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Setting the scene for two sustainable projects in a French eco-hamlet¹

Abstract

The aim of this audio-visual project is to present some elements of the ethnographic research I carried out in 'La Ferme du Collet', an eco-hamlet in the south of France. My videographic documentation is divided into three film montages, the result of production choices based on the theoretical and methodological orientations in filmic anthropology. The first montage consists of oral testimonies designed to introduce the protagonists. The following montages represent the two main economic activities, namely the production of spirulina (a plant used as a food supplement) and herbal teas. These activities are part of an autonomous, self-sufficient approach to life, linked to a form of activism. They are contesting conventional lifestyles by creating an eco-hamlet, which is carried out by its inhabitants in their day-to-day activities.

Keywords: Eco-hamlet, sustainability, filmic anthropology

QR-Code for the film



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Here, I present three film montages of sustainable rural activities, respectively: *Geographical location and presentation of the protagonists* (10'37"), *Spirulina production at La Ferme du Collet* (4'11") and *Herbal tea production: harvesting, drying and sorting the plants* (10'39"). The films were shot for a research project in filmic anthro-

1 The difference between an eco-hamlet and an eco-village reflects those between a hamlet and a village: The hamlet is smaller and the buildings are grouped differently. They both represent an intentional, traditional or urban community that is consciously designed through locally owned, participatory processes in all four dimensions of sustainability (social, culture, ecology and economy) to regenerate their social and natural environment (Global Ecovillage Network, <https://ecovillage.org/ecovillages/what-is-an-ecovillage/>).

pology² that is part of my PhD in Ethnology at the University of Côte d'Azur. The research focuses on the symbolic-practical relationship that the inhabitants of an eco-hamlet have with the environment, particularly those inspired by models of sustainability. The site chosen for my fieldwork, which started in 2019, is La Ferme du Collet, an eco-hamlet created in 2001, around 70 kilometres from Nice in France. It is located in the 'Préalpes d'Azur' Regional Nature Park (PNR), where activities combining sustainable development and tourism are encouraged. The estate of La Ferme du Collet covers 24 hectares, including woodland, meadows, fallow land and moorland. The land was acquired through a 'Société Civile Immobilière' (SCI), a legal structure whereby three of the five resident families joined together to buy the property. Each partner owns the same number of shares, which, in the case of La Ferme du Collet, are not attributive, in other words, they do not belong to a specific domestic unit.

The contentious elements in French scientific literature place this type of rural collective experiment (which the inhabitants themselves call an 'écohameau') within contemporary environmental movements. A remarkable example is the pioneering work of sociologists Danièle Léger and Bertrand Hervieu investigating the phenomenon of 'utopian immigration' in the 1970s. Their research was very useful to me in thinking about the links between environmental issues and the forms of anti-capitalist protest that I was discovering in my own research field. For these sociologists, 'Mai 68' was a key moment in French history for understanding the emergence of 'apocalyptic communities' whose transformations and new waves are still with us today even if they are known by other names (including 'eco-hamlet' and 'collectives'). I emphasize the contribution of these researchers because they have highlighted the political dimension of such initiatives, an aspect that I also have highlighted in the montages presented. On the face of it, the day-to-day activities of a small mountain farm, as depicted here, may seem boring to viewers. But these everyday practices play an important role in the political protest of contemporary society, from the choice of the place to live to the activities its inhabitants pursue. According to these sociologists, this explains the double logic of enclosure and exemplarity that characterizes such projects: '(...) "the

2 Instead of visual anthropology, Claudine de France prefers the term 'filmic anthropology', to focus on everything to do with moving and cinematographic images (Rouch 1975; France 1982).

logic of enclosure”, which corresponds to the tendency of groups to withdraw from the world, is inseparable from “the logic of exemplarity” manifested, among other things, by their extreme concern for hospitality.’ (Léger and Hervieu 1979: 50).³

This double logic seemed to correspond, at least in part, with the operation of the eco-hamlet I was studying. Firstly, I could interpret the residents’ choice to settle in the mid-mountain hinterland of Nice not only as a consequence of the lower price of land, but also as a form of ‘desired distance’ from any urban-industrial area (the idea of withdrawing from the world). This desired remoteness is certainly relative since the village of La Penne is only a few hundred meters from the eco-hamlet. It’s a voluntary compromise that the residents have made in order to share their utopian project and anchor it in the area. In addition, discovering that La Ferme du Collet was a member of the Worldwide Opportunities on Organic Farms (WWOOF) network piqued my interest, both in terms of the agroecological practices encouraged and the ways in which know-how is passed on through the hosting of volunteers, trainees, visitors and ‘WWOOFers’. This is one aspect of the logic of exemplarity, the idea of setting an example, briefly shown at the beginning of the third montage.

According to the founding families of the eco-hamlet, the facilities required for their installation are based on permaculture, which they have applied from the outset. This approach to sustainability heightened my research interest as it dovetailed with theoretical texts arguing that ‘the permaculture movement acts as a kind of natural laboratory where potentially sustainable solutions are experimented with.’ (Lockyer 2013: 104). The idea of applying the relationships observed in the natural world to the various dimensions of human life seems to me to be in line with the project for an ‘ecological society’ claimed by the founding families of La Ferme du Collet. A laboratory in the natural world, dedicated to finding sustainable solutions to local human needs, could become an inspiration, in other words an example.

In the methodological framework of my research, the audio-visual recording of daily activities proves to be relevant, both for the analysis of know-how and for the communication of significant themes for the families concerned. The first montage, entitled *Geographical situation and Presentation of the protagonists*, provides a brief introduction to the location of the eco-hamlet and the two founding families. The

3 All cited French literature has been translated to English by the author.

choice of setting the scene by montage of interviews aims to give voice to subjects of primary importance to the inhabitants, elements of their way of life, which they themselves describe as reformist. First, there was a discussion of the life path that led them to create the eco-hamlet, then its management, their particular attention to food, agricultural production and animal husbandry, as well as the 'three-tiered social organization' (individual, family and collective) that they claim to live by.

The second montage focuses on spirulina production. Research into food autonomy has led the Ollivier-Huot family in particular to discover this microscopic cyanobacteria, a food rich in proteins and antioxidants. The consumption of micro-algae represents their quest for health, but is produced also, according to them, in anticipation of a global collapse in food production. Bertrand, who created and developed this activity on the eco-hamlet, tells us about its many phases: the design and construction of micro-algae ponds, the purification of waste water by a shrimp farm (*Artemia salina*), the long algae harvesting time (between four and six hours), drying and bagging.

The sequences mentioned above are part of a 'modality of oral testimonies' (Henley 2017) collected during the filmed interviews at La Ferme du Collet. My choices of filmic staging of the interview, as proposed in these montages, blur the presence of myself as the interviewer, both sonically and visually, to make room for the interviewees. Solicited by the filmic event, 'the word and its communicative whole' (Paggi 1993) take the form of a monologue by which the filmed interview comes close to the function of commentary 'in that it is a reflection on the action, taken in the broadest sense, as an argument, the subject of the film. In this form, the interview is often a self-commentary, when the interviewee is also the protagonist of the action filmed' (Paggi 1993: 212–213).

While the first two montages are marked by the oral communication of the protagonists, the third, which focuses on the production of herbal teas, is quite different. In filmic anthropology, we quickly learn about the importance of the three aspects that guide the analysis of the anthropologist-cinematographer: material techniques, bodily techniques and ritual techniques (France 1982). The third sequence, both during filming and editing, highlight the 'techniques of the body' (Mauss 1968 [1934]: 364–386) employed in the activities concerned, while speech is rarely expressed. When the latter does appear, it takes the form of 'spontaneous self-commentary' (Paggi 1993, 2011), pre-

sent at certain moments in the process observed. My experience in filming body techniques required me to actively change my ‘observation post’ (France 1982: 87) while filming, in order to combine the requirements of cinematographic language (articulation of points of view) with the analysis of the gestures and postures of the people filmed. The representation of the gesture-posture pairing, essential to any activity, seemed to me an important challenge to take up because, more than the gestures themselves, the posture ‘(...) seems to convey to the spectator the very dimension of the temporality to be respected. This monstration is characteristic of the moving image. Through it, we can feel the beat of time’ (Freire and Lourdou 2020: 191).

Finally, I would like to present the context of the activity shown in this last sequence and its significance for the inhabitants of the eco-hamlet. The production of herbal teas is one way of reconciling economic objectives with the principles that underpin the activities of La Ferme du Collet. In fact, it is the most important part of the Arias family’s economic activity, and Diego was my main contact. The work is carried out throughout the year, but some operations are more often carried out during rain-free periods. There are six phases in the production of herbal teas: picking the plants, sorting, drying, storing, blending, and bagging. This last editing focuses on three of these steps: harvesting spontaneous plants, sorting them in the Arias house and drying them.

With his knowledge of the farm’s terrain, Diego knows how to find areas where he has noticed that certain plants are concentrated. Spontaneous plants are picked according to the number of specimens found and their state of flowering. If the plants chosen are few in number or in the early stages of flowering, Diego will look for other medicinal plants. Diego picks with a knife or sickle. It may seem a simple operation, but in fact it requires a deep knowledge of the plant so as not to damage it when cutting.

The second phase consists of sorting the picked plants, a necessary operation as picking several stems often leads to other herbs being taken. As soon as they have been picked, the stems are selected to check whether any of the plants have already turned black from exposure to the sun. The entire length of the stem needs to be inspected to ensure that the plants are in good condition and to remove any insects. Wilted, blackened plants with torn foliage are set aside for compost, dry toilets, or crop mulching in agricultural areas. The device often used

to dry the selected stems is a dryer, built on site by the Arias family. This is a wooden structure made up of slats arranged in tiers, which are handled like drawers. This wooden structure is complemented by a metal duct that collects the ambient air, which is heated by the sun's rays and directed towards the inside of the dryer. The plants will be checked frequently to ensure that the dehydration process is running smoothly throughout the day and throughout the week. This is also an opportunity to remove any plants that are rotting.

To conclude, my ethnographic research in this eco-hamlet stems from my interest in social organisations taking up the 'sustainability challenge' (Lockyer 2007: 108). The ethnographic film project, which is currently being made and of which I present some sequences here, is based on the film documentation recorded in the field. It sets out the values and practices that underpin the changes in lifestyle that the inhabitants of the eco-hamlet have implemented and continue to implement. The process of achieving the ecological management they have imagined is not yet complete. Nevertheless, the implementation of their project reveals the methods of subsistence they have adopted and the social relationships they have established to ensure that the natural environment of their territory is exploited in a way that is less destructive. The use of the camera for field research shows, on the one hand, the possibility of analysing in detail the activities studied, and on the other hand, the possibility of showing these same activities and the people who practice them to a wider audience.

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