The Buffalo Film Seminars

Conversations about great films with Diane Christiani and Bruce Jackson

Directed by Agnès Varda
Music by Joanna Bruzdowicz
Cinematography by Patrick Blossier

Sandrine Bonnaire ... Mona Bergeron, sans toit ni loi
Setti Ramdane ... le marocaine qui la trouve


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Setti Ramdane ... le marocaine qui la trouve has appeared in only 1 film—1985 Vagabond.

French director and scenarist, was born in Ixelles, Belgium, the daughter of Eugène Jean Varda, an engineer, and the former Christiane Pasquet. Her mother came from Sète, a small seaport in the south of France near Montpellier, and during the war the family lived there on a boat. After attending the Collège de Sète, Varda completed her education at the Lycée Victor-Durow in Paris and at the Sorbonne, where she received a bachelor’s degree in literature. The move to Paris, she recalls, was “truly excruciating” and left her with “a frightful memory of my arrival in this grey, inhuman, sad city.” Classes at the Sorbonne struck her as “stupid, antiquated, abstract, scandalously unsuited for the lofty needs one had at that age,” while her fellow students were sufficiently unfriendly that she stayed close to acquaintances from Sète for some time. She at first intended to become a museum curator and studied at the École du Louvre before switching to the Vaugirard school of photography. In 1951, when Jean Vilar (another native of Sète) launched the Théâtre National Populaire, he hired Varda as the TNP’s official photographer, a post she retained for ten years. As the theatre became better known, so too did her photographs, and she began to receive photo-journalistic assignments that took her all over France and to Germany, England, and elsewhere.

At this point, although some of her Parisian friends were interested or involved in filmmaking, Varda knew little about cinema and says she had seen no more than twenty movies by the time she was twenty-five. In this state of ignorance she wrote her first scenario, “just the way a person writes his first book. When I’d finished writing it, I thought to myself: “I’d like to shoot that script,” and so some friends and I formed a cooperative to make it.” Even then, she says, she “had the feeling…that the cinema was not free, above all in its form, and that annoyed me. I wanted to make a film exactly as one writes a novel.” For her, the process of “finding my way”—as a woman above all—was instinctive: “Because I am not at all a theoretician of feminism, I did all that—my photos, my craft, my film, my life—on my terms, my own terms, and not to do it like a man, not like a man.”

La Pointe Courte (1955) is a full-length feature set in the small fishing village of that name in the south of France, not far from Sète, and telling two separate stories. One concerns the struggle of the local fishermen (who are played by themselves) against the economic domination of the big combines; the other is about a young man (Philippe Noiret) who comes home with his Persian wife (Sylvia Monfort) in a last attempt to save their failing marriage. The two stories unfold side by side, counterpointing each other but never merging. It is significant that Varda derives this structure not from the cinema but from literature—from William Faulkner’s The Wild Palms, which is made up of two stories printed in alternate chapters.

Varda says: “I tried to establish the relationship between people and things. The hero’s theme is wood: his father was a marine carpenter. Wood is his natural element. He is most himself within the wooden frame of a boat—which is both matrix and cradle. For the heroine, the theme is iron: winch, rails, train. They belong in different realms: and this is their key paradox of life. The film is about a young man (Philippe Noiret) who comes home with his Persian wife (Sylvia Monfort) in a last attempt to save their failing marriage. The two stories unfold side by side, counterpointing each other but never merging. It is significant that Varda derives this structure not from the cinema but from literature—from William Faulkner’s The Wild Palms, which is made up of two stories printed in alternate chapters.

The film also embodies the concept of verfremdung, usually translated as “alienation”—a dramatic theory and technique of which Brecht is the most famous exponent. It signifies a deliberate attempt to distance the spectator from what he being shown so that, instead of identifying emotionally with the protagonist to the point where he “loses himself” in the play, he retains his objectivity and his critical faculties. Varda introduces this element my making the young man and his wife abstract figures, nameless and without individuality, speaking a non-naturalistic and literary kind of dialogue. She wrote this dialogue, she says, “with a desire for complication of the style
and simplification of the characters. We are concerned with an abstract couple, we don’t really know who they are, what they are doing, where they are going later. It was not that which interested me.”

*La Pointe Courte* was written, directed, and produced by Varda, photographed by Louis Stein, and edited by Alain Resnais. It was, in Varda’s words, “hand-made” in her own apartment, from the scenario to the editing (on a rented machine): “I listened to the music I loved, I continued to plant my flowers, with the idea that the kind of life I had chosen, that this house where I was living, I needed them to function.” Most critics agree that Sylvia Montfort’s overly theatrical performance clashed with the documentary sobriety of the other story and some maintain that Varda, trained as a still photographer, gives more attention in this novice work to composition within the frame than to the sequence of shots. The film is nevertheless visually beautiful and startlingly original, and it has been claimed as a *nouvelle vague* picture several years ahead of its time.

And indeed it does satisfy many of the criteria later used to identify the New Wave—low-budget filming outside the studio system, on location, using nonprofessional actors. The combination of documentary and fictional material and the deliberate distancing effect were also adopted by some of the *nouvelle vague* directors. What distinguishes Varda’s film from the work of Godard, Truffaut, and the other New Wave filmmakers associated with André Bazin’s influential journal *Cahiers de Cinéma*, is that it is the product of a cinematic intelligence shaped not by the movies themselves but by literature and the plastic arts, especially painting and photography. The *Cahiers* directors were film addicts before they became filmmakers, and it was a pardonable exaggeration when Roger Leehardt claimed that they discovered Shakespeare through the films of Orson Welles. In any case, the *Cahiers* circle was immediately impressed by *La Pointe Courte*; Bazin wrote that it was “a miraculous film. In its existence and its style.” For Truffaut, it was “an experimental work, ambitious, honest, and intelligent.”

Attempting to divide into manageable parts the welter of new talents that constitute the *nouvelle vague*, critics have dubbed Varda and her friends and associates the Left Bank Group, after the riverfront in Paris where they all live. It is a cosmopolitan area long associated with the literary and artistic avant-garde, social non-conformity, and left-wing politics—as much a state of mind as a geographical location. The most prominent members of the Left Bank Group are Varda herself, Alain Resnais, and Chris Marker, who has emerged as its central figure. Henri Colpi, Armand Gatti, and Jean Cayrol are also associated with the group, whose members are mostly older, more widely cultured, more interested in formal problems, and more politically conscious than the *Cahiers* directors are or were. They also share a reluctance to be lumped together in anything so Procrustean as a school or movement. Varda will go no further than to concede that: “We have in common a certain way of thinking, a certain complicity… I often have the impression of sharing with Resnais the same sort of plastic vocabulary and sometimes with Marker the same desire to amuse myself, a certain way of seeing funny things, a…rather detached way of talking about them.”

For his part, Resnais denies that they have anything at all in common, “apart from cats.” However, it is well known that he was reluctant to take on the editing of *La Pointe Courte* because it was no nearly the film that he wanted to make himself—and its structural similarity to *Hiroshima mon amour*, made five years later, is beyond dispute. It was Resnais who nagged Varda into acquiring a cinematic education: “When he was editing…[*La Pointe Courte*], he kept saying: ‘H’m, this bit’s like Visconti.’ ‘Mm, this piece reminds me of Antonioni,’ until I got so fed up with it all that I went along to the Cinémathèque to find out what he was talking about.”

*La Pointe Courte* is a key film in the history of the New Wave and the Left Bank Group in particular, as it is in Varda’s own work, where the use of parallel story-lines, abstract characters, and personified objects, as well as the overriding influence of the visual arts, are consistent features. According to Varda, the film “hit like a cannonball because I was a young woman, since before that, in order to become a director, you had to spend years as an assistant….In fact it’s a film that had very few viewers, and its real success was not so much as an object of culture but as a family snapshot: the pleasure of seeing one’s mother or one’s boat on the screen.” Financially *La Pointe Courte* was a total failure, and for the next seven years Varda had to content herself with documentary shorts, beginning with two publicity films commissioned by the French tourist office. Neither was the sort of routine travelogue that might have been expected. In *O saisons, o châteaux*, the classic beauty of the Loire chateaux is set off against the extravagant and ephemeral creations of the French fashion designers, paraded by young models against the old stone, and all this elegance is burlesqued in a sort of ballet of chateaux gardeners. *Du côté de la Côte*, about the Riviera, pointedly contrasts the teeming beaches of the masses with the private gardens of the rich—unspoiled but exclusive Edens.

The short that followed, *Opéra Mouffe* (1958), is one of Varda’s own favorites among her films. It is a documentary about the Left Bank streetmarket on the Rue Mouffetard and the slums around it, seen from the specialized viewpoint of a pregnant woman (which Varda at that time was). There are shots (some of them taken with a concealed camera) of other women in pregnancy, of children playing in the streets, of old people worn down by poverty and anxiety; others of naked lovers and of images (gourds, doves) related visually or symbolically to pregnancy. “I myself had a very happy pregnancy,” Varda says, but she “constructed the experience as it might be for a woman of
the district... *Opéra Mouffe* is a film about panic. At bottom a tender film. What has been called its cruelty comes from the strength of its feeling.” She made it as her contribution to the 1958 Brussels Experimental Film Festival, where it won the prize of the International Federation of Film Clubs.

In 1962 Varda received backing for her second feature from Georges Be Beauregard, whose Paris-Rome Films had produced Godard’s *À Bout de souffle* two years earlier. The resulting film *Cléo de cinq à sept* (*Cleo From Five to Seven*), is an account of ninety crucial minutes in the life of a spoiled and beautiful young pop singer (Corinne Marchand)—ninety minutes during which she is awaiting the results of a medical test that may show she has cancer. Terrified by a fortune-teller’s warning of a major change in her life, Cléo leaves her elegant white apartment and the selfish and trivial life it contains and wanders through Paris from the Rue de Rivoli to the Salpêtrière Hospital. On the way she encounters a party of carnival revelers whose exuberance underlines her loneliness and fear, briefly visits a movie theatre showing a silent entertainer who swallows live frogs, and everywhere sees evidence of violence and alienation. These experiences of indifference and cruelty are followed by a chance meeting with a young soldier that seems to promise a deeper relationship than the casual affairs she has known, and the hospital report when she receives it, gives her additional grounds for hope. Cléo’s journey across Paris is also a spiritual journey, and we see her grow, under the threat of death, from unthinking superficiality to the beginnings of real perception.

Varda wrote the film herself, as she always does, and was given an entirely free hand by the producers. She had Jean Rabier as her photographer, Bernard Evein as a designer, and a score by Michel Legrand. (The latter, who also appears as a composer in the movie, wrote the music for *Les Parapluies de Cherbourg* and other films by Jacques Demy, whom Varda married in January 1962.) Screen time in the film equals real time—that is, an incident which in reality would last three minutes occupies three minutes in the film, with no elisions, so that the spectator shares Cléo’s ordeal in its entirety. The secondary characters—Cléo’s maid, her lover, her friend, various musicians, and the young soldier—are well and convincingly drawn, and Paris is very beautifully and knowledgeably photographed, seen afresh as Cléo sees it. In this film, as in *La Courte Pointe* and indeed in the documentaries, the relationship between people and their environment is given great prominence—“If we open people up,” Varda once said, “we should find landscapes inside.”

A critical and popular success (and one that later became a New Wave cult film), Cléo received the Prix Méliès, and Varda was inundated with offers to make what she describes as “more pictures about dying blonde singers.” In spite of this, Varda was unable to find a producer for her own project, *La Mélangite*, an ambitious feature conceived in 1960 and still unrealized. She had continued to work from time to time as a photographer, visiting China and other countries, and in 1963 she went to Cuba. Returning with several thousand photographs, she edited fifteen hundred of them into a “homage to Cuba”—a movie paradoxically made up of still photographs in a montage cut to the rhythms of Cuban dance music. *Salut les Cubains* received the Bronze Lion at the Venice Film Festival in 1964.

*Le Bonheur* (*Happiness*, 1965) is one of the best-known and most controversial of Varda’s films. A young carpenter lives an idyllic life in the Paris suburbs with his wife, whom he dearly loves, and his delightful children. After a while he falls in love also with a girl who works in the post office (Marie-France Boyer). He proposes that his loving family should be extended to include her, thus increasing the supply of happiness. To him, nothing could be more natural, but his wife, a more conventionally possessive person, finds the notion so traumatic that she drowns herself. After her death the mistress replaces her, and life goes on as happily as before. This outcome proved deeply shocking both to conventional moralists and to some feminist and political activists, who regarded the film as a sellout to escapist and decorative fantasy.

As in *La Pointe Courte*, the principal characters are left deliberately undeveloped and unexplained—not individuals but exemplary figures invented to illustrate a thesis, or at any rate a speculative essay on the possibilities for human happiness that might exist beyond the nuclear family….

Varda has said that she wanted *Le Bonheur* “to arouse the same feelings I get looking at old vacation snapshots, and, in another way, from impressionist paintings. Critics were reminded of the films of Renoir and those of Jacques Demy. Varda’s husband (her photographer, Jean Rabier, also shot Demy’s *Les Parapluies de Cherbourg*). The carpenter and his family are played by members of a real family—the television actor Jean-Claude Drouot, Claire Drouot, and their children. *Le Bonheur* won many awards, including the Prix Dellecu, the Silver Bear at the Berlin Festival, and the David Selznick Award.

In her first film, Agnès Varda had tried to show how objects take on a different significance depending on the mind of the observer. This process is carried much further in *Les Créatures* (*The Creatures*, 1966), an examination of the relationship between reality and fiction in which human beings are subjected to the transforming power of the creative imagination. A science fiction writer (Michel Piccoli) and his wife (Catherine Deneuve) come to an island in Brittany where they hope to recover from an automobile accident that has left him physically and mentally scarred and her dumb. She is expecting a child and he is pregnant also with a new novel. …Henri Langlois thought the move “pure Méliès in its visual ingenuity and wit but many reviewers found it confusing and intellectually pretentious, and were alienated by Varda’s refusal to individualize her characters. Financially it was a failure, and once again Varda made no more features for several years. She
contributed an episode to Chris Marker’s *Loin du Vietnam* (*Far from Vietnam*, 1967), but this was never used.

When Demy went to the United States in 1967 to direct *Model Shop* for Columbia Pictures, Varda accompanied him and made two shorts in the Bay Area, one, *Uncle Janco* (*Uncle Janco*, 1968), about the uncle she discovered there, and the other, *Les Panthères noirs*, (*The Black Panthers*, 1968), about the black militant organization based in Oakland. For her, these were “personal and political documentaries; I could have filmed them anywhere.” She was, nonetheless, fascinated with Hollywood and wanted to make a film in Los Angeles. When Columbia Pictures refused to give her final editing rights for a film called *Peace and Love*, she dropped the project (“I didn’t see why I had to have fewer right in Hollywood than in France”) and found independent backing for *Lion’s Love*, a film she made outside the commercial studios “in total freedom.”

*Lion’s Love* (1969) was in fact about an avant-garde woman director who goes to Hollywood to make a movie. The heroine is played by Shirley Clarke, and the friends she stays with are Viva (one of Andy Warhol’s superstars) and James Rado and Jerome Ragni (coauthors and stars of *Hair*). According to Varda, Viva, Rado, and Ragni were eager to work with her because they too “wouldn’t accept the rules of the game and had been swept aside.” Richard Roud wrote that the film’s real subject is filmmaking itself, “and therefore when Shirley Clarke is supposed to attempt suicide and cannot go through with the scene, it is not at all surprising that Varda jumps in and acts the part herself. And when Viva complains (to camera) at the end of the film that her dream of being in a *real* movie has once more been frustrated, it is neither inappropriate nor startling. What did startle—even shock—American audiences was the confrontation between the four characters of the film and the assassination of Robert Kennedy [seen on television].”

*Les Dites Ciné-Tamaris*. The result was *L’Une chante, l’autre pas*. (*One Sings, the Other Doesn’t*, 1977), an intimate portrayal of two women’s lives over a decade of personal and social change….Along with *Le Bonheur*, *Une chante* was the most widely discussed of Varda’s films to date, and one of them most admired, receiving the Grand Prix at the Taormina Festival.

In 1979 Varda returned to Los Angeles to start a short film on a local news item; the intended two-week visit led to a six-month step-contract to work with an American coscenarist, which in turn expanded into a two-year stay in the beach community of Venice, California. Out of this experience, which Varda characterizes as he double exile (from France and Hollywood alike), came a pair of films presenting Varda’s perception of Los Angeles from two angles. *Mur Murs* (*Mural,* 1978, eight minutes) and *One minute for One Image* (1983, a related collection of 170 two-minute films recording how people respond to photos of or by themselves). In 1984 she made a few shorts more, a twelve-minute “cine-poem,” *Les Dites-Cariatides* (*The So-Called Cariatids*) and a half-hour treatment of family life….Varda then began working on a one-hour film which she first called *À saisir* (*Grab Onto It*), because, as she later explained, “it was a film to grab onto, still wandering.”

The film that she eventually made, inspired in part by her encounters with young drifters, was *Sans toît ni loi* (*Vagabond*, literally “Without roof or law”) the full-length feature that won the Golden Lion at the 1985 Venice film festival. “I had an urgent desire to make this film,” she told interviewers,” and I wanted to conserve my energy. I gave myself two weeks to find a producer, no more. With funding from Jacques Lang, the French Minister of Culture, and from a French television station (and later from Britain’s Channel 4), she began work with a two-page plot summary, inviting actress Sandrine Bonnaire to play the part.
of the teenage drifter Mona. Her basic idea was “to tell the story of a wandering character in relation to those who see that character pass by, more or less seen by them….All of us understand loneliness, and I wanted to make a film about someone who pushed that to total rebellion….I didn’t want to adopt Mona, to pretend I knew everything about her. I wanted to examine her behavior, not explain why she was the way she was.”

As Mona’s itinerary was established in the region of Nimes in the south of France, Varda, who’d scouted the locations herself, wrote local people into the story—truck drivers, garage mechanics, migrant workers, relics of the counter-culture, actual drifters. Other characters were fictionalized and acted by professionals—Madame Landier (Macha Mériel), a tree conservationist who (as Varda had done) picks Mona up in her car; her student Jean-Pierre (Stephan Freiss) and his wife (Yolande Moreau).…“The whole film is one long traveling shot,” says Varda, alluding to the repeated views of Mona marching, right to left. “It’s cut in pieces, the pieces are spread apart, and the ‘adventure’ set in place.”

Varda showed a 140-minute version of the film to twelve people whom she then presented with a twelve-page questionnaire, asking them about the plot, the structure, what they would cut, condense, reedit, and so forth—not, she stressed, to do American style market research but to determine “the common denominator of perception.” A second test version, at 125 minutes, was shown two weeks later to a different audience, after which Varda cut the film down to the final 106 minutes (she then used the outtakes to make her own trailer). “Where my film is involved,” she concedes, “I’m an extremist.”

The story created by this process begins with the discovery of Mona’s frozen body in a ditch and then moves through the series of chance encounters that filled the last weeks of her life. A web of interconnections gradually emerges—the maid whose boyfriend burges the house where Mona camped for a night is sacked by Aunt Lydie’s nephew, who is also Madame Lanier’s student; David, the drifter with whom Mona spends a few days crosses her path again when he sets fire to the squalid communal residence that is her last stop; the migrant worker who promises to take her in and can’t is mirrored by another who finds her body. But in all this, Mona is never the hub of the interconnections, merely the hapless, if not innocent creature trapped by them. As the story moves along, the audience is inevitably involved, implicated, left feeling as incapable of reaching Mona as the other characters in the film do, and as frightened by the extremity of her alienation. Her death, initially perceived as grotesque, by the end of the film comes as a relief, bringing an end to suffering for her and those around her (including the audience).

_San toit ni loi_ was an immediate success. Critics praised its structure and rhythm, its stunning integrity, the authenticity of the situations, and the acting, above all the profoundly disturbing performance by Sandrine Bonnaire, who received a César. Varda’s response was characteristically down-to-earth. “It took me much more time to put this film together than just being a director….I raised the money, I took the risk, and now I’m paying it back. After all this is finished, then maybe I can breathe and think of something else.”

She points out that filmmaking for her is women’s work: “The way that I had set up an artisanal system of filmmaking made me think [later]…that I had found the equivalent of the activity of those women who weave cloth, or do hand sewing, those women of another time who were creative in those crafts that were in women’ domain.” She said of _L’Une chante_ that she had no intention of making a militant film—“I’d like to see and direct films which warm people, make them coherent, aware, and content.”

_Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, “Vagabond” (Criterion Film Notes)_

Vagabond has been called Agnès Varda’s _Ulysses_, and with good reason. The comparison with James Joyce’s era-defining epic novel extends well beyond a recognizable similarity between the two artists. Both writer and filmmaker occupy vanguard positions in the history of their respective forms, each bringing an experimental vitality to his and her work that affirms the social dimension of art. Just as Joyce attempted to describe contemporary consciousness by reworking the Homeric foundation of modern culture, so does Varda model her simple tale—of a woman’s place in today’s complex and unresponsive world—on that seminal document of modernist cinema, Orson Welles’ _Citizen Kane_.

“If you tell the story of _Citizen Kane_,” Varda has said, “it’s not much of a story. An old rich mogul man is dead. He said a word we don’t understand. We don’t discover so much, just some pieces of his life and finally it is just a sled. Is that a story? It is not much. So what makes _Citizen Kane_ so interesting is the way [Welles] told us about the man—intriguing us about what people think about him.” And, with as much perversity as playfulness, Varda gives us the total inversion of Welles’ masterpiece in _Vagabond_: a young, poor vagrant woman is dead. She died in a way we don’t understand. We don’t discover so much, just some pieces of her life and finally it is just a pagan ritual of the vine.

This thin armature of a plot, “not much” in terms of the kind of action we are increasingly subjected to on the movie screen, becomes the deep structure around which Varda paints a vivid,
engaging portrait of the texture of daily life in modern France. Through the range of people that Varda’s heroine Mona encounters in the last few weeks of her life (people of all classes, from foreign workers to centuries-old peasant families, from professional women and men to shopkeepers, construction workers, and truckdrivers, from young business people on the make to social marginals of all ages), and through the variety of places that Mona’s journey takes her (from Arab migrant workers’ vineyard housing to a goat farm run by university dropouts, from an abandoned 17th century mansion-turned-playground for stoned hippies to a professional conference in a well-heeled suburban hotel), we learn a documentary lesson about contemporary society while we discover new insights about ourselves and the cultural and subjective attitudes that shape us.

Yet Varda is not content to simply present us with a ready-made world. Directly related to the specific attention to local detail in each of Mona’s encounters is the implicit demand for our own opinions as viewers. And, through Varda’s brilliant mix of documentary and fiction, our own thoughts and suggestions seem to be treated as if we, too, were actual participants in Mona’s world. (This strategy of interweaving “real” events and places with constructed fictions of both character and plot has been central to Varda’s work since her first feature film, La Pointe Courte (1954), which literally inaugurated the French New Wave by anheating both Jean-Luc Godard’s Breathless and François Truffaut’s The 400 Blows (both 1959) by several years.) Each “witness” who remembers Mona has a story to tell, but the line between actual French people and actors playing characters is always ambiguously drawn. Mona herself is based on a young vagabond whom Varda met on the road (she even has a small role in the film), while many of Mona’s experiences are evidence of Varda’s inventive artistry. Yet Varda is always conscious of the precarious balance between fact and fiction in a medium that can only exist by virtue of the spectator’s imagination. From her single voiceover address to the viewer (that sets into place the parameters by which to investigate Mona’s life) to her assertion of the writer’s hand in the opening credits of the film (Cinécrit par Agnès Varda), the director makes it clear that while what we see looks like reality, our engagement with it requires, as do all works of art, our imaginative capability and a sense of respect. And while the film has the casual quality of a travelogue or a loosely-sketched portrait, it provides many opportunities for serious thought. For this reason, in this perplexing, disturbing, and ultimately unexplainable film, there are moments of pure grace, dazzling and unexpected instances of the sublime that make Vagabond, rather than a cynical invitation to drop out, a Whitmanesque celebration of everything human.

“Agnès Varda, Filmmaker,” Believer (October 2009)

Agnès Varda is sitting in a hotel room during the Toronto International Film Festival, and there is a photographer looming in the corner. She doesn’t want him to shoot while she is talking—she insists he do it now. “Don’t take pictures of the others, please! Make no mistake which one is me,” she says. “We have a brunette, here. A blond. You have the choice. Oh my god. Move back!” she cries. “You have a telephoto! Why do you need to be so close? It’s like a gun!”

Six journalists sit around, drinking tea and coffee, all poised to interview her at once. She asks a newspaperman, “Did you get the press kit? It is full of information. You could even invent that you met me. Say, ‘We were in a little room. She had the light behind her because her eyes fear the light. And we had tea and coffee.’”

This interview is invented; many of the questions are made up. Of the questions that are asked here, I did not ask them all, but the answers are always Varda’s own. She was not interested in speaking to each reporter individually, and since her latest films, in particular, are more interested in the feeling of truth than the truth, there is no reason for me to argue with her method. I hope this interview conveys at least the feeling of the truth of speaking with Agnès Varda, if not the literal truth of the situation.

In 1954, Varda established herself as a significant figure in French cinema with her first film, La pointe-courte, only partly because it had come from a woman in her mid-twenties with no film training. It melded documentary footage of fishers in a fishing village with a somewhat melodramatic fictional love story about two young city-dwellers for whom the fishing village is mere setting. It is considered the first film of the nouvelle vague, and was followed by the magnificent allegory of beauty and death Cléo de 5 à 7 (1962). Recently, her four most beloved films were collected in a Criterion box set that shows her mastery, her sensitivity, her imagination and range. These include La pointe-courte, Cléo de 5 à 7, Le bonheur (1965), and Sans toit ni loi (1985).

Her most recent film, Les plages d’Agnès, is a collage self-portrait of her passions through eighty years of life, the material for which includes her past films, images from art, footage with friends, some invention, some fact. Her films have, from the beginning, encompassed many genres and none.

—Sheila Heti

I. “YOU HAVE TO BE STRONG TO BE A CARPENTER, MAYBE, BUT THE DIRECTOR OF A FILM DOESN’T NEED TO HAVE MUSCLES. THIS IS WHY I DIDN’T KNOW WHY I COULDN’T DO IT.”

AGNÈS VARDA: I should say nothing! I’m through with it! I hate to repeat myself all the time. I cannot invent totally. I cannot say something different to one person and then another. I cannot make it totally different each time, you know. I say so much in the film and so much even in the press kit! I quoted Montaigne. So I would say, can we have subsidiary questions, or side questions? Can we speak about the weather? Or the tennis that I watch in my room?

THE BELIEVER: It’s so nice to see that you have had the same haircut always, because I’ve had the same haircut all my life, and I always try to change it but it’ll never change.
AV: I remember when I tried it. I was nineteen and I put a bowl on and I said, Cut around! Because it was not the fashion at the time when I did that hairdo—and I kept it all my life! At the time of Cléo I grew it a little more, and when Jacques died I grew a bit here. [She pulls out a strand.] I made a braid because Chinese old people, they say that the God will take you by the hair to join you with—but God didn’t take me, so I cut the braid. Now it’s the same hairdo but it has two colors—come on! It’s different! It’s like an ice cream of chocolate and vanilla! I tried a wig. I hated myself totally white. So now I cheat. It’s my white hair, and I put color there. My grandson says I’m punk. I tell you—better they laugh about their grandmother than think she’s a bore. Some grandmothers are really boring! They ask, Ah ha ha—did you do this?—be careful—put your sweater on! C’est ça. So, in a way, we try to please them somehow.

BLVR: You had a remarkable career in an age when women didn’t have careers—

AV: I had a world. I don’t think I had a career. I made films.

BLVR: Yes, it would be odd, thinking of cinema as an extension of life as you do, and at the same time thinking of it as a career or trying to make a place in history.

AV: I don’t try to make a place in history at all! People put me in the history of cinema because my first film, La pointe-courte, was so ahead of some other filmmakers. Many filmmakers have made resurgent work, and I was just a little ahead of the time. It happened because of La pointe-courte, which is a very strange film, but very daring for ’54.

BLVR: How did you get started?

AV: I was a photographer first. I went alone to China—not alone. I was in a group, but I worked alone. I did it my way as much as I could. I have been sort of courageous about doing things, because I didn’t think I should do less than my brothers. But I wouldn’t be courageous in terms of a physical thing. I never fought, I never learned kung fu or boxing, I never went into these sportif competitions. I wouldn’t cross the ocean. I think it’s ridiculous to take such risk. But look, people love to do that. But I was not afraid of doing things I wished to do. I did not think that woman would be restrained. I never saw that, especially not in filmmaking, where you don’t have to be strong. You have to be strong to be a carpenter, maybe, but the director of a film doesn’t need to have muscles. This is why I didn’t know why I couldn’t do it.

When I started my first film, there were three women directors in France. Their films were OK, but I was different. It’s like when you start to jump and you put the pole very high—you have to jump very high. I thought, I have to use cinema as a language. When I saw what painting had done in the last thirty years, what literature had done—people like Joyce and Virginia Woolf, Faulkner and Hemingway—in France we have Nathalie Sarraute—and paintings became so strongly contemporary while cinema was just following the path of theater. Theater! I mean, psychology and drama and dialogue and making sense! At that time, when I started, in the ’50s, cinema was very classical in its aims, and I thought, I have to do something which relates with my time, and in my time, we make things differently.

BLVR: Differently in what way?

AV: When I did Cléo, I thought, I have to work with time. We feel time differently when we are suffering or are in pain or we are waiting for something. So subjective time became the subject for me—plus the duration of the time of the film that the spectator perceives. I worked with matters that are there for any artist to work with, but which I worked at with cinema. I didn’t have a list of things I should do this year, next year, find a good novel, sign two stars and make a deal—because I think cinema should come from cinema. I never adapted anything. Beautiful books are beautiful books, that’s it. I don’t know why we should transform them. I have respect for literature. If he found the words, if she found the words—this is a book! Bien! I didn’t think I should do a career by picking this or that. I waited for each film to become important for me. If I had no ideas for a film, I didn’t do a film. So I made not that many films for fifty-four years of working. I think I did fifteen long features and fifteen documentaries, or something like this, which is very little when you think of people making a film every year. Some people have done fifty or sixty films.

BLVR: The way you made Les plages d’Agnès can be seen as a kind of gleaning—you found material that already existed to put in your film. It is almost like you were looking into the ground, bringing up images from the past, from old films you had made, and photographs, and scenes from the films of your late husband, Jacques Demy.

AV: But gleaning is getting things that are abandoned. I did not abandon my early pictures, my photos, my early films. It’s just going through my body of work as something I can pick from—I pick this and that and that. It’s like I had a collection of my work and I could choose this one or this one. With Jane Birkin, we had a scene from a film called Jane B. by Agnès V.—a portrait I made in ’87. We had a casino scene, surrealistic, in which we had some naked people gambling. Jane Birkin was the card dealer and I was the player. I had beautiful jewelry around me, and when I lost I would take the jewelry and say, Service—being very generous, because it was very expensive jewelry. I would say, Tip. Now, I just take this piece of film, and I make a narration in Les plages where I say I’m losing. I say that I lost my father. We are watching the roulette ball, and the ball stops and I say, That is where it fell—and he died. He lost, he fell, he died. Which is a totally different use of the same images. That was my game. And it works. You can have seen Jane B. or not.

II. “THE STORY OF A COUPLE IS ALWAYS VERY FRAGILE, ESPECIALLY OVER MORE THAN THIRTY YEARS.”
BLVR: Is each film a game, then, in some way? Is every film like you’re making a different game for yourself to play?
AV: Well, there is a song of Gainsbourg that Jane Birkin sang, and the words are beautiful in French. It says, “Le jeu et les moi.” It’s impossible to translate, because it has a very nice sound. It sounds so lovely in French. So I took that because it was the subject: I and myself and myself and I. Which is, in a way, boring, because it is a contradiction.
BLVR: You also brought in images of people from your past, like Harrison Ford. Is he a friend of yours?
AV: I never met him since he became so famous-famous. But yes, he came to the opening of Vagabond in Los Angeles. Whenever we meet he is very friendly, but, you know, these people cannot even be reached! If I knew how to reach him—I went to the country in his house where we shot in the winter, and he told for the camera the story that the studios told him, when he was young, that he had no future. Can you believe this? And that is nice to put in a film, because it is a real story in itself, so interesting.
BLVR: I read in a book where somebody said that your Los Angeles was so different from the way other people lived in L.A., because you and Jacques created a little Paris around you, with friends and food, and it was so different from the alienated Los Angeles that other people were living in.
AV: Some people meet each other again only when I’m there! Sometimes it’s like, Eh! I haven’t seen you since the last time Agnès made a little—it’s people I put together because I have been always liking them and loving them and seeing them. Jacques was invited by Columbia, and we had that incredible life. At the time I made some films. I made Lion’s Love and Black Panthers. I worked all the time. Then we came back ten years later with Mathieu as a child, but Jacques was not really finding a deal. I tried with the studio—but it didn’t work. I made a documentary about a woman that my son, Mathieu, acted in. At the time, Jacques and I were arguing, and when I show this in Les plages, I use that beautiful Picasso painting called La femme qui pleure. What a painting—so strong! At that time I was down because I was so much hoping—and so was Jacques—that we could go on forever. We were disappointed more than anything. More than separated, we were disappointed. I think it’s something I can tell. The story of a couple is always very fragile, especially over more than thirty years. People know it’s not easy, and even though you have strong feeling and desire and endless love, it doesn’t always happen. Then we came back together back in Paris.
So I tried to find a language for the film—not just telling stories. I picked the Picasso painting because it said more than I could explain. I need images, I need representation which deals in other means than reality. We have to use reality but get out of it. That’s what I try to do all the time.
BLVR: Yet it feels more like life actually is—
AV: I hope it does. Because I think that’s what we need. We need to find another way or another shape or an allegory or something that tells us more. Even Vagabond—it was a fiction but it was really a documentary. I mean, it has the texture of documentary. Even if I made up every line, it has the texture of being true.
BLVR: You used to make fictional films. Why don’t you make fictions anymore?
AV: I’m not sure I’m in the mood for that. I’m trying to capture something more fragile than a regular story. I love what people bring me. I had a very good time when I did The Gleaners—even though the people are poor, and I was suffering to see the conditions, and plus they are not such lovely hearts. They are tough to each other, they beat each other, they are rude and they are violent and they drink. They’re not sweethearts, you know, but some were so interesting.
With The Gleaners, the problem was bigger than me. I wanted to catch the problem of consumption, waste, poor people eating what we throw away, which is a big subject. But I didn’t want to become a sociologue, an ethnographe, a serious thinker. I thought I should be free, even in a documentary which has a very serious subject. It made me feel very good that I could investigate a certain way of doing documentaries in which I’m present—I’m myself—knowing I’m doing a documentary and speaking with the people, telling them I have a bed, that I can eat every day, but I would like to speak to you. And they really gave me wonderful answers. We got along very well without trying to make me look like I’m what I’m not.
BLVR: How did you gain their trust?
AV: I think I got their confidence because I was not looking at them like insects that I would film. We sat down and we spoke. But Les plages is a different film, because the subject is not bigger than me. The subject is the small me, if I may say so.
BLVR: Does it feel different to make something more documentary than something more fictional? Does one make you feel more a part of the world?
AV: You are always in the world. Even in Vagabond. I am not on the road, I am not eating nothing. But in a way we all have a Mona. We all have inside ourselves a woman who walks alone on the road. In all women there is something in revolt that is not expressed. I’m interested in people who are not exactly the middle way, or who are trying something else because they cannot prevent themselves from being different, or they wish to be different, or they are different because society pushed them away.
BLVR: Your speaking of people being pushed away reminds me of a scene in Les plages where you and your brother hold hands and face the camera and walk backward. You walk so slowly, so carefully, with half smiles, almost like children. It’s so moving.
AV: Yes, because people think you are an orphan when you are a child, and don’t believe that old people can feel that they are
orphan. But maybe I will take it out from the film. You know, an hour and fifty-four minutes is too much for audiences. They get nervous. I try to make it one hour forty-five.

III. “IT’S A WAY OF LIVING, CINEMA, AND I SEE MY FAMILY, I DO THIS AND THAT, I TRAVEL. IT’S A LONG PROCESS TO LET IT HAPPEN.”

**BLVR:** Why be an artist? Why do you make films?

**AV:** To share a lot of ideas—not ideas—emotions, a way of looking at people, a way of looking at life. If it can be shared, it means there is a common denominator. I think, in emotion, we have that. So even though I’m different or my experiences are different, they cross some middle knot. It’s interesting work for me to tell my life, as a possibility for other people to relate it to themselves—not so much to learn about me. There’s nothing special. I know people could tell incredible stories. People have been in concentration camps, or women being raped, or a man going to war and not recovering from it. People have been robbed and beaten. A lot of people have had strong events in their life, which I didn’t. I had a life of work and emotions. So I asked myself, Is it interesting to tell?

**BLVR:** And how did you decide that it was?

**AV:** It was an organic process. In the beginning I didn’t dare speak about me. When I did the first edit of *Les plages,* it was very dry and very square in a way. I was just saying the minimum. I said, *Well, if this is the minimum, I don’t make it.* So I tried to make it more refined. I tried to find images, allegorical images, that I could use to express things that I didn’t want to say or didn’t want to show or I was not able to find how to show. I started to look for images, including paintings, that would relate to my own feelings and experience. Which is a contradiction of the film—I want to be shown, I want to be hidden.

**BLVR:** You said you would shoot one day and edit one day—

**AV:** Not by day, by weeks. There would be weeks of editing and weeks of shooting. I did the first weeks of shooting, then I edit and I think about it, because the writing is everywhere—in the shooting and in the editing. When the editing needs it, I fix it. I say, *OK, we go back, we shoot another three days.* Then I do the narration. This changes the editing, then the editing needs—there’s something missing. Up and down and back. It took me six months. It’s a way of living, cinema. And I see my family, I do this and that, I travel. It’s a long process to let it happen. It’s a way of living, sharing things with people who work with me, and they seem to enjoy it.

**BLVR:** One of the themes of *Les plages* is memory, people losing their memory, like your mother did. Is that something you fear very much for yourself?

**AV:** Yes. I think I’m on the way. I have to do it the way she did. She told people, *Don’t worry if I say it wrong—I’m allowed to do so.* My sister was suffering from it. She said, *It’s terrible—she gives us the names of her brothers and sister!* I said, *But she’s free, let her enjoy that—and I laughed.* And I teach my children, who were there, laugh! I mean, she does nothing wrong. She’s liberated from truth, in a way, from being right.

An old woman I loved very much when I was young—the wife of Jean Villard—she’s just reciting poetry all the time, which is beautiful because it means she went back to the world of poetry that she loved when she was young. That’s all she does—she almost doesn’t recognize her children, but she recites Valéry and Baudelaire. So what? We’re the ones who are suffering. She’s not.

**BLVR:** There’s a real generosity on the part of all the people in your film, like they are expressing love for you by being in it, rather than for any other reason.

**AV:** The couple I met in Los Angeles that were married on the beach, with the minister who had a yellow sock and another brown sock—I found that hilarious—and the only witnesses were the birds on the beach. I love that couple as an allegory of a dream of love that they accomplished with kids and grandkids. They are real friends of mine, so they came into the film naturally. I tried to have the film grow naturally with things that I love, and to tell things that I love, and always in a parallel way to speak about what I feel through other people’s feelings.

**BLVR:** You like ordinary people.

**AV:** I call them real people, because they have in themselves an incredible treasure—stories, a way of speaking, a way of sharing, an innocence and a perversity which I find very interesting to discover little by little.

**BLVR:** It is beautiful how you end the film by showing your extended family on the beach together. It reminds me of the end of *One Sings, the Other Doesn’t,* where you had a very similar ending. All the generations come back—

**AV:** Yes, but in this film, it’s the real family. It was so nice for them to agree to do it. I said, *Please come and dress in white.* They said, *Why? What is this?* My older grandson, he is twenty-two, he says, *This is ridiculous!* I say, *Please do it for me—be in white and just move to each other—don’t dance, just move a little.* And they did it. They did it in the ocean and they did it on the beach. And it was cold! The little one says, *It’s so cold today!* I say, *Do it! Do it!* It’s the tyranny of the filmmaker who wants to have the shot. And they did beautifully.

I think we need to have a nest of something which is family, and whenever it goes very well—some families don’t get on that well—but we need the idea of family—the concept more than this one and this one. It’s peaceful to think about the family as a group. I totally believe in extended families, and the good friends I have—I see them all the time. We choose our family—the family of what we believe in, people who share our opinions—it can be political, it can be artistic, it can be a position, as
feminism. I quit seeing some people who were saying bad things about women; I don’t even want to meet them or see them.

IV. “I DIDN’T GO TO FILM SCHOOL. I WAS NEVER AN ASSISTANT OR TRAINEE ON A FILM. I HAD NOT SEEN ALL THOSE CAMERAS. SO I THINK IT GAVE ME A LOT OF FREEDOM.”

BLVR: Can you tell me about one of the artists who first inspired you?

AV: Well, Picasso really changed my life. It’s strange to say so, but I started to see some Picasso paintings very early. I was very young, and he was not so much known. The first exhibition was organized by the communist party, can you believe this?—because of his position during the war and all that. But the freedom he gave himself to work and change shape and change ideas and work all the time with joy—you know, the joy of painting was in Picasso, which I found beautiful.

I never met him. I took pictures at the Festival d’Avignon, but I was too shy to ask to go in his studio. It does not look like me now, but I was very shy, and shy of men also. I think there was a world that frightened me totally. How can I meet these guys when they are on another—? Plus, I’d been educated stupidly, I knew nothing about nothing, that’s part of being shy. The way younger people are educated now—but if you know nothing, it could be like an enemy in a way. I think that’s the way I felt when I was young. You understand, I was eighteen, this was back in ’46, so we also had these very frightening images of soldiers in the streets of Paris. So the effect of war, plus my shyness, plus my lack of education—I was afraid of men, really. It changes later, but it took me a certain time to adjust, yes.

BLVR: You were given the name of “Grandmother of the Nouvelle Vague.” How do you feel about that?

AV: I love that! I was thirty. I remember my photograph in the magazine and it says: “Ancestor of the New Wave.” And I looked OK at thirty, eh? So I thought, If I’m an ancestor and grandmother when I’m twenty-five, I should go peacefully to the real time when I’m an ancestor and a grandmother. No, I love that. I don’t care. I was not looking bad so it didn’t hurt my appearance, as I would say.

BLVR: You said that you were intimidated when you were young, entering the world of men, and I wonder, you mention Chris Marker and Resnais—were they more open to you than, say, Godard, or were you more curious about them, or—

AV: They impressed me. I didn’t feel they were humans I could approach or touch. They’re very bright and they were already. They were slightly older than me, but it’s very important when you’re twenty-five. People are four years older and they know much more than you, and they’re both very bright, and Resnais told me a lot of things. In the editing he told me I should maybe see films: You know there is a Cinémathèque in Paris? And he said to me when the editing was done, he said, There’s Visconti. I said, Who’s Visconti? I had no knowledge at all, no knowledge of films. I’d seen few films. I knew nothing. I was interested in painting and theater at the time. Then I learned and I went to see movies.

Sometimes I say, If I had seen some masterpieces, maybe I wouldn’t have dared start. I started very—not innocent, but naïve in a way. So that’s a big freedom, you know? I didn’t go to school. I didn’t go to film school. I was never an assistant or trainee on a film. I had not seen all those cameras. So I think it gave me a lot of freedom. I see all these students, and I admire them—they’re trying to learn something, they go to school, they do film school, they go on shoots, they help. I’m sure they learn a lot, and some of them, it makes them aware of what they wish to do. I was—that’s the way I was—autodidact.

BLVR: Speaking of Chris Marker, is he standing behind the large cardboard cat in Les plages?

AV: I asked him permission to have his cat as my friend and interviewer. He hasn’t seen the film yet—the film was just finished when I ran to Venice, but he came to have lunch. He saw the cat in my garden. He knows the size of the cat. We meet, we speak, he sends little cartoons by mail almost every day. And using Guillaume-en-Egypte—I think it’s a nice way to speak about him. He didn’t want to be filmed, he doesn’t want photos, but we are friends, so I thought he should be in the film as Guillaume-the-cat in Egypt.

BLVR: Did he actually ask the questions?

AV: No, I made them up. Because it’s too simple, because he’s much smarter than that, but I just wanted him to say, Tell us about the new wave—which is not what he would ask. But I needed someone to raise the question so I could tell. I gave him the voice of my editor, so this is fake, but it’s also a testament of my friendship, and my admiration for Chris, who is a very bright man, and hardworking. He’s older than me and he still works like a real worker—he does good things. And he’s a very interesting man, really interesting, aging in a very interesting way. He’s like in the middle of a cave—have you been there? Screens and machines and he does the music and he does the editing and he has piles of books and records and things, and he thinks about other people all the time—all these cartoons about what’s happening in the world, very sarcastic cartoons, you know. He’s bright. I think he doesn’t want to meet so many people. He doesn’t eat, he has his protein sort of food, he doesn’t want to lose time in eating so he feeds himself with, you know, raspberries and protein food, and he’s OK.

I think people should be different. I love people who don’t go by the rule that you have to be careful because you’re old, you have to do this and that, you have to eat this and that. I try to do nothing. I drink rosemary when I have a lot of work to do. People take coffee, they take speed, whatever. I take rosemary. My company is called Ciné-Tamaris, which is rosemary. That’s my speed. Hot water and herb. But it’s nice to think that we have in
ourselves the energy. It’s somewhere, but it’s sleeping sometimes. I try to wake it up when I need it.

BLVR: Have you needed rosemary while in Toronto yet?
AV: I could have used some. Yesterday during the screening of La pointe-courte, there was a bench in the hallway—just a bench in wood, that’s all. I lay on the bench. While I started to sleep somebody brought a pillow, but I slept an hour—they woke me up for the discussion. I said, Wake me up five minutes before! Then I went on the stage. I made myself very serious. They should have seen me half an hour before, sleeping like a baby on a bench!

BLVR: I know you think that feminism is out of fashion. Why do you think that is?
AV: Because to advance in society is slow, slow, and slow. To change history is very slow. The first two times I came to the States—black people didn’t have the right to vote—but we have seen them in France, American soldiers, black, and they come and save us. A lot of them died in France. They were doing the job of the American army. I come to the States and they don’t have the right to vote! Can you believe that? So, society is so slow. A feminist is a bore.

BLVR: And do you see feminism as out of fashion in France?
AV: People don’t speak about that now! It’s boring. I wanted to speak strongly about feminism in my life, since it’s been a struggle. People again started to be against self-control, against birth control, and against abortion. Even in France where it’s allowed, in a hospital there is a boss doctor for each floor, and if their convictions push them to say no, they can say, I don’t want abortion in my service. Even though it is legal, still they have the right to refuse. Can you believe this? And the young girls don’t even know that some people fought for them to have the pill or the—after-night pill? How do you say that?

BLVR: The morning-after pill.
AV: I put so much energy in being a photographer and then a filmmaker, and meeting Jacques and raising the kids and trying to be involved. Going to Cuba in ’62 was very exciting, and going to China in ’57, when Shanghai was not even recognized by the United Nations, was an adventure. I’ve always been like this—trying to find adventure where it’s still in its first élan—the first spring. The revolution in China was still fresh and people were going to it. And filming the Black Panthers—they turned bad two years after, but I saw them trying to make their own law, make their own thoughts, the body-and-soul theory. They wanted to be the one thinking, the one acting, not be led by white people. All of them were trying to find autonomy.

Je résiste. I’m still fighting. I don’t know how much longer, but I’m still fighting a struggle, which is to make cinema alive and not just make another film, you know?

BLVR: Would you say you are a filmmaker today for the same reasons as when you started?
AV: Sure I’m not, because when I started I did not know I wanted to be a filmmaker. You know, I started—I made a film. Then when I finished I said, Oh my god it’s so beautiful—I should be a filmmaker!

The online PDF files of these handouts have color images

Coming up in the Spring 2014 Buffalo Film Seminars:

April 1 Gabriell Axel, Babette’s Feast, 1987, 104min
April 8 Louis Malle, Vanya on 42nd Street, 1994, 119 min
April 15 Wes Anderson, The Royal Tenenbaums, 2001, 110 min
April 22 Tommy Lee Jones, The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada, 2005, 120 min
April 29 José Padilha, Elite Squad, 2007, 115 min
May 6 John Huston, The Dead, 1987 83 min

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