

# Whole Terrain

CELEBRATING 20 YEARS OF REFLECTIVE ENVIRONMENTAL PRACTICE



## After Winter, Spring: Whole Terrain interviews documentary filmmaker Judith Lit

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*Ⓕ*Filmed on location in the Périgord region of southwest France, [After Winter, Spring](#) presents a cinematically beautiful, heartwarming, sometimes discouraging, and sometimes optimistic look into the lives of the region's farming community (see the [film trailer](#) below). Filmmaker Judith Lit and her crew spent parts of four years filming this documentary in each of the four seasons, following the lives of a number of small farmers with various backgrounds and approaches: from peasant farmers whose ancestors have lived on the land for centuries to recent imports from French Canada trying their hand at organic farming, from traditional-style horse and wagon to state-of-the-art dairy farming.

After Winter, Spring walks through the seasons, interviewing the farmers as they work in the fields or in their homes, showing sweeping panoramas of French pastoral scenes interspersed with intimate shots of farmers with their beloved animals and plants. Most of the film is in French with English subtitles, with occasional narration in English by Judith Lit. She moved to the Périgord region 18 years ago, splitting her time between her French country farm and the United States. Growing up on a 180-acre farm in rural Pennsylvania, she longed for a return to a similar lifestyle in a farming community. A year in France as a college student ignited the dream of someday moving to France. These two dreams came together when, years later, she found a beautiful, small farm in the Périgord, and began asking her neighbors questions when she needed help and information in order to run the farm.

After her elderly neighbor passed away, Lit recognized that the way of life that had long been practiced in that region may soon pass. She realized she wanted to make a film about the people around her and their way of life. Lit introduces us to seven farm families in her region, and we hear them discuss the positives and negatives of farm mechanization and other modern conveniences, changes in farm policies after joining the European Union (EU), peasant farmers' passion for their profession, joys and fears around passing traditions on to a new generation, and eloquent comments from each farmer on his or her sense of connection to the land, animals, and plants under his or her care.

We watch as each farmer adapts to changing times, using creative solutions to continue to make a living on their farm. The older farmers are conscious of themselves as a "transitional generation," recognizing that adaptation to new ways is necessary, but not wanting to lose the traditional knowledge they learned from

*their ancestors. Recognizing the benefits of the modern world (one woman mentions that she doesn't miss the days of wooden shoes!), several of the farmers mention adaptation coupled with awareness. Though they don't state it, I notice that part of this awareness is grieving, and sorting through which parts of the traditional world to hold on to with tenacity, and which can be let go with grace and mourning.*

*Through it all, we see the farmers plant their crops, tend their animals, attend a farm equipment expo, harvest and process produce and livestock, gather for celebration, take produce to market, protest falling prices, process paperwork, and live out their daily lives on their farms. Skilled cinematography and storytelling leads us through the film, inviting us into the seasonal rhythm of these farmers' lives. It elicits a recognition that we are part of this rhythm, connected to people and the natural world in all times and in our own place.*

*I recently spoke with Judith Lit about the film, her own background, her intentions in the film, and a deeper perspective on the lives and experiences of the individuals we meet in the Périgord.*

**Whole Terrain:** *What inspired you to make this film?*



Judith Lit, documentary filmmaker of *After Winter, Spring*

**Judith Lit:** When I found the Périgord, I was stunned to find myself in a world I felt like I had lost, something like that sense of community among farmers where I grew up in Pennsylvania. It doesn't exist there anymore. Families have given up farming and much of the land has been turned into subdivisions. Having lived through this experience in my childhood motivated me to capture a similar process that I now found in my new home in France. I began making this film to show what was being lost.

My conversations with my neighbors, on and off camera, before and during the film, moved over time to a deeper level. I felt a sense of connection with these farmers, despite our huge cultural differences. I recognized their way of seeing the world.

I began to feel like what is at risk of being lost, as this way of life disappears, is not only the wonderful food that comes from healthy farming, or even taking care of the environment so it can continue to feed us, but something else. There is a whole life view and a set of values that come from working intimately with nature: a sense of humility born of the fact that you're always at the mercy of things like the weather, forces you can't control. You can do your best — but it doesn't always work out.

Living like this also develops an acute attentiveness to your surroundings. One of the farmers in the film, Guy, came over last time I was there, and we were standing looking out at the forest that rings my meadow. Guy said, "Look Judith, look at the trees. You see how different types of trees blow differently in the wind?" The older farmers watch the clouds, knowing by how they are moving and forming what the weather will be like for the next three days.

There's also an understanding of the life cycle. In the film, Alfred talks about dying. He's been working with the births and deaths of his animals all his life, seeing the life cycle on a short-term basis. There's a continual process of grieving, accepting, and moving forward.

There are all these skills and values that I felt in their way of life and their way of seeing the world that I really wanted to show, because I think these are directly linked to the connection farmers have with the land.

*WT: What did the farmers think of you making a film about them?*



**JL:** It wasn't easy at the beginning. They were a little wary. I would go to families I already knew and ask if I could film. They were people who rarely had had a still photograph taken of them. To be nice to me they hesitantly said yes. I came with my small crew—camera and sound engineer—and eventually it became something they would look forward to. Soon they began to call me to let me know if they were going to be doing something they thought I might want to film. They were already comfortable with me because they'd known me for ten years and were used to talking about these things with me. Over time, they became friends with my cinematographer and sound recordist too. We would all visit and share meals together.

The one difficulty was finding a woman who would speak to me on film. Most women I approached deferred to their husbands. Nanou was the mother of a friend of mine and she and I had become friends as well. She had a wonderful, philosophical perspective, and I really wanted to have her in the film. She was

reluctant. It took a year and a half to convince her, but finally she agreed to do one interview in her kitchen. This became the master interview for her sequences in the film. She was fabulous! Now she sometimes will come to screenings with me to do a Q&A, and suddenly she's kind of a star and feels validated in a new way, which is wonderful to watch.

The film exists because of the people in it. Peasants are not often listened to in France, and the film gave these farmers a voice. They were just amazing. That said, I was terrified at the avant-première of the film, when they saw it for the first time. When I asked them to join me for the Q&A after the film, Guy leaned over and whispered to me, "You didn't betray us," and I was so relieved! Alain said to me, "You've made the film that I would have made if I could have." Nanou said, "You knew how to listen to us." It was such a responsibility to shoot a film about a culture that has a very strong sense of identity and pride, and isn't my own. It was terrifying at times, but I just had to trust my material and my relationships with the farmers. They were very much partners in this project.

*WT: What are some of the similarities and differences you see between farming in France and farming in the U.S.?*



**JL:** This region of Périgord was home to the Neanderthal and the Cro-magnan man. It is the site of the Lascaux caves, and the tiny region where I filmed is where the Venus of Laussel, the famous sculptural symbol of fertility dating back to 25,000 BC, was found, giving this area the name "Valley of the Goddess." Farming has been going on here uninterrupted for at least 5,000 years. The fact that it's perhaps going away was a powerful thing for me to explore. This depth of history and of farming history is something that affects the people who live in the Périgord. Farmers find prehistoric tools in their freshly plowed fields and collect them proudly. People are well aware of their place in the chain of a very long history.

That said, the problems farmers are facing are very similar in France and in the U.S. "Progress" has been a little slower coming to France, so the farming way of life is a little more intact there. Guy says, "I like to tell people I was born in the Middle Ages." He started farming with oxen, and that's only changed in the last 30 years.

A particular problem that French farmers face is that they're dealing with the requirements of the EU: how business should be conducted, pricing, and so on. It's no longer each European country making decisions that affect their own populations, so regulations are complex and not necessarily beneficial to farmers in a given country. This is hard for these farmers.

That said, France does try to protect its local production. They have AOC labeling (*Appellation d'origine contrôlée*, or "controlled designation of origin") for local products, so that, for example, in order to give a

certain name to your cheese—Camembert, Roquefort, Cantal—it has to come from a very specific geographic location with particular *terroir* (soil, climate, topography) and be produced using particular methods.

On the other hand, the amazing local food movement you see in the U.S. is not nearly as developed in France. Slowly, organic production is taking hold. Now I have a desire to make a film here about the exploding “good food movement” that’s going on in the U.S. and take it to France, because they would be stunned.

*WT: Through the film, you give dignity to these peasants and their work. In the U.S., it seems like we usually feel bad for peasants, and we want to reject the notion of “peasants” because it smacks of a class system. How did you feel about the term “peasant” before and after making this film, and would you say a little bit about your sense of the French/European understanding of what it means to be a peasant?*



**JL:** When we first subtitled the film, we used the word “farmer.” I did that because in English the word “peasant” has a pejorative connotation. But then I thought, “The people in my film refer to themselves as peasants with a sense of professional pride. That’s important. I need to honor that.” And we did a direct translation. In French, *paysan* means “people of the land.” Nanou calls herself a “retired peasant,” just like any other retired professional. It’s very matter of fact.

I say that and yet even in France, in the cities, the idea of working the land is often looked down upon. I had someone in Paris who watched the film say, “I had no idea the peasants were so articulate.” I was shocked. These peasant farmers express themselves beautifully and have much wisdom to share.

*WT: What is it like living on farmland in France compared to your childhood home in Pennsylvania? Do you feel a different sense of connection to the land?*

**JL:** It’s more like returning to a connection with the land. I showed the film to my dad, now 97. He said, “Oh, it’s all the same! This is the same story.” The Périgord is not the same as Pennsylvania is now, but it’s very similar to what it was like when I grew up.

But I find that in France’s countryside, there’s a particularly deep connection with place. The culture is not as mobile as ours. For example, I left a farm in Pennsylvania and moved to California, then went to New York, and now France. We Americans move around. The young people in the Périgord may decide not to farm, but they rarely leave the area. When you see grave stones in the cemetery, the name of the deceased is followed by: “at such-and-such farm,” indicating that people belong to their place.

When I get back to my farm, people to say to me, “You’re back amongst us.” The sense of community is very strong. They’ve been wonderful in letting me be part of that.

*WT: What do you hope people take away from this film?*

**JL:** I want people to remember. Most people have some sense of a historical connection to the land, maybe the farm of an uncle or grandparent, and I want to rekindle those connections. I want them to have a visceral and emotional sense of the importance of belonging to a particular place and caring for that place. What I wanted to do was something interior, to effect a response that’s deeply personal. Maybe this will lead to personal action. Maybe they’ll plant a vegetable garden, or choose to shop differently and support local farmers, or maybe they’ll teach their children to see and notice nature.

My neighbor who died was trying to teach me that we are part of nature. When the wild cranes migrate overhead—usually for several days, off and on— whole villages come out to stand and watch them. People rush out of their barns or houses, call to one another to come see thousands of birds filling the sky. The sound is raw and wild. Villages, couples, a lone farmer in his field, all watch in silence. It’s almost like a religious experience, something like reverence. The crane migration denotes a change of seasons, but I think it’s more than that: an acknowledgement of something wild, that has its own life, its own continuity.

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*Through the work of Judith Lit and her crew, we glimpse this dignified peasant life, humble, often traditional, facing many challenges, and yet aware of the world in ways that many of us have lost. To meet these farmers for yourself, you can purchase a DVD of After Winter, Spring for private use through the film’s [website](#), or purchase or rent the film for educational purposes or community screenings through [Bullfrog Films](#).*