

GLASGOW REVIEW OF BOOKS

GOT MILK? Marianna Simnett's short film 'The Udder'

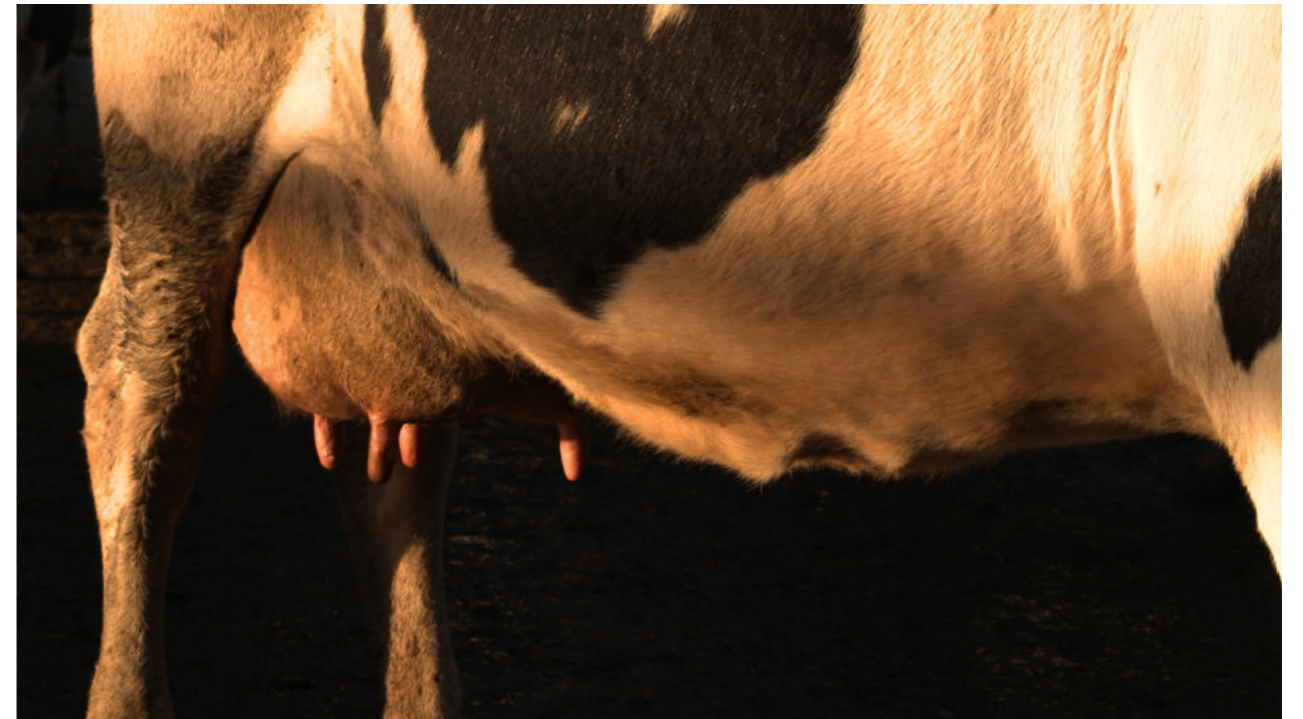
4 July 2014

ECOCRITICISM NOW: The essays, reviews, and poetry collected in this thread trace responses to the interlinked terms nature, ecology, and ecocriticism, all of which have come to occupy increasingly important roles in a number of everyday and academic discourses over the last few decades. The "now" of its title is therefore not only a mark of the interest of certain contributions in the development of ecocritical theory (ecocriticism at this moment in time), but also an injunction, a call for more. This thread is co-edited by Tom White.

The Udder was exhibited at the Jerwood Space, London, between the 12th of March and 27th of April, and the CCA, Glasgow, between the 4th of April and the 21st of April, as part of the Glasgow International Festival. More information on the video is available [here](#). All images used with permission by the artist.

Marianna Simnett, *The Udder* (2014)

by Sam Solnick



Milton and mammaries make for unlikely bedfellows, but they are at the heart of *The Udder*, Marianna Simnett's new Jerwood Prize-winning piece. Her fifteen-minute video manages to bring together ideas surrounding dairy farming, endocrinology and pathology, childhood, observation and control and, perhaps most intriguingly, seventeenth century notions of virtue. The contrasting layers are woven together into an exploration of purity and danger within the relations between the technological and the organic.

The majority of the piece takes place on a dairy farm. While small-scale this farm is fundamentally not a pastoral space or rural idyll: milking machines thrum and suck, the herdsman relies on intimate knowledge of the animals but also on a system of alarms and CCTV, tractors rumble past wire fences and disinfecting iodine is splashed across wibbling teats. This last action, we are told, is part of a series of measures taken to avoid mastitis – an extremely painful and highly contagious bacterial infection of the mammary gland that can affect humans as well as cows and drastically reduces milk production.

Some scenes take place inside a set which resemble the interior of a giant udder. From here three children – Isabel and her two brothers – lark and scheme while the (female) farmer and the (deaf) herdsman explain the processes of the dairy farm and the problems with mastitis which, at one point, the herdsman mis-lip-reads as “chastity.” Isabel, who is described by her mother (the farmer) as “too beautiful to play outside” escapes the confines of the udder space – much to the alarm of the herdsman – while her brothers are left inside to muse over whether she'll be safe out there, and whether her “chastity” will be enough to keep her from harm.



Relatively few viewers will spot that the two brothers debating over the chastity of their escaped sister is straight out of Milton's 1634 'A Mask presented at Ludlow Castle' (commonly known as *Comus*). It is certainly not crucial to the impact of Simnett's deftly edited and circular piece that they do – indeed it is only a couple of nods and hints (including a direct quotation from Geoffrey Hill's *Scenes from Comus*) that confirm Milton's direct influence. What is foregrounded is *Comus*' interest in shifting conceptions of chastity which, in Milton's Protestant milieu, are fundamentally not coterminous with the total purity of virginity. Simnett's piece homes-in on the tension between notions of absolute control or purity and a (moral) programme which is more geared towards a context-specific moderation that acknowledges the possibility of present or future contamination. Such a contamination may be sexual, spiritual, microbial or technological – all are at play in this film.

In *Comus* the character "the lady," while lost in the forest, must resist the sorcerer Comus – a Bacchus-descended seducer who anticipates the character of Satan in *Paradise Lost*. In *The Udder* Isabel must resist the temptations of her double – played by the same child-actress but with added lipstick. One part Lolita chatting in the mirror to two parts schizoid Golum talking to himself, this scene, like any implicit sexualisation of children, is unsettling with its talk of tongues, smudging of make-up and Isabel trilling about mastitis and chastity:

Mastitis mastitis

I'm swollen, so sore and inflamed.

There are, incidentally, five uses of the word "inflamed" in *Paradise Lost*. Four are associated with Satan, one with Satan's son Death who, "Inflamed with lust," copulates with his mother, Sin, bequeathing her monsters that continually gnaw on her. It is more than just happy coincidence that *The Udder's* Miltonic undercurrent offers a pleasingly grotesque parallel between this unfortunate vision of motherhood and the painfully mastitic udders of dairy

cows; between inflaming lust and inflamed teats. It is also worth noting that the hormone oxytocin – which the film tells us is crucial to lactation because it makes the teat "erect and turgid" – also plays important roles in orgasm and maternal bonding.

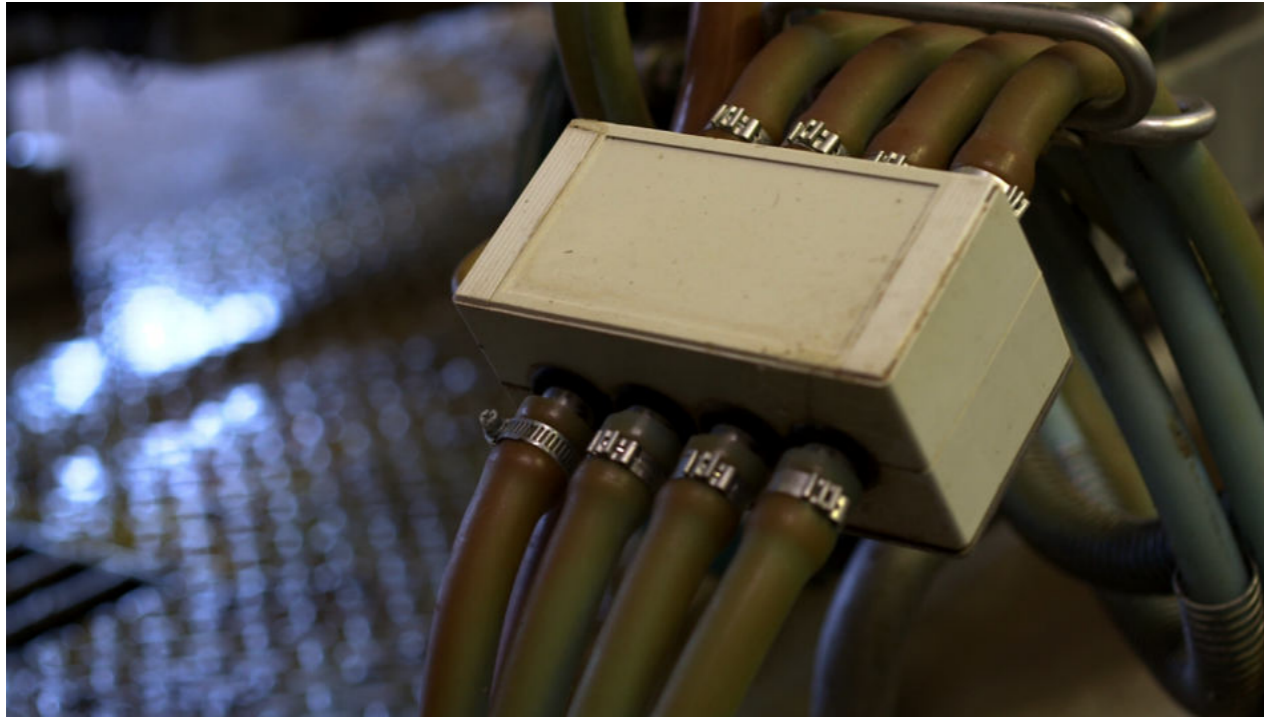
As the film loops farm-robots malfunction, oaths are (half) made and (perhaps) broken, and Isabel, presumably to avoid the abuses that might be vested upon her for being "too beautiful" to play outside, ends up slicing off her own nose. Not so incidentally this recalls the story of Saint Æbbe of Coldingham, whose actions in the face of Viking invasion Milton recorded in his 'commonplace book': 'Æbbe monacha nosum sibi et labia truncavit' [The nun Æbbe cut off her nose and lips]. Her intention being to preserve her virtue against the threat of rape.

What to
make
then of
this
self-



mutilation, this technological slicing in the name of chastity? Æbbe's actions belong to a more demanding vision of chastity than that which we find in *Comus* and which, within the film, intimates a shift from that which might liberate or protect into something that causes us to damage our "natural" bodies or desires. Cutting off one's nose to spite one's face; morality becoming tyranny.

Simnett uses the parallel between bacterial infection and sexual virtues alongside a series of edits and fades which establish a clear visual relation between nose and udder, setting up a constellation of ideas and images surrounding noses, teats and genitals. (Interestingly, Freud's friend and sometime collaborator Wilhelm Fliess proposed that there was a link between the nose and female genitalia.) The various techniques and technologies used to prevent mastitis take on a sinister hue. The depictions of and explanations for udders being shaved ("hair on the udder increases the risk of environmental mastitis. It should always be clipped") are brought into the orbit of female epilation – an aspect of the beauty industry where the rendering-hairless reaches toward a certain paradigm of desirability which turns away from humans' (animal) creatureliness. At the other end of the spectrum (and remember that Æbbe slices off her nose and *lips*) lurks the horror of female genital mutilation. Nevertheless, it would be an injustice to the film's interwoven tensions, allusions and anxieties to claim that Simnett is simply making her case for eschewing an overzealous moral program – that the film is "of the Devil's party" and knows it.



There is more going on in *The Udder* than I have detailed here and it would perhaps be milking the film's paralleling of farming and fucking a bit too much to assert that various attempts to sanitise the sexuality and the body are in some ways isomorphic with a society increasingly alienated from food production by agribusiness. We no longer know what it means to be made of the white stuff. Nevertheless, what is clear is that Simnett challenges us to reevaluate our conceptions of technology and what we call natural (whether 'natural' refers to microorganisms, copulation, hormones or landscape). On the one hand she tracks the ways chastity *through* technology – i.e. protective or preventative technologies and techniques – might metamorphose from help to hindrance to harm. On the other hand she brings into focus how the contrapuntal tendency – chastity *from* technology, where we affirm purportedly “natural” capacities over the technological – is itself drastically problematic. The pervasiveness of technology means that everywhere the organic is supplemented or supplanted by that which cannot really be called natural (if it ever could). With this in mind we have to ask what sorts of “moderation” might exist, what relations, practices and rituals, what ways of being-with-technology, might stop its worst excesses and engender new possibilities.

Category : Art, Ecocriticism, Film, Video

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