An Artist in Her Own Right
The Cinema of Agnès Varda

by Jonathan Kirshner

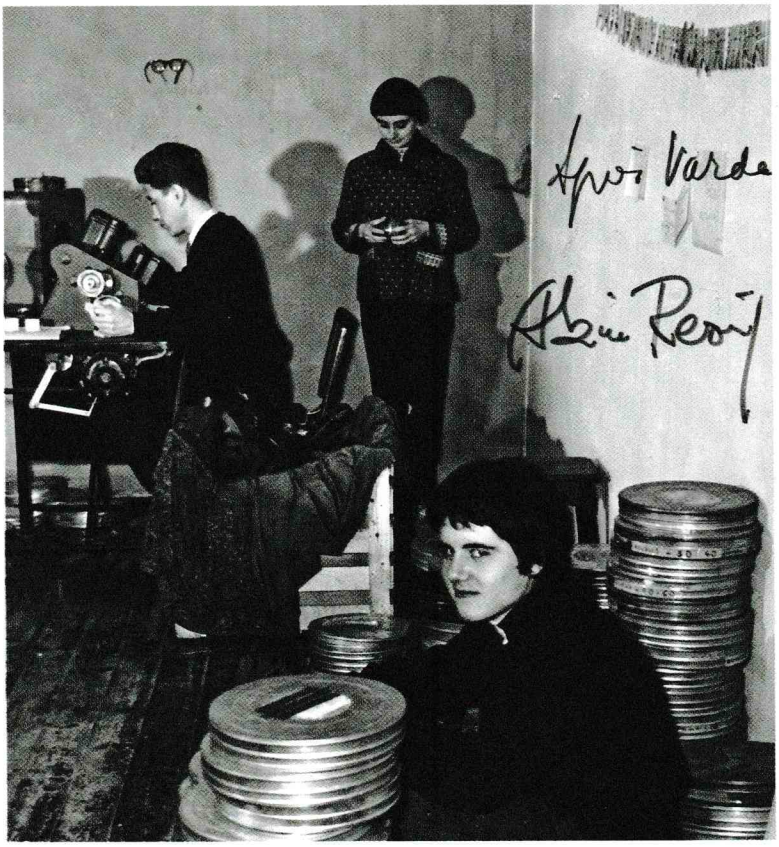
At some point during her sixth decade of filmmaking, Agnès Varda was finally recognized as a prominent figure in the pantheon of contemporary filmmakers. The unexpected, widespread popularity of her extraordinary *The Gleaners and I* (2000) and the irresistible cinematic force of *The Beaches of Agnès* (2008), each of which garnered shelves of prestigious awards, invited new and comprehensive assessments of her long and distinguished career. Looking back at her remarkable body of work illustrates the extent to which Varda followed a less conventional path than most revered directors whose output more easily facilitated canonization. But such an effort also reveals unambiguously that she was an accomplished artist with a distinctive voice and vision.

She began as a forerunner to the French New Wave, then embarked on an idiosyncratic, challenging, and frequently dazzling career whose curiosity and humanism are amply on view in "The Complete Films of Agnès Varda" Blu-ray box set from The Criterion Collection.

In late career, as is often the case for such artists, Varda (1928–2019) was showered with tributes, including lifetime achievement awards at the Locarno and Cannes Film Festivals, and, like Hitchcock, received an honorary (and implicitly compensatory) Academy Award for her contributions to cinema. Those contributions have now been collected in "The Complete Films of Agnès Varda," The Criterion Collection's spectacular box set of fifteen Blu-ray discs, which brings together thirty-nine of Varda's films, including features, documentaries, shorts, and more than seven hours of outstanding supplements, from interviews, introductions, making-ofs, tributes, and more). The box set also features a two-hundred-page book brimming with informative essays by Amy Taubin and Ginette Vincendeau, among others, and extensive liner notes by Michael Koresky.

And "Complete" this package very much is, sweeping across experimental shorts shot in the late Fifties, snippets of aborted projects from the Sixties, two inventive television commercials (1971), and five hours of peripatetic travelogues featuring the octogenarian filmmaker recording visits with artists and exhibitions from throughout the world (taken from a miniseries made for French television in 2011). Most thrillingly, this collection includes some essential obscurities that have long been beyond the reach of even the most dedicated cinephiles. Highlights among these are the truly delightful feature *One Hundred and One Nights* (1995)—a must see—and *Nausicaa* (1970), an unreleased made-for-TV feature that was suppressed by a French government wary of offending the Greek military junta.

Agnès Varda was born in Brussels in 1928 to a Belgian mother and a Greek father. The family moved to France shortly before WWII. Agnès (who legally changed her name from Arlette) graduated from the Sorbonne with a B.A. in psychology and literature. Like Stanley Kubrick (two months her junior), Varda started out professionally as a still photographer and in the early Fifties scraped together the cash to make a microbudgeted first feature. Their paths, of course, distinctly diverged from there; Varda's inquisitive humanism would increasingly contrast with Kubrick's often icy stare. In another notable difference from Kubrick, still photography would retain a central role in Varda's films (and in her career more generally). Two of her short films, *Ulysse* (1982) and *Une minute pour une image* (1983) center on the analysis of photographs, but the theme is a ubiquitous one—many if not most of her productions feature photography in some way (at times emphasized in contrast to the moving image). From her short documentary *Salut les Cubains* (1963), structured entirely around four hundred photos she took during a visit to Cuba (Michele Piccoli provides the narration), to her last major film, *Faces Places* (2017), a collaboration with the French street photographer JR propelled by elaborate outdoor installations of massive large-form photos, the intersection of these two art forms is a trademark of her craft.



Left to right, editor Alain Resnais, director Agnès Varda, and assistant editor Anne Sarraute at work on Varda's first feature film, *La Pointe-Courte* (1955). (photo courtesy of Photofest)

Agnès Varda, seen here in the courtyard of her Paris home, looks back at the films in her illustrious career in *Varda by Agnès* (2019), her final feature film. (photo courtesy of The Criterion Collection)

Varda's movies are characterized by a number of additional recurring motifs involving the relationship between documentary and fiction, a fascination with history and memory, and an explicit if never pedantic engagement with left-leaning political themes, including the politics of the body. These in turn inform an essential feminism (or feminisms) that leaves an indelible imprint on her work. Varda is all too easily (if appropriately) branded as a trailblazing female director and a major feminist filmmaker, but such labels can obscure these other important attributes of her work. One of the singular voices of postwar French cinema, Varda was a participant in the Nouvelle Vague, and one of the central tenets of the New Wave was to challenge the distinction between "documentary" and "fiction" films (which Varda would come to routinely blur further by inserting herself into the action). André Bazin, the legendary film critic and theorist who co-founded *Cahiers du cinéma* insisted in one influential essay that, "Every Film is a Social Documentary." Jacque Rivette would echo this with his observation that every movie can be understood as a documentary of its own making.

This was not merely cleverness talking, it was rather the recognition that documentaries follow the narrative arcs of storytelling, reflect the choices of their creators, and present a distinct point of view; conversely, fiction films are products of (and records of) their social/historical/cultural contexts. No New Wave filmmaker so successfully navigated this contested and sometimes morally fraught terrain than did Varda. As she stated plainly, "I believe that there are no objective documentaries." If one was to let fifteen cameras roll in one place for five years, Varda explained, "even then the editing would be subjective." Similarly, she insisted, "for me there's no fiction without its documentary side." Her films are expressions of this ethos, and commonly blend the two elements, setting "fact" and "fiction" side by side (the finally accessible *Nausicaa*, which embeds interviews with political refugees within a fictional story, is an exemplar of this). In the 1980s and 1990s, Varda would extend this experiment, commonly making pairs of overlapping films, one a feature and the other nominally a documentary. And obviously that Varda trademark—a personally inflected, biographically oriented essay film in which she participates as a subject—is a blend of all of these attributes.

History and memory are common companions in Varda's films, as seen most explicitly in her final effort, *Varda by Agnès* (2019). But they are also there, recurrently if more implicitly throughout the years, and especially in later decades, as the passage of time allowed her to revisit and reassess the participants and places that were featured in her productions—always with an eye for how things have changed, and attentive to the tricks that memories can play. Finally, any assessment of her body of work must situate Varda as an affiliate of the "Left Bank" branch of the New Wave (along with Alain Resnais and Chris Marker), which leaned more actively political in subject and more overtly experimental in technique than the films of the movie-mad auteurs who started out as critics for *Cahiers*.

For Varda, those politics invariably and perhaps inevitably included gender. This created expectations about her work that none of her peers had to endure. (Few interviews with Éric Rohmer, for example, were laden with questions about his role as a "male director.") And for some it was (and perhaps is) problematic that, as with many artists with avant-garde inclinations, Varda had a tendency to dwell on the naked body—from her gently scandalous presentation of a nude pregnant woman in *L'opéra-mouffe* (1958) through the extra beat that lingers on the prodigious erection that makes a brief but explicit appearance in *Beaches*. As one interviewer observed, the "theme of nudity" seemed to "pervade" Varda's work, to which she responded, "Yes, it's true." In 1975, her short film *Réponse de femmes: Notre corps, notre sexe*—commissioned to engage the "Year of the Woman"—featured naked women discussing their bodies and their lives.

This was one expression of feminism—there were, of course, many others. And, as was too often the case, Varda was not only a pioneering feminist artist but also the target of (occasionally vehement) criticism by others. "I can say I am a feminist," she observed in 1974, "but for other feminists, I am not feminist enough." Her *Le bonheur* (1965) was a common object of rebuke along these lines; and questions about that film's posture regarding its female characters rumbled

Cléo (Corinne Marchand), anxiously awaits biopsy test results from her doctor, a two-hour period chronicled in Varda's first big hit, *Cléo from 5 to 7* (1962). (photo courtesy of Photofest)

more than a decade after its release. As Varda acknowledged, in that film the wife "comes across looking terribly weak." Nevertheless, she adds crucially, "I avoid making moral judgements about my characters." Some scholars have reinterpreted *Le bonheur* as an ironic and subversive feminist statement, but the simple fact is that, for Varda, the film always comes first. And in this particular production, the choices made by various characters were not designed to send audiences to the barricades, inspired by the duly delivered political imperatives of the moment. Varda's feminism was essential and defining, but it was hers—to be appreciated, respected, and, for some, contested.

Varda's first film, *La Point-Courte* (1955), is generally considered a forerunner of the New Wave, touching many of what would become the signature themes of that movement. Made outside the rigid dictates of the French film industry, it was shot on locations in documentary style featuring local nonprofessional actors, and the production was also a personal one (Varda had lived in the region during her youth); it also focused on what Chabrol would subsequently champion as "little themes." A virtual amateur when she shot the film, *La Point-Courte* nevertheless gestures at much of what would follow in Varda's career: a blend of documentary and fiction, detailed attentiveness to the economic condition of the working class, subtle observations about the gender dynamics of social and familial relations, and, of course, the notable presence of cats. *La Point-Courte* shifts back and forth between the separate stories of a couple (Philippe Noiret and Silvia Monfort) negotiating a marital crisis, and the residents of a small fishing village whose livelihoods are threatened by increasingly polluted waters. The latter thread is more successful, but the former is shot with a precocious maturity (Varda was then twenty-five) that includes an eye-catching Bergmanesque close-up of two faces.

Varda had the good fortune to land Alain Resnais to edit the film (there was no money to pay anyone; all collaborators eschewed fees in exchange for a share of prospective future returns). Through Resnais, *La Point-Courte* got the attention of André Bazin, who loved what he saw and arranged to have the film shown to the public. Anyone who was anyone attended Bazin's Paris screenings, but the film was not picked up for distribution and languished unseen for decades. Rubbing shoulders with the glitterati of the day did have its benefits, however, opening doors for documentary commissions, and introducing Varda to Jacques Demy. The two fledgling filmmakers would become a couple in 1958 and marry in 1962, an apparently idyllic relationship that necessarily had its ups and downs. (The couple divorced in the late Seventies and reconciled a decade later.) Varda, whose films like to suggest an unflinching, confessional quality, was always scrupulously guarded about the details of their private lives—a reminder that there is much more to Varda than the beloved grandmotherly character she embraced in late career. But surely it takes a spine of steel to successfully direct over fifty films.

Demy would alert Georges de Beauregard to Varda's talents. Beaurgard, who had produced the first films of Jean-Luc Godard (*Breathless*, 1960) and Demy (*Lola*, 1961), was eager to ride the emerging New Wave, and was in search of new filmmakers who were well positioned to helm such modestly budgeted features. The roster of the two dozen features he produced from 1960 to 1967 is jaw dropping, and includes Varda's second feature, *Cléo from 5 to 7* (1962). *Cléo* is a flat-out masterpiece, and with *Les cousins* (Chabrol, 1959), *The 400 Blows* (Truffaut, 1959), *Breathless*, and *Paris Belongs to Us* (Rivette, 1961), represent the foundational films of the New Wave—low budget, naturalistically shot stories about the modest tribulations of young people on the streets of Paris.

Cléo follows, in something very close to real time, ninety minutes in the life of a beautiful young pop singer (Corinne Marchand) anxiously awaiting the results of a biopsy. As many have observed, the crucial arc of the film traces the transformation of its protagonist from an infantilized object of the gaze of others, to an independent and thoughtful observer of the world around her—a change marked at the moment she sheds her wig and returns to the streets of Paris alone, absent her handlers and hangers-on. But the film is even richer than this familiar summary implies. Despite the apparent documentary-style spontaneity of its street scenes, *Cléo* is an impeccably crafted film. As Molly Haskell observed, "Varda's photojournalistic instincts are apparent in the way she turns Paris into a hall of mirrors—windows and faces that reflect the heroine back to herself." This is evident as well in interior scenes, such as in a café that features more mirrors and reflections just this side of Orson Welles's *The Lady from Shanghai* (1947)—and note also how a marginal character (a young woman who has just separated from her lover), is invariably well-positioned in the frame, regardless of the camera setup.

Cléo is also distinguished by motivated excursions. An interlude with a friend who works as a nude model (an activity the audience plainly witnesses), invites a discussion of autonomy and objectification (without insisting on a "correct" answer); a comedic short film-within-the-film featuring some of the New Wave gang, including Godard, Anna Karina, Jean-Claude Brialy, and Eddie Constantine, serves a very different purpose. (As Varda recalls, it was designed to hold the viewers' interest at a moment when attention might naturally flag.) There is a political element to the film as well. The Algerian War (a white-hot topic in France at the time), first appears on a taxicab radio, and then in a later, extended sequence between Cléo and Antoine, a soldier on leave (played by Antoine Bourseiller, the absent father of Varda's daughter, Rosalie), who, like Cléo, awaits an uncertain fate.

Varda would make two more features in France in the 1960s. *Le bonheur* was inspired by Varda's reaction to some old photos, in particular one of a large family smiling in the shade of a tree on a perfect summer day. "When you see the photo, you say to your-

self, 'that's happiness,'" she recalled. But "when you look more closely, you're suddenly troubled," because "it's impossible that they were all happy at the same time." What is happiness? Varda addresses this question in a beautifully shot color film (Jean Rabier, Chabrol's go-to cinematographer, had worked on *Cléo* and was on hand here again) that seems to document the idyllic lives of an ordinary family. Jean-Claude Drouot is the very happy François; his wife, Thérèse, and their small children are played by nonprofessional actors (Drouot's actual family). François speculates he might be even happier if he had both a wife and a mistress, in particular Émilie (Marie-France Boyer), a postal employee. Happiness seems to endure, until it is tragically interrupted, and then, controversially, seems to resume. What exactly happened in the interim is left to the viewer's imagination. In a 2006 interview with Varda, Claire Drouot and Marie-France Boyer offer different interpretations.

Le bonheur won the Silver Bear at the Berlin International Film Festival. Her next feature, *Les Créatures* (1966), was received more coolly, despite the star presence of Michel Piccoli and Catherine Deneuve. Since the movie takes place on an island, and Deneuve's character is (mysteriously) mute, it is often compared with Bergman's *Persona*, released the following month. But it is much closer in spirit and mood to Resnais's *Je t'aime, je t'aime* (1968), with its vague suggestion of conspiracy and elements of magical realism, accompanied by a more Vardian interest in the blending of fact, fiction, and imagination (as Roger Ebert observed, "sometimes we can't find the line between the story and the fantasies.") Not for all tastes, the film has its champions, including Richard Brody of *The New Yorker*.

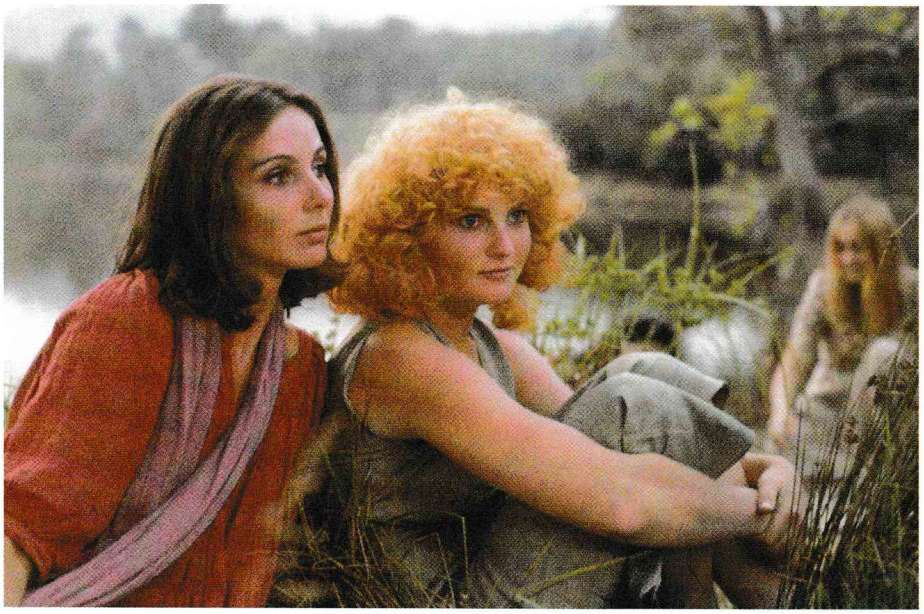
Into the late 1960s, Varda's films took a more overtly political turn (how could they not)? Accompanying Demy to Hollywood (a rocky recruitment that would yield his 1969 film *Model Shop*), her output there would prove more consequential. *Black Panthers* (1968) remains vital and alive today, and is essential viewing for anyone with an interest in events then or race relations in America today. Somewhat similar to the experience of 1970's politically charged *Nausicaa*, the Panthers documentary was initially shelved by the French television station on which it was scheduled to appear. An extraordinary short film, shot on a borrowed 16mm camera, Varda followed the events surrounding the trial of Huey Newton (and secured a jailhouse interview with him). In addition to lingering on "everyday people"—it is hard to imagine a Varda production without that touch—*Black Panthers* also boasts appearances by Bobby Seale, Eldridge Cleaver, and Stokely Carmichael, among others. It is unlikely that other filmmakers would have spent as much time with female participants in the movement in general, and with the remarkable Kathleen Cleaver in particular.

Less essential but still of considerable interest is *Lions Love (...and Lies)* (1969), a partly improvised period piece about three hippies—Andy Warhol affiliate Viva, and James Rado and Gerome Ragni, the co-writers of the musical *Hair*. The story, as far as it goes, involves New York–based experimental filmmaker Shirley Clarke, playing herself but also standing in for Varda, as an outsider who has come to Los Angeles to make a Hollywood film. Offering a clear-eyed look at its cultural milieu, *Lions Love* nevertheless reflects some of the faded attributes of the era, and is at times meandering and self-indulgent. But there is much to appreciate here. Scenes of studio suits dickering over whether "the girl can have final cut" are priceless; in one innovative scene Clarke (apparently) balks at her character taking an overdose of pills, leading Varda (it would seem) to argue with her—a standoff resolved with the women swapping blouses and Varda performing the action herself. And it is fun to catch glimpses of Rip Torn, Jim Morrison, Peter Bogdanovich, and others in cameo appearances. The movie will endure, however, primarily for the way it allows a full third of its running time to be dominated by Bobby Kennedy—his California presidential campaign, assassination, and aftermath (and the essential role of television in communicating all this)—sequences which are riveting and heartbreaking.

In 1972 Varda gave birth to Mathieu Demy, and this led to a pause in her film career. Itching to return to work but unwilling to drift too far from her toddler, she found a novel solution with her next project, *Daguerréotypes* (1975). Starting with the "idea that women are attached to the home," Varda embraced this notion figuratively and literally, shooting entirely within eighty meters of her house—the length of the electric cable she used to power her equipment. The result is a fascinating look at a constellation of traditional mom-and-pop storefronts (the butcher, the baker, the perfume maker). In addition to interacting with customers, the shopkeepers also pose for portraits and answer questions about their personal histories. Without forcing the issue, *Daguerréotypes* observes the functioning of the gendered economy, both with regard to chosen self-identities ("the baker's wife") and the way in which husbands and wives perform different functional and social roles within the enterprise. Generally received as a delightful divertissement, as Rebecca DeRoo astutely observes in *Agnès Varda between Film, Photography, and Art*, "the film can also be understood as an indictment of urban modernization and the violence it did to the lives of the workers and the small shop owners in Paris." Characteristically, Varda does this indirectly by what she chooses to show, and with an oblique reference to a massive (and then controversial) office tower under construction that would transform the neighborhood. (These changes would be evident in her short film shot thirty years later, *Rue Daguerre en 2005*.)

One Sings, the Other Doesn't (1977), the story of two women navigating their friendship, their feminism, and their lives over a dozen crucial years of the great awakening of the women's movement, could have done with a little less singing. But it is a major and important (and entertaining) film, and takes its place alongside *Cléo*, *Le bonheur*, *Vagabond* (1985), and *One Hundred and One Nights* as one of Varda's bravura fiction films. *One Sings* offers a virtual synthesis of Vardian themes (part of this globetrotting observational film takes place in Iran, a key character is a photographer, and the body is routinely present). Seen today, the feminisms of this film seem to shout from the rooftops. The initial motivating action concerns securing funds

A stylized image of the happy family in Varda's *Le bonheur* (1965).



Thérèse Liotard (left) and Valérie Mairesse star in Varda's "feminist musical," *One Sings, the Other Doesn't* (1977). (photo courtesy of The Criterion Collection)

for a furtive abortion, some initially appealing men turn swiftly patriarchal within the confines of marriage, equal-rights protests abound, women are confronted with hard, even wrenching dilemmas about balancing family and personal autonomy, and they make daring choices, which contemporary mainstream audiences might find radical and controversial. In the heady days of the 1970s, however, the film, which was generally well received, nevertheless drew critical fire from all sides. As Varda put it, *One Sings* "wasn't feminist enough for the feminists and too feminist for the others." Her rejoinders properly situate a filmmaker who was a brave and passionate feminist, not a feminist who happened to be a filmmaker. "My film is a feminist film, but it's a *film*," she explained in a 1978 interview with *Cineaste*.

At the time, radical feminists found the film "too kind to men," an eminently contestable proposition, but, in any event, Varda had a different perspective. "I don't agree that a feminist film must put men down," she insisted. "As feminists we have to be tolerant, with each other and even with men. I think our movement needs different types of women; there shouldn't just be one line, one way." Moreover, she would observe with pride that 350,000 people in France saw *One Sings* and argue convincingly that, "it's better if they got half the message than to have 5,000 people seeing a courageous 16mm film."

Whatever happened in her personal life during the off-screen Demy interregnum, professionally the 1980s were a rich and productive decade, highlighted by five major features and a slew of shorts. Back in California, Varda made a pair of enmeshed films: the documentary *Mur murs* (1981) about the large street murals of Los Angeles within the culture of (commonly distressed) minority communities, and *Documenteur* (1981), which tells the story of a young French woman recently separated from her husband (Sabine Mamou, a nonprofessional actor who was the editor of *Mur murs*), struggling to make ends meet and to care for her son (played by Mathieu Demy), as she works on a documentary for a local production company. Inseparable from *Mur murs* (there are overlaps in the voice-over narrations and even of some shots), *Documenteur* is arguably a more personal and intimate expression than Varda's late-career autobiographical essay films—or, as Varda put it, "more to the point" than the recognizable parallels seen in the story, *Documenteur* "is full of emotions which are very powerfully autobiographical." (She immediately added, however, in what seems like a smokescreen, "but then so is *Vagabond*.")

Vagabond was another breakthrough. A fiction film shot in documentary style (with scripted commentaries provided by local nonprofessional actors as if describing real events), the film won the Golden Lion at the Venice International Film Festival. Eighteen- year-old Sandrine Bonnaire is Mona, a teenage drifter found dead in a ditch at the start of the film. The movie then retraces her steps, in a series of long tracking shots, punctuated by the recollections of those whom she encountered on the road to her fate. A grueling production (glimpses of the director's unyielding determination to get the shots she wants can be seen in *Varda by Agnès*), Bonnaire was instructed to play the role as "someone who never says thank you." That turns out to be very hard to do in practice, but it did yield a performance that won Bonnaire the César for Best Actress.

Flush with opportunities following the success of *Vagabond*, Varda did what every great artist does—something completely different. (As she once said, venting frustration with the money men, "I make films, not deals.") Approached by Jane Birkin on the cusp of the then-perilous age of forty, the two women embarked on a portrait-film of the actress, *Jane B. for Agnès V.* (1988). Varda rejected the traditional "this is your life" biopic in favor of a series of vignettes that blended fact, fiction, and homages to cinema (the baker from *Daguerréotypes* appears in an ode to Laurel and Hardy). Another film with something to say about looking at women, Birkin is characteristically fearless throughout. And speaking of fearlessness, during the production Birkin shared with her director a story she had been developing, about a middle-aged woman who has an affair with a teenage boy. The resulting film, *Kung-Fu Master!* (1988), became a family production, with Mathieu Demy taking the role of the video-game obsessed teen, and Birkin's daughter Charlotte Gainsbourg playing...Birkin's daughter, in a pitch-perfect per-

Hitchhiker Mona Bergeron (Sandrine Bonnaire) is given a lift by Mme. Landier (Macha Méril) in *Vagabond* (1985). (photo courtesy of The Criterion Collection)

For the 2003 Venice Biennale, Varda, a self-described "little old lady," wore a potato costume to promote her triptych called "Patatutopia."

formance. *Kung-Fu* is distinguished by its combination of discretion and frank bravery in the treatment of fraught subject matter. Like Louis Malle's *Murmur of the Heart* (1971), it seems inconceivable that such a film could find distribution today.

Varda's reconciliation with Jacques Demy would prove tragically short-lived; he would die of complications from AIDS in 1990, and aspects of her grief were expressed with another pairing of films. *Jacquot de Nantes* (1991) is a representation of Demy's boyhood in the 1930s and 1940s, shot at the original locations in crisp black and white (with occasional bursts into color, and passages from his films). *The World of Jacques Demy* (1995), a more conventional documentary, would follow. Associated with these efforts are *The Young Girls Turn 25* (1993), which revisits one of Demy's most popular films (*The Young Girls of Rochefort*, 1967), and with Varda's own appearance in her *Quelques veuves de Noirmoutier* (2006), a compilation of moving interviews with widows from the island where she lived with Demy from 1962.

Varda closed this stage of her career with *One Hundred and One Nights*, a movie designed to celebrate cinema's centennial. Starring Michel Piccoli as Simon Cinéma, the living embodiment of the movies—though at 100 his memory of films past is at times muddled. Simon, in poor health, is visited by an exhilarating cascade of movie stars playing imagined versions of themselves as they debate what happened in which movies, generally seen though the contrasting lenses of competing egos. The cavalcade of luminaries is far too vast to rehearse but name checks of Marcello Mastroianni, Alain Delon, Catherine Deneuve, and Fanny Ardant give the idea. A critical and commercial fiasco, it is nevertheless an irresistible pleasure for any movie lover and, as Koresky observes, "ripe for reconsideration as a core expression of [Varda's] cinematic project."

That flop likely contributed to a fallow period that followed, but in her early seventies, Varda enjoyed an unanticipated renaissance. This was facilitated in part by technology: the development of high-quality, handheld, lightweight digital movie cameras meshed naturally with the kinds of films she had always created. Now it would be less of a challenge to work with low budgets, small crews, and, most important, to more easily include herself as both observer and participant in the action. The busy and productive final two decades of her career would eschew traditional features in favor of innovative, experimental, and self-reflective projects.

The Gleaners and I put Varda prominently back on the cultural map. And as an increasing presence in her own films (and perfectly happy to dress up as a giant potato), she would come to enjoy a cult following as a Chaplinesque figure, (in her words) a "little old lady, pleasantly plump" with a trademark two-tone pageboy coif. *Gleaners* is a special, surprisingly profound, and disarmingly humanist film that resonated deeply with audiences (so much so that *The Gleaners and I: Two Years Later* would follow in 2002). An epitome of her late-career offerings, the project was partly inspired by (and takes its title from) an 1857 Jean-François Millet painting of peasant women bending to gather stray fragments in a wheat field. Self-identifying as a gleaner in her art, Varda set out to meet modern gleaners, people on the margins of society, urban and rural, who survive by collecting the scraps and discards left behind by others.

Also notable among the late films is *Faces Places*, which was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature. The eye-pleasing road-and-photo show is deceptively straightforward—beneath its abundant good cheer the movie has much to say about class, gender, friendship, and the power of narratives (and features everything from goats to Godard)—and also reveals a still curious and engaging late octogenarian with failing eyesight but undiminished creative skills. Varda's major statement from these decades, however, remains the César-winning *The Beaches of Agnès*, which could have also been titled the mirrors of Agnès, or the memories, or the pictures. Uneasily labeled a documentary (it is more of an essay-film about cinema in the spirit of Welles's *F for Fake*), *Beaches* is much more than a look back or a summing up—it is a lingering meditation on aging, the passage of time, the slippery currents of history and memory, and the magic of the movies. Which is another way of describing the thrilling sixty-five years of flickering images captured in "The Complete Films of Agnès Varda" box set. ■

One of the many public art displays created throughout rural France in *Faces Places* (2017), a collaboration between Varda and photojournalist JR. (photo courtesy of The Criterion Collection)

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Varda by Agnès (2019)

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