

A HISTORY OF THE EUROPEAN RURA LIFE

written and directed by **Stan Neumann**

produced by **Les Films d'Ici - Camille Laemle & Serge Lalou**

4x55 minutes



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GENERAL PRESENTATION & NOTE OF INTENTION

Retelling the history of peasant Europe in 4 films. Traveling across the European countryside from Spain to Sweden, from the Balkans to Ireland, on the evanescent traces of a history spanning more than a millennium, and which remained unwritten for a long time.

Trying to tie together the threads of landscapes and climates, of cultures and cultivation, of techniques and beliefs, of roots and exiles, of the time of history and the time of lives.

A daunting gamble. How to proceed?

By choosing to be more illustrative than exhaustive, to err on the side of pleasure, of journeys, of stories, of meetings.

THE BEGINNING AND THE END

I chose to begin in the sixth century, at a time when the Roman Empire, the last great urban civilization before ours, was disintegrating. And to work through to the present day, when our urban civilization is in turn being weakened and called into question.



In the 6th century the vast majority of the European population found itself peasant by force of circumstance. And it remained so until the beginning of the 20th century. In other words, the history of the peasantry is deeply enmeshed with the history of Europe itself.

I tell it in a **chronological order** and only partially. I favor singular moments, specific to a particular region or country. It is a way to account for the huge geographical and cultural differences of peasant Europe.

I overlay a **thematic structure** on top of this this chronological structure, a dominant theme that gives each film its own unique flavor.

Finally, I freely flow between the past and the present, whenever it feels meaningful.

The only rule: the narrative must be dynamic and clear.

THE MAIN THEMES PER EPISODE

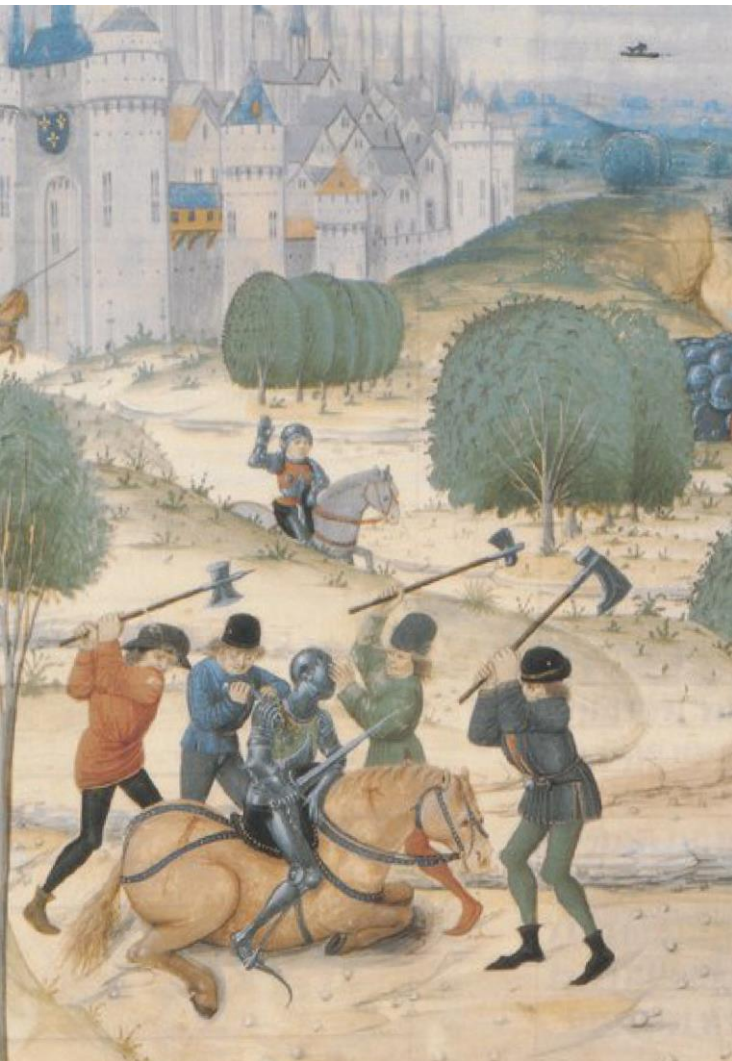


Film 1 / The lords, and those
who dig /
6th to 16th century.

After the collapse of the Roman Empire, Europe turns to mass peasantry. Freed from the State's overbearing control, these peasants experience a few centuries of freedom, producing only what they need. But from the 10th century onwards, the new feudal regime gradually puts an end to this golden age of a peasantry freed from its masters. At the behest of the powers that be, the Church helps "reconquer" the countryside and justifies all the abuses of peasant subjugation. However, the intensive exploitation of the countryside allows the return of economic growth and trade. Peasants are more exploited, but they also live better. **From the XIVth century onwards, a succession of wars and plague epidemics**

puts an end to this fragile balance. The peasants start revolting against the lordship, with egalitarian and millenarian accents. From the French Jacquerie of 1358, to the English Peasants' Revolt of 1381 and the German Peasants' War of 1525, all were quelled in blood.





In France, without a major agrarian revolution, the small peasantry largely remains in the majority. The centralized royal state needs them. Its administration, its wars and its pomp are costly – a burden that the peasants must bear. **From the Croquants to the Bonnets Rouges, they first and foremost revolt against taxes.** They take on a new character towards the end of the 18th century, when the government timidly tries to follow the English example. Riots multiply. They herald the Revolution of 1789, which is now said to be “bourgeois” but whose origin is just as much peasant. It puts an end to a thousand years of feudal regime.

In the 15th century, the religious and civil powers start hunting for witches in the countryside. They do so in the name of a new, rational and “modern” spirit that manifests itself economically through the development of commercial and speculative agriculture. In Southern Europe, large estates start to monoculture rice while in England, in the name of profit and freedom of trade, the Agricultural Revolution privatizes communal lands and destroys the solidarity on which the village economy was based. The small independent peasants can no longer survive. They disappear, becoming farm workers or vagrants.



Film 3/ The immobile peasant, the moving peasant

From the beginning of the 19th century to the Great War. Farmers on the move. The great transhumances, **the migrations of men and women**. The summer pastures of Scandinavian shepherds, a space of freedom. Seasonal migrations, the peasant-masons of the Creuse. The colonial question. The peasant, an ideal settler.

The Great Famine in Ireland. The transcontinental emigration. **The rural exodus, a moral fault?** Peasant roots, politics and the Nation. The myth of Chauvin, "the ploughman-soldier". The mechanization and chemical revolution.





From 1918 to today. **Peasant ideologies** of Nazism and Fascism. **Revolutionary movements** of socialist and anarchist peasants in Italy and Spain. The post-war period: collectivizations in the East, and reparcelling in France. Agricultural Europe and subsidies. Agricultural unionism. The questioning of productivism in the 1970s. The tyranny of the agri-food industries. Migrant farm workers. The **return to the land, a real perspective** or **the latest urban fantasy**? The neo-ruralists. And the **distress of the peasants**, still there.



A HISTORY THAT SLIPS AWAY

The pattern may seem clear, yet in reality **most of peasant history is elusive**.

For centuries, the dominant classes, the only ones to leave written records, rarely even spoke of the peasants. They could describe the fields and the harvests at length, but it was as if the wheat grew by itself. The peasants were invisible.

When they did make a few rare appearances, it was always from the point of view of the masters. They were described with contempt, as a savage and uneducated mass, which had to be disciplined, Christianized, but above all not educated. **They do not have to know. That could prevent them from working.**

The texts are a little more verbose about the boors' obligations towards their masters, which consist in feeding them and enriching them. And occasionally the chroniclers also like to tell how the Lords massacre those who dare question them, whether to oppose their exactions or the progress of agriculture.

Today's historians seek to change the perspective, to see the peasants no longer as passive objects subject to the will of their masters, but **as autonomous actors of their own history**.

The problem is that for more than a thousand years, the peasants did not write. Their culture, **their historical tradition is oral**. Destined to fade away.

It was not until the end of the 18th century that the first written testimonies appeared and their voice was finally heard, even if it had to be cast in the mold of the dominant language.





ARCHIVES / ANIMATIONS

As I did in the Time of the Workers, I will freely mix archive images, photographs, cinema and animation sequences.

The iconographic and filmic archives are very rich. I will apply my usual criteria: singularity, readability, and relevance. And of course always have something that surprises, that catches the eye. No blur, no “cheating”:

each image must be shown as it truly is. No gratuitousness: each one must contribute to the progress of the story.

The animations, about 5 per film, that we will create with **Joris Clerté** (Donc Voilà) will follow the same constraints. They are above all tools of narration, both playful and totally serious. They allow us to embody and clarify concepts: the question, for example, of “open fields” and elongated fields, or the effects on the countryside of the liberalization of the grain market in France in the 18th century (it is easy to guess which ones). But we will also use them to simply tell some beautiful stories, such as that of the peasants of Gournay, who in 1790 fought against the local lord for possession of apple trees planted by the lord, but planted on the public highway. (Spoiler: although it is 1790, the peasants lose).

As in the Time of the Workers we will probably work with a combination of three layers: 2D animation for the characters, 3D animation for the scenery, and the last layer in stop motion. But we are still at the very beginning of our reflection.

Scientific advisor: **G rard B aur**

President of the *European Rural History Organisation* (EURHO). French rural world of the 18th and 19th centuries. The French revolution and the agrarian question. EHESS

For the film, we will meet with various researchers in Germany, Belgium, Spain, France, Ireland, Sweden, Italy, Czech Republic and Switzerland.



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