

## VIFF: Raw, gory and real - The Lie of the Land

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**"Dust to dust, ashes to ashes," one farmer shrugs, "that's the way it is. People with animals accept it much more readily."**

*- Extract from The Lie of the Land*

VANCOUVER - The image is brutal and graphic, and one rarely witnessed by the cosseted urbanite. A man wrestles with a skittish calf on a United Kingdom farm before shooting it in the head.



CREDIT: Glenn Dearing Photography  
Filmmaker Molly Dineen.

While millions of animals are slaughtered regularly for our consumption, it is the quiet comment about this killing that lands one of the most devastating blows in *The Lie of the Land*. "What was wrong with that one?" asks Molly Dineen, the Canadian-born/U.K.-raised director of the documentary which will have its international premiere at the Vancouver International Film Festival. "Nothing," replies the shooter, Ian Williams, "there's no value for him."

The owners, who run a specialized dairy farm, cannot afford to keep a male calf which will fetch nothing at market. Being paid the equivalent of \$6 to remove the animal, Williams goes on to strip the hide, which he hopes to sell, before feeding the rest to a large pack of dogs that he looks after for the local hunt. The act of killing sits uneasily with him, not because he finds it difficult ("the countryside is all about life and death," Paul Hancock, one of his colleagues, points out), but because neither of these middle-aged men was brought up to shoot a healthy animal. "It would be all right if they were sick, or something," Williams laments in the dialect of his home, Cornwall, the rural southwestern tip of England.

Released in 2007, *The Lie of the Land* sparked passionate response across the U.K., fuelled countless debates at literary and film festivals, and scooped a BAFTA, the highest film accolade in Britain. The country's *Guardian* newspaper declared it "brilliant, upsetting, thoughtful," while a critic on the *Observer* said, "It not merely made me vow to change the way

I live my life, but actually do it."

The film, with its revelations about government and European Commission bureaucracy and supermarket dominance, is part of the zeitgeist manifesting itself in the rise in popularity of farmers' markets and the slow food movement in Britain. Here in Vancouver, the film will undoubtedly be more fodder for the locavore scene in a city that's home to the 100-Mile Diet.

Dineen, however, never planned the documentary that way. She initially started filming in the countryside following the recent curtailment of fox hunting in Britain, which had created a bitter schism between the rural community (who saw hunting as a necessary ritual) and urbanites (who thought it a cruel sport and, in part, a preserve of the landed gentry). It had provoked an almighty debate in Parliament: Some 700 hours, Dineen says, versus six on the Iraq war.

"I went in there because I thought what a load of rubbish the hunting ban was," she tells me unhesitatingly on the phone from her home in London. "Not because I was a fanatical hunter - in fact, I am scared of horses - but because I knew enough about the filming in the House of Lords [during 2002's *The Lords Tale*] that this was a ludicrous amount of attention that we were spending on whether we do or don't chase foxes with hounds. Not about whether we kill them, but about nob's in red jackets, and you cannot focus a political system on something so infantile."

What she uncovered while filming was a way of life barely surviving. Crippled also by bouts of BSE and hoof and mouth disease, the U.K.'s agrarian society appears to be disappearing in the face of imports from low-labour-cost countries such as Brazil and Argentina.

"I truly had not realized the basic economics of meat production," says Dineen. "When I started filming I thought, 'Oh my God.' It wasn't because I wanted to make a film about food production and our bizarre, hypocritical attitude to animals in England and the basic corruption and monopoly of the food industry." (The statistics from Britain are sobering: In the retail sector, supermarket giant Tesco accounts for nearly a third of every pound spent on food and over the past decade, 30,000 independent food, drink and tobacco shops have ceased trading.)

Raw and gory as it is, this is why the killing of unwanted healthy animals and the de-skinning scenes were kept in her final edit. "All I was trying to do was make it a little bit of a wake-up call," she explains. "I deliberately left in the brutality because I did not want to spare the animal lovers, especially what I went through. There was something deeply, deeply pathetic that there was nothing they could do with that creature. It was one of those really rock-bottom moments. I don't know whether it's a moral or a religious thing, but it's hard not to have a reaction when a life is so worthless."

It is fine, she adds, if animals are killed for meat or for a purpose. "However distressing it is seeing a life extinguished, this is right and proper," she says. "Animals wouldn't be around if we weren't using them

and it is respectful to use them."

The shift in the fabric of the English countryside, from centuries-old working farms to housing development, is symptomatic of globalization, says Dineen, who has earned a reputation for covering institutions and individuals undergoing change ranging from the London Underground to Geri "Ginger Spice" Halliwell. (Two other films at the VIFF evoke the passing of a rural way of life: director Leon Sevy's *In Your Absence* set in Spain and filmmaker Koppel Gideon's Welsh documentary *Sleep Furiously*.)

"I resent the way things are globally sourced," she continues. "Basically, Tesco can have food grown in Venezuela and ship it over to the U.K. and it will be cheaper. The countryside is becoming increasingly filled with large grey chilling looking sheds [shopping centres and supermarkets] as opposed to farms. Motorways are clogged up with vast great trucks moving the imported food around; somewhere around the world there are millions of animals pressed into small spaces. So much of this so-called human progress is actually retarding human ability and the human condition."

For her, the West is being further removed from the actual process of producing food as we turn into complete consumers - and "cheeky" ones at that. "We think somehow food production just happens," she says. "There's an obvious socialist argument in life - and one that's correct - that people have a right to eat properly and cheaply. But I think the word 'cheap' is now very questionable. I think we expect food to be something that is extremely cheap leaving us lots of spare money for holidays, trainers [sneakers], CDs, DVDs, mobile phones."

One criticism levelled at Dineen, a mother of three, was that she was part of a section of society who could afford to avoid supermarkets and shop in farmers markets and buy organic. "I think that is completely missing the point," she retaliates. "People go into supermarkets and that becomes a way of life. It becomes more about buying what you are offered than what you went out to buy. It's a shopping sensation and it's increasingly what people are doing 24/7 - purchasing things whether you need them or not."

Dineen is foremost a filmmaker, but you get the feeling she wants *The Lie of the Land* to galvanize people into action. "What if I draw people's attention to things that are ghastly and then we chat, but do nothing about it?" she says, adding that she wonders whether she should do something political. "I don't think [the government] has been very intelligent about the long-term future of this country, if they are committing to importing and making mass farms which are necessarily worse for animals, necessarily environmentally more destructive, and necessarily not as constructive to the social fabric of a country. I think it is a very unhappy situation and one we seem to be hurtling towards."

There is another particularly poignant scene in *The Lie of the Land* in which Dineen, who prefers to record her own questions in the film rather than voiceovers, asks Hancock whether there's anything positive going on and he grabs his head in despair. Up to this point in our interview Dineen has been upbeat, but now I picture her holding her head in the same way as she rather dramatically concludes, "To me the food and the food situation is

symptomatic of a malaise generally. In fact, I rather wish I wasn't alive in this era."

Special to The Sun

The Lie of the Land will be shown at 6 p.m. Friday at Empire Granville Cinemas; and 1:30 p.m. Wednesday at Pacific Cinematheque.

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