriculture are recent public health issues: Mad cow disease, the use of antibiotics, pesticides, GMOs, all affect negatively the profession and its image within the non-farming community. According to Mer (2004/2005), these public health crises are partly to blame for an identity crisis in agriculture, and the de-legitimation of their role as “feeder”/sustainer of French society. The shift in the economic and symbolic role of the farmer from working for the French to working against them invalidates the farmer’s social function and questions his/her very identity (Hervieu and Purseigle, 2008; Mer, 2004/2005).

Reality TV: A New Form of “Human Zoos”

In this paper, we interrogate how the reality TV programme *L’Amour est dans le pré* contributes to the cultural representations of farmers in France. Particularly, in light of the work of Bancel et al. (2004) and Blanchard et al. (2011) on the correlation between today’s reality TV and yesterday’s human zoos, we argue that *L’Amour* operates according to the following criteria: entertain, inform, and observe. “Human zoos” were exhibits of humans in 19th and 20th century Western countries. They appeared in the 1906 and 1922 *Expositions coloniales* in Marseille, and in the 1907 and 1931 *Expositions coloniales* in Paris. They showcased “indigenous people” from non-Western countries (mostly newly conquered colonies) in their supposed “natural” environment and state, in an enclosed space presented as “scientific” to facilitate public “observation.” Blanchard et al. (2011) point that the objectives of “human zoos” are complex: They do more than simply “show” indigenous people. They also aim to entertain (through the staging of the exotic, the remote) and to inform (through the display, indexing of different human races, cultural habits, etc.).

However, the enclosed/compartimentalized “enclos”/spaces of the human zoos do not promote cultural dialogue. The cultural separation materialized by physical fences does not promote communication between visitors and “indigenous” people—rather, it creates a geographical proximity that in turn produces social distinction and distancing. It also underlines the differences and creates a barrier between ‘us’ and ‘them’—‘them’ becoming the ‘other’ by means of the constitutive role of the public. In these spaces,

indigenous people are “staged” through the use of decors and customs, and the showcasing of “everyday” activities. Through the combination of the two--showcasing and staging--‘normality’ becomes ‘otherness.’ While human zoos ended in the 1930s, they emerged in the 19th century, at a time of colonial expansion and of rapid and profound societal changes. Arguably, reality television represents a new, contemporary form of human zoos. In fact, in reality television programs, “normal/real” individuals are placed in a space diverted from its original function, their daily activities are staged, and the screen materializes a barrier that creates a form of distancing. However, as for human zoos, distancing is intertwined with proximity. In fact, confessional scenes, as well as the staging and choreographing of mundane activities, produce a feeling of proximity.

In what follows, we argue that *L’Amour* offers a combination of entertainment, information and observation, if not of “indigenous subjects,” of farmers placed in a (re)constructed idealized rural environment. Moreover, we demonstrate that despite claims from the production team at M6 that they “film people as they are” (Soenen, 2012), the program is highly choreographed and staged. And finally, we posit that, the programme’s success lies in its participation in a broader national, collective context of rapid demographic, ethnic and cultural changes, in which single farmers struggle to find a place.

“L’Amour est dans le pré”: Between Fact and Fiction

In *L’Amour est dans le pré*, the television screen acts as a material and social border, to generate a specular hierarchy that divides the French into objects and subjects (of the media gaze), creating simultaneously distance and proximity. Our reading of *L’Amour* focuses on season 7 (2012), and more specifically, on the Portraits. In these initial episodes of the season, farmers are introduced to the audience—and to potential love interests who will contact them by mail after the airing of the Portraits.

The tension between unscripted and scripted, fact and fiction that is characteristic of reality TV is evident in *L’Amour*, and while the “cast” is made of ‘real farmers’ speaking freely in front of the camera (rather than actors performing their part), these Portraits episodes are actually highly orchestrated. While the

Portraits are presented as candid interviews, a study of the sequence organization for each Portrait reveals that, far from being spontaneous, this first encounter between the farmer and *L'Amour* host Karine Le Marchand (and between the farmer and the viewers) follows a well-defined structure.

Each portrait represents about 10 to 13 minutes of airtime, and is divided into 8 recognizable and identical sequences, starting with a description of the location of the farm, and ending with an invitation to write the farmer at the address listed on the screen.

In addition to lining up the same 8 sequences for each farmer, *L'Amour's* Portraits share common filming and editing strategies. All portraits are filmed in a rural environment (with the exception of Thierry's portrait that includes a segment at a farm fair in town), and nature is filmed with similar alternating shots: insert shots of natural elements (flower, animal, foliage) and wide shots of the local scenery. When it comes to the farmers themselves, they are filmed with increasingly tight camera shots: long shots introduce the farmer in his/her (natural) "environment," whether the activity is work (Pierre) or leisure (Rémi and Jo) and change into medium-shots by sequence 3, and into close ups with tight framing in sequence 7. These filming strategies create an increasing proximity between viewers and farmers. In fact, if farmers first appear far away—lost in the middle of their 'natural' environment, by the end of each portrait, camera/physical proximity comes along with psychological proximity since viewers, from then on, know about the inner secret and desire of each candidate.

In the end, *L'Amour's* filming and editing strategies reveal that farmers are shown for entertainment, observation and information, displayed as essential "others" for specular consumption and objectification, not unlike the human zoo "natives" in their enclosed "natural" exhibits.

Entertain: Visual Pleasure and "Exoticization" of the Rural

While the purpose of the Portraits in *L'Amour* is to introduce and showcase single farmers, much of the screen time is actually devoted to the farmers' environment—rather than to the farmer him/herself. The initial narrative opening the Portraits episodes presents « beautiful » rural images, in a rapid succession of

varied shots: extreme wide, close-up, bird eyeview or low angle: a sunset on a beach cove, a breaking wave on a beach, a line of ducks, a goat, sunlight through tallgrass, an eating bird, a cow in its pasture, a pig overlooking mountain peaks, grapes, a sunset over water, a rooster and chicken, etc. Over the slide, we hear James Blunt's song « You're beautiful », which is also the program's signature song. The short sequence excludes the farmer, and other rural dwellers or even host Karine Le Marchand who is reduced to a voice-over. In this non-anthropogenic, purely visual segment, no human is present. Instead, France's fauna and flora are highlighted to showcase « natural, » unspoilt and unurbanized landscapes.

In other segments of the program, when people appear, they are almost exclusively the candidates and host Karine Le Marchant. In fact, apart from them, human presence seldom punctuates these rural landscapes. Likewise, apart from isolated farms or hamlets, traces of human constructions are rarely seen. This creates visually a de-humanized rural space that is consistent with Bourdieu's discussion of France's rural scenery as a bourgeois construction for the leisure of urban dwellers (Bourdieu, 1977). This representation of the rural space as a place where only farmers live and work does not reflect the reality of contemporary rural France which can no longer be reduced to its agriculture (Hervieu and Viard, 2011; Perrier-Cornet, 2002). French rural space has become a complex space where different land uses (production, residential, recreational, nature conservation, etc.) coexist.

And yet, images in *L'Amour*'s "portraits" show rural space as the space of farmers only: it is where they live and work, and it is what they have shaped through centuries of hard work. Large shots of picturesque fields (vines, olive groves, harvested fields, fenced pastures, corn fields, etc.) contribute to the idea of an ever-present and still dominant agriculture in contemporary rural France. So do verbal references: to the age of traditional farmhouses when viewers learn that one part of Philippe's house was built in 1842, the other in 1584, or to the many generations who have worked the land on the same farm when viewers learn that Pierre's family has been connected to his farm since the mid-19th century. Such allusions to pre-industrialized rural France divorce the land admired on the screen from its contemporary reality.

To understand the disconnection between farmers' actual experience of rurality, and *L'Amour*'s portrayal of an idyllic, depopulated, and long-gone, pre-industrialized rural France, we need to turn to television viewers, and more specifically, to their comments on the official M6 website. In a forum devoted to *L'Amour*, viewers convey their enthusiasm for rural imagery. In the discussion thread simply titled "Why do you watch *L'Amour est dans le pré*?"³, they spell out the connection between television aesthetics, landscape imagery and specular gratification: [I watch]"[e]specially [for] the beautiful countryside images"⁴. The emphasis on the pictorial quality of rural France echoes geographer Frémont's aesthetizing statements: « Rural landscapes in France . . . are beautiful almost everywhere . . . The [French] countryside is beautiful » (Les paysages ruraux en France . . . sont beaux presque partout . . . La campagne est belle) (Frémont, 1997, pp. 3072). By satisfying viewer expectations, *L'Amour* idealizes rural France in a nostalgic way that clearly "sells" the program.

Inform: *Tour de France* and Ag 101

It is no coincidence that the initial scenic images of the Portraits *idealize* the French rural space as a series of visually gratifying televisual post-cards. The succession of visually pleasing images allows viewers to « travel » « from their home » to rural France, to obliterate both the geographical and the social distance that separates them from contemporary (and historical) rural France, much in the same way that the television coverage of the annual Tour de France does.

In fact, one of the first images in season 7 of *L'Amour* is a winding mountain road. It is the visual queue for the program's veritable "tour de France" of regional diversity. Karine Le Marchand's voice (00:05:10-00:06:04) narrates season 7's itinerary, while images recognizable to a France audience appear as a slide show—the Mediterranean sea, a Normandy beach, a hay bale, a castle nestled in the countains, etc.. "From Corsica [sea] to Normandy [beach front], from Brittany [hay bale in field] to Franche-Comté [castle

³ Pourquoi regardez-vous *L'Amour est dans le pré*?

⁴ [S]urtout, les belles images de la campagne.

in the mountains], by going through the Basque country [sheep on mountain side] or Provence [hillsides with Mediterranean vegetation] we criss-crossed France to meet fourteen single farmers⁵.”

The didactic dimension of the travelogue quality of the *Portraits* is embedded in topographical familiarity, as in the introduction Pierre, season 7’s first farmer (00: 06:04). Again, rural images punctuate the voice-over narration: “We begin our journey in the Midi-Pyrénées region [ducks], in the Gers [map] a *département* known for its gastronomy [ducks], and especially its *foie gras* and its *Armagnac*. Well, it is in this breathtaking setting that lives Pierre [medium shot of Pierre driving a tractor] a thirty-five year old *Armagnac* producer [sunlight going filtering through close up grapes]⁶.

In this opening sequence of season 7, images and sound track interact to dynamically create aesthetic and educational identifications. The “visited” rural areas tend to be identified not only with images that operate as synecdoches (white grapes for *Armagnac*), but also with a map of France that locates the farmer’s *département* on a background featuring landscape views typical of that particular region. Escapism, culture, viewer pleasure and engagement are the goal, and one viewer comment from the forum on M6’s website confirms it is achieved: “[The program] allows us also to . . . know or rediscover our beautiful French regions.”⁷

For viewer consumption, *L’Amour* offers images of various recognizable *terroirs* that mobilize collective memory and are mediated by knowledge. Images of regional diversity exemplify the interaction of memory and place, culture and geography, and viewers identify visually and emotionally with rural spaces that are presented as lands of tradition. Of course, *L’Amour*’s suggested “tour” of French regions operates as an intertextual reference to other *Tour de France* that also highlight regional diversity: the annual bike race

⁵ De la Corse [mer] à la Normandie [rivage], de la Bretagne [pré avec meules de foin] à la Franche-Comté [paysage montagneux avec château], en passant par le Pays Basque [moutons sur versant montagneux] ou la Provence [montagnes vegetation type garrigue], nous avons sillonné les quatre coins de la France pour rencontrer quatorze agricultrices et agriculteurs célibataires.

⁶ Nous débutons notre voyage en région Midi-Pyrénées [canards], dans le Gers, [carte] un département réputé pour sa gastronomie [canards], et notamment son foie gras et son Armagnac. Et bien *c’est dans ce magnifique décor que vit Pierre* (plan serré de Pierre conduisant une machine), un producteur d’Armagnac de 35 ans [grappe de raisin en gros plan, à contre-jour, les raisins sont translucides]

⁷ [L’émission] me permet également de . . . connaître ou revoir de belles régions françaises.

that « loops » around France and feeds television audiences images of daily changing scenery and Bruno's 19c book *Le Tour de la France par deux enfants* that combines didactic descriptions with a storyline revolving around the search for a loved one--not unlike *L'Amour est dans le pré*.

With this didactic dimension linked to the (re)discovery of various recognizable *terroirs* comes another one: an introduction to French agriculture. During this travelogue in the French countryside, viewers are not only introduced to each candidate, they also learn about candidates' farm and farming activities. In fact, interestingly, candidates embodied quite accurately the diversity of French contemporary agriculture in terms of farms' geographical location, production and production system, as well as in terms of farmers' background, training, age and sex. However, this information only appears as backdrop: no direct references to the characteristics of French agriculture are made. Tensions existing in contemporary French agriculture (modernity versus tradition, global versus local, conventional versus alternative, or specialization versus diversification) do not stand as central, or even relevant, issues. This observation is in line with the findings of Béliard and Quemener (2012), who, in their general analysis of the different seasons of the program, noted a decreasing focus on agriculture in general and an increasing focus on farmers as individuals.

Nonetheless, even if informing viewers is not the prime objective of the program, this dimension still exists and this first meeting between viewers/host Karine Le Marchand and each candidate resembles an Agriculture 101 class alternating short lectures and practical activities. During these small "classes," farmers hold a knowledge that host Karine Le Marchand urges them to share. Her various, and admittedly naïve, questions ("But what is this machine?", "What kind of cow is that?", or "How much food do they [pigs] eat every day?"), allows farmers to give her a small lecture. She always appears enthusiastic in discovering new activities, as suggested in the following dialogue between Bruno (a farmer in his mid-40s and living in South-East France) and her:

Host: - So, what are you up to with your tractor?

Bruno: - So, here, I am doing alfalfa stacks.

Host: - So you're producing alfalfa. What else do you produce?

Bruno: - In fact, I am vine nurseryman.

Host: - What is that about?

Bruno: - I am producing “mother vines” to make stocks for grafting.

Host: - But, what is that?

Bruno: - I am producing wood to make vines’ patches/young vine plants.

Host: - Personally, I have never seen that! Can you show me? It’s great, once again, I am going to learn something!⁸

This type of conversation punctuates the beginning of each portrait. Undeniably superficial, information shared with the host express a didactic dimension in the program. The educational dimension of this first encounter is reinforced by role-plays where Karine Le Marchand participates in farm chores: the small lectures gives way to practical activities. Whether it is picking up apples, feeding calves, milking dairy cows, lunging a horse or selling a sheep, farmers give unexperienced Karine Le Marchand the opportunity to have a “real” farming experience. During these role-plays, she does not hesitate in expressing her lack of knowledge and her incompetence. Asked by Bertrand, a young dairy farmer in his mid-20s, to help him put a straw bottom in the barn she warns him “Let me tell you that I am so bad.” However, even in this circumstance, she appears eager to learn and to be a good student:

Host: - So...wait. I am supposed to take ‘this’ [a pitchfork]

Bertrand: - You put it into the straw

Host: - [She is doing it] I am not taking too much. And then, you spread it [the straw] everywhere.

Bertrand: - You should put it where it’s missing... See, Karine, over there, you should put some.

Host: - Here, too, it was missing right?

Bertrand: - No, but you’re doing a good job.⁹

Placing herself deliberately as an outsider discovering and learning about new places and new activities, Karine Le Marchand does not only give farmers an opportunity to share their expertise. Her naïve questions also allow viewers to get acquainted with this unfamiliar world and to learn its codes and practices.

⁸ Alors qu’est-ce que tu fais avec ton tracteur ?/ Alors là, je fais des bottes de luzerne./ Alors tu fais de la luzerne et qu’est-ce que tu fais d’autre ? Je suis pépiniériste viticole. / Qu’est-ce que c’est que cette histoire ?/ De vigne mère porte-greffe. / Mais qu’est-ce que c’est ?/ Je produis du bois pour faire des plans de vigne. /Moi, j’ai jamais vu ça ! Tu me montres ? Ah, c’est génial, je vais encore apprendre des trucs !

⁹ Alors attends... moi, je dois prendre ça ? / Tu piques de la paille. / J’en prends pas beaucoup. Et donc, tu mets ça partout ? /Faut en mettre où il y a pas de... Karine, là-bas faut en mettre. / Là il y en avait pas, non ? Non mais c’est très bien comme tu fais.

In addition, because she wears modern and urban outfits and expresses frankly her lack of knowledge when it comes to farming, viewers are likely to identify themselves with her. She stands as a mediator between farmers and mainstream audience, fostering dialogue and building bridges between these two worlds.

Observe: Social and Specular Hierarchy

While claiming to help farmers find a soul mate, *L'Amour* ends up “othering” and objectifying them through voyeuristic filming and editing strategies. Farmers appear as “inadequate” in the *Portraits*: alone, unable to find a life partner, and closely connected to nature and animals, rather than to people.

Vulnerabilization

At first, farmers in *L'Amour*'s season 7 seem entirely **fulfilled by their work**. Pierre, a wine and cereal producer in his mid-30s, is described as “a true epicurean and a passionate person.” Michel-Edouard, a wine and cereal producer in his early 50s, confesses that “[w]orking the land and gardening is a passion which has not disappeared since his earliest childhood.” Finally, Jeanne, a beef and sheep producer in her early 60s, is introduced as someone “passionate about her two jobs: farming, because of the pleasure she gains from taking care of animals, and physical therapy, because of contacts with other people.”

However, what the recurring reference to “passion” masks is **the absence of passion** in their life. What is conspicuously suggested is that for farmers, professional dedication is a substitute for their love life. Their professional expertise comes at the expense of their private life, as Annie explains when she states about her horse farm: “I gave up my private life for that.” It is also work that caused the eventual break-up for season 7 farmers who, unlike Annie, did have a long-term relationship. In the case of Danny, a mid-30s, dairy production farmer, also owner of a restaurant and music performer, life “was too busy.” He became unable to “devote time to his personal life” and eventually got divorced.

Professionally successful, but single, farmers in season 7 of *L'Amour* seem to embody a social contradiction and a deviation from social expectations. When host Karine Le Marchand meets Patrice, a bee keeper in his early 40s, she asks: “You have a beautiful house, you have a super cute girl, you have a job

you like. Well, I wonder what's your problem? Why haven't you met the woman of your life?" Her questions cast Patrice's single status as a **social "problem."** When introducing Pierre, a wine and crop production farmer in his mid-30s, her voice-over commentary also presents his single status as a source of concern: "[Pierre] has been really affected by the different loves stories he had and that did not last." For other farmers in the *Portraits*, the emphasis on their inability to be or remain in a long-term, exclusive relationship is presented as a sign of a personal failure: Both Bertrand, the youngest participant and a dairy, vegetable and fruit production farmer, and Annie, a horse breeder in her mid-50s confess to too many shallow and meaningless relationships. Bertrand mentions a series of casual sexual encounters with no future and Annie many lovers without commitment. When it comes to Philippe a wine producer in his mid-50s, failure in love becomes a sign of moral deficiency when he apologetically admits that he is divorced because he cheated on his wife with a much younger woman.

Whatever the reason for being single, *L'Amour's* farmers appear as **social outcasts**, unhappy in love, incapable of finding a life-long partner, and unable to conform to heteronormative and reproductive social norm characterizing Western society in general (Rubin, 1984) and rural France in particular (Annes and Redlin, 2012). Season after season, the program « documents » a situation so much so that presents it as not only «real» but also current and recurring.¹⁰ At 22.1%, the rate of bachelor farmers in France is higher than the national average of 19.9% (Giraud, 2013). More importantly, it points to a larger, national identity crisis by questioning the very existence of the "family farm" and what it has historically entailed: land, patrimony, linearity and (national) identity (Bessière, 2010; Reed Danahay, 2002). Passing on the family farm from one generation to the next is seen as essential to the continuity of rural France (Bessière, 2010), itself perceived as the place where France's "core values" originate and self-perpetuate (Reed Danahay, 2002). Entirely devoted to farmers' search for a spouse and, ultimately, for a child and descendant, *L'Amour* shifts viewers'

¹⁰ With the modernization of agriculture in the 1960s, the increased of single lifestyle mostly among male farmers has focused the attention of sociologists (Bourdieu, 1962, 2002; Jégouzo, 1979, 1991; Giraud, 2013; Giraud et Rémi, 2008). According to sociologist Christophe Giraud, farmers have one the highest rates of bachelors in France compared to other socio-professional categories.

perception about the role of farmers in France's national narrative: the farmer-founding figure of the *République* with a unique relationship with the land now performs on the screen as the "last representative" of an endangered population. To the French television viewer, M6's programme simply "confirms" the dire "reality," only in an individualized and personal documentary mode. Farmers appear to operate outside social norms: because they are single, but also because they are unable to solve this situation by themselves.

By stressing farmers' single status and resulting social and emotional vulnerability, *L'Amour* cleverly performs a **self-legitimizing gesture**. It introduces farmers' participation in the M6 programme as a last resort solution to their helpless attempts at finding a life partner, as in the case of Pierre, who, according to Karine Le Marchand, "appears in today's programme because he still believes [in love]. He dreams about a long-term relationship with a young woman sharing his sensitivity and passion of the opera." For Bertrand, the youngest farmer in season 7, *L'Amour* may put an end to a series of casual sexual encounters, while for Annie, a middle-aged horse-breeder, it may lead to a relationship with a future. More importantly, by situating itself within the debate surrounding declining marriages and birth rates among farmers, *L'Amour* validates its concept and continuing success. At the onset of season 7, Le Marchand's narrative justifies the new season with statistics for unions and births from the previous seasons: "Six seasons, this means twenty nine couples, eleven weddings and already twenty children born from these marriages."¹¹ The partner of a farmer from a previous season chimes in and states : "Thanks to this program, babies and weddings are made"¹² The emphasis on 'babies' stresses that the stakes are personal (for the farmer) but also national, for the survival, preservation and continuity of France's rural space depends on populating it with future farmers. The programme is thus introduced as a concrete and quantifiable solution to a social issue plaguing rural France: its mission is to help farmers find a partner to eventually produce an heir who will one day take over the farm.

¹¹ Six ans d'émissions, cela représente vingt-neuf couples, onze mariages, et déjà vingt enfants nés de ces unions

¹² C'est une émission qui permet de faire des bébés et des mariages.

By turning farmers' personal single status "problem" into a national cause, *L'Amour* **inferiorizes** farmers within an implied urban, normative cultural framework. It casts them as rural, still single, and helpless, thus portraying them as vulnerable « personnes déclassées » (Giraud, 2013, pp. 297).

Indigenization and Animalization

In addition to presenting farmers in a hierarchical opposition to the rest of France's geographical, cultural and social majority, *L'Amour* further marginalizes farmers by "indigenizing" them, and showcasing them in their "natural" environment. When Thierry, the widowed farmer from Normandy, is seen crossing one of his pastures, he is filmed in a wide-angle shot, appearing small and alone, surrounded only with nature and his dogs. This is also the case for Jeanne, a single mother and Basque farmer, shown herding her sheep, alone in the mountains. Visually, this shot fulfills three goals: by shooting the farmer from a high angle (Thierry) or from behind (Jeanne), it promotes "observing" (the farmer), the programme's third performative quality in addition to "entertaining" and "informing." Secondly, it accentuates the natural setting (a wide-open pasture) and creates the illusion of a non-anthropogenic habitat. Finally, it "shrinks" the farmer, giving the impression that the farmer "blends" with the vegetal and animal worlds, and lives in perfect harmony in them.

The proximity of farmers with their animals is a recurring theme in *L'Amour*. On the one hand, the relationship candidates sustain with their animals underscores their emotional void and on the other one, it animalizes them. Animals are in physical and psychological proximity, standing by the farmer's side in a natural space devoid of other human presence, and appear as friends and sole confidants. On occasion, the relationship is ambiguous and animals appear oddly as lovers. In that regard, the portrait of Bertrand is revealing. In his mid-20s, Bertrand is in dairy, fruit and vegetable production, and the youngest farmer of season 7. In the opening shots of his *Portrait*, Bertrand is seen petting his cows and kissing one of them on the muzzle. When Karine Le Marchand arrives, he is laying a straw bottom in his modern barn while his

cows are “observing” him. Bertrand explains that he is “making the bed of [his] cows.” The programme host’s reaction is telling: “Oh, you say ‘bed’ for cows,” noting the use of the word “bed” (*lit*) for animals, when the word *litière* may be expected. Soon she inquires about the breed of a cow that looks different from the others, and Bertrand continues to personify his cows, suggesting an ambiguous relationship when he confesses he is “in love with his cows.”

- Bertrand: - *It’s a Brune des Alpes. She is sort of our favorite one. Her name is “chouquette” but we call her “chouchou,” it’s her nickname.*¹³
- Host: - *It’s true that she is really beautiful. Chouchou! Is she nice?*
- Bertrand: - *Yes. You can pet her if you want.*
- Host: - *(to the cow) Hi!*
- Bertrand: - *She is really soft.*
- Host: - *You look really emotionally attached to your cows?*
- Bertrand: - *Yes, I am in love with my cows.*¹⁴

Again, at the end of this sequence, Bertrand is seen “mouth-to-muzzling” with one of the calves. Is the animal personified? Or is the farmer animalized? The line is equally blurred for Thierry, this time through editing. When the widowed farmer who is raising his teenage daughter alone is asked “You think your daughter needs the presence of feminine role model?” the camera cuts to a grazing cow. On the one hand, the transition is not unusual—it is a farm after all—but on the other one, the juxtaposition “cow”/“feminine role model” evokes an oddly amorous symbiosis between farmers and animals.¹⁵

“Animal-like behavior” is a common descriptor for farmers, and it echoes the French historical narratives that Weber famously traced for their “othering” of nineteenth century peasants. Weber’s work documents how

¹³ Both names connote preference and privileged treatment: Chouquette is a common name for a pet dog, while Chouchou is the term used for “teacher’s pet.”

¹⁴ *C’est une brune des alpes. C’est un peu notre chouchou. Elle s’appelle « chouquette » mais on l’appelle chouchou, c’est son surnom./ C’est vrai qu’elle est belle. Chouchou ! Elle est gentille ?/ Oui, tu peux aller la caresser./ [à la vache] Bonjour ! /Elle est très douce. / T’as l’air très attaché à tes vaches. / Oui, je suis amoureux de mes vaches, comme on peut dire.*

¹⁵ As if to set the tone about romance for/between farmers and animals, *L’Amour’s* opening credits end with an incongruously sentimental shot: two pigs grazing face to face on a mountain top, on a sunset backdrop. The two snouts face each other to form a heart shape, while the voice-over mentions the candidates’ “desire to at last meet their soul mate.” Again, the multiple superimpositions (verbal/visual, human/animal) undo the hierarchy separating humans and animals to implicitly “downgrade” farmers to the rank of “creatures” that viewers will “observe” and “study” during the programme’s “experiment.”

peasants were often represented as backward, uncivilized “savages” or “beasts” living in symbiosis with their “natural,” uncharted environment (Weber, 1976, pp. 3). According to him, period accounts list defective behavioral, biological, moral, and social traits commonly used to describe peasants: brutality, physical unattractiveness, untrustworthiness and—already—the inability to find a spouse (Weber, 1976, pp. 11). Hence, when *L’Amour* presents farmers closely connected with animals—visually, verbally, physically, and psychologically—it only perpetuates the narrative tradition identified by Weber. Ultimately, the programme participates in farmers’ marginalization by showing them split between humanity/normality and animality/abnormality. One of the consequences of this inferiorization is to implicitly draw a line between programme viewers and farmer candidates, or between viewing subjects and objects.

Objectification and Voyeurism

The specular objectification is performed through *L’Amour*’s filming and editing strategies. It is especially noticeable in the case of Solange, a farmer in her mid-30s living in Corsica. When viewers first see her, she is standing among her olive trees and she forms an optical continuum with the surrounding vegetation. The image suggests a metonymic identification from the vegetal to the human worlds. This consistent with the dominant/urban conception of the “Other” that characterizes the farmer as “**primitive.**”

The apparent **authenticity** of Solange’s setting and behavior grant the sequence a documentary-like quality. Not only is Solange in physical harmony with her “natural” environment, but she is tending to her crops, conducting “normal” farming business. The seemingly spontaneous sequence creates a pseudo-reality, a staged normality that enables the viewer to “observe” Solange, who seems unaware and undisturbed.¹⁶ But while the camera is hidden from the viewer, it is visible to Solange.¹⁷ The farmer is fully aware of the staging

¹⁶ The components of Solange’s sequence—“natural” habitat, vegetation, daily activity—meet Blanchard’s criteria for the “recreated reality” (*reconstitution d’une réalité*) that he identifies as one of the mechanisms of human zoos. With its “recreated reality”, “pseudo-scientific” perspective and entertainment quality, reality TV constitutes a modern form of human zoos, according to Bancel et al. (2004).

¹⁷ A rain shower reveals *L’Amour*’s filming crew and cameras to the viewer in another season 7 *Portrait*. As Bertrand is confiding in Karine Le Marchand in an open field, rain drops interrupt the conversation; the frame shifts to expose camera men and an M6 assistant bringing an umbrella to the host.

apparatus and “performs” for and in front of the camera. She in turn internalizes the exoticizing vision of rural France by “playing farmer” and tending to her plants, while she is “unknowingly” being filmed.¹⁸

Combined with the acting component, the “**hidden**” camera gives viewers the impression that Solange is behaving all the more “naturally” and authentically that their own gaze is invisible. She is dwarfed by wide-angle shots that increase distance from the viewer and preclude any reciprocity of the gaze. When she is watering and caring for plants, Solange is engrossed in her work and environment; she does not see/look at the camera and seems oblivious to the filming. Moreover, plants, bushes and even a pumpkin stand between viewing subject and filmed object. The viewer becomes a voyeur, allowed to observe Solange without being seen.

In fact, the camera duplicates the gaze of an explorer: hidden and on the hunt. Located at ground level and partly obstructed by foliage, it occupies the position of an animal on the prey. With it, viewers feel they are sneaking up on the unsuspecting farmer, dropping in on her daily work. As the host walks towards Solange, increasingly tighter shots accompany her approach. At first a spot in the distance in a full shot, Solange is filmed in a medium shot, until we finally discover her face in a close-up shot. The **predatory** aspect of the filming is enhanced by the fact that all along, the gaze is non-reciprocal, and Solange is still looking down or away from the camera.

Conclusion

In light of the concept of “human zoos” of Blanchard et al. (2011) and Bancel et al. (2004) and, more specifically, its implications for reality TV, our study concludes to M6’s cultural hierarchization and appropriations of farmers in France. In our initial discussion, we presented the polarized context of idealization, marginalization, and national identity that surrounds rural France. Our subsequent analysis of *L’Amour* demonstrates how, from viewers’ perspective, the programme reinforces existing social hierarchies.

¹⁸ Bancel et al. (2004) document the duality farmer/actor and viewer/voyeur in his chapter “Les zoos humains aujourd’hui?” when he discusses reality TV.

While the programme purports to foreground proximity, reality and authenticity, its *Portraits* actually create distance between viewers and rural France, and portray farmers as objects of specular consumption and domination. M6 effectively shifts viewers' perception about the role of farmers in France's national narrative: the farmer-founding figure of *la République* who holds a unique relationship with the land now performs on the screen as the "last representative" of an endangered population whose survival (a spouse) depends on civilized contemporary France. Finally, we expose how, in spite of claims to "docu-reality," the M6 programme actually promotes *representation* over *self-representation*, and how its deceptively candid *Portraits* reveal that rural France is more than a geographical space, that it is a place defined by conflicting social and cultural interests.

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