

Agnès Varda: A Conversation

Barbara Quart / 1986

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Agnès Varda has been making films for over three decades now, starting out at a time when less than a handful of women were directing. Varda's longevity as a serious filmmaker, her capacity for survival, is in itself moving, as other august figures have come and gone, their trajectories played out by death or burn-out in one form or another. It is not hard to remember how dazzling *Cléo from 5 to 7* was when it first appeared in 1962, or *Le Bonheur* for that matter in 1965. Varda has come in for her share of criticism but her place in film history is safe. Forerunner of the New Wave, she continues to work and grow, each new film a bold new direction, even though each is a massive enterprise that she must get off the ground, taking on the same miserable struggle for finances however known and respected she is, however glowing the critical reception of such a film as her strong latest one, *Vagabond*, her best film yet (and a commercial success in France).

Varda turns this time to the story of Mona, a young woman vagrant—not an easy subject though a brave one, and in Varda's hands of such interest from start to end that one needn't ask why the film won top honors at the Venice Film Festival. Through flash-backs and documentary-style commentary by those who encounter Mona in her wanderings, *Vagabond* creates the journey that led its central character to a miserable death in a ditch. However, Varda eschews psychological explanations and does not see Mona as a victim, but rather as someone who says no to everything so totally as to look like independence itself. Mona's is an intriguing presence (with an extraordinary performance by Sandrine Bonnaire) that one never gets bored watching, unpredictable, touching in both its tough resourcefulness and its vulnerability. The film's title in French, *Sans toit ni loi* (*Without a Roof or a Law*), alludes first to the pitiful condition of living outdoors in an unbearably cold winter, but alludes

second to caring for nothing and nobody—a freedom so total that it is the same as total loneliness, as one of the film’s characters says, and can only lead to self-destruction.

The film raises philosophical issues as naturally as it creates ravishing images of great though austere beauty. It also creates through Mona a kind of prism through which to look at a wide range of characters, allowing Varda an unusual, and always multi-layered, perspective on “normality.” In speaking with Varda, as in watching the film, one is stuck by her refusal to take sides, and by the complexity she creates by laying different attitudes and perceptions side by side—while maintaining full control of the material. The film brings together what Agnès Varda can do best and shows her to be as skillful and intriguing a director as ever.

Vagabond’s opening in New York seemed a fine occasion upon which to talk with Varda, to ask her to reflect about her work, about film and art generally, about the differences between the European film scene and our own, about feminism, as well as about the making of *Vagabond*. Habituated as we are to a film industry that is all compromise, for which the box office is almost always the central concern, to hear a director speak out of a larger vision of filmmaking, a vision she has struggled for all these years, in film after film, is an important reminder of what the art of film is all about.

Varda began our talk by asking where my “head is at,” so she would know how to gear her remarks. I told her I am interested in women directors. The interview was conducted in English.

Agnès Varda: I have not seen a woman director in America that I could speak to as I can speak to European women directors—to von Trotta, to Chantal Akerman. They do what they can but I never spoke with an American woman director who had thought about what is the cinematic writing, and where are the goals of what I call in French *cinécriture*, which means cinematic writing. Specifically that. Not illustrating a screenplay, not adapting a novel, not getting the gags of a good play, not any of this. I have fought so much since I started, since *La Pointe Courte*, for something that comes from emotion, from visual emotion, sound emotion, feeling, and finding a shape for that, and a shape which has to do with cinema and nothing else. That conversation I almost never have had here. Either the talk goes to subjects, like women subjects; or screenplay, the story. Is it a good story or a bad story, it’s a *wonderful* story—always that. And then what?

Barbara Quart: Do you think, the problem is the industry here?

AV: I think it's the industry. And also the way people are taught at school makes them believe that a good story is a strong film, a strong screenplay is a good film. What the cinema has to deal with is the way of narrating, and not the story. That's what makes Murnau big and Orson Welles and Bresson and Godard and whoever you take, that we respect, Cassavetes. It is the way that they decide to tell a story or a non-story. So that makes it very difficult sometimes here. It is perhaps confusing that when I did *One Sings, the Other Doesn't* as a feminist story, I had to go more through the story and follow the story, even though the narration was up and down. But most of my films—if we get that one slightly out of the way because it was somewhat differently made—are very very thin stories. My work is how I use it. If you tell the story of *Citizen Kane* it is 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 he told us about the man—intriguing us about what people think about him. And what is good about Murnau is the way the tension grows, but no story almost.

BQ: I don't know if directors can survive that way here with that mentality. The few directors here who think that way have had trouble surviving. You were talking about visual imagination. *Vagabond* was so beautiful to watch along with the whole sense of an exploration.

AV: I agree with the word "exploration." I didn't make it as a beautiful film to watch.

BQ: It doesn't feel decorative-beautiful, it seems totally integrated, but the images you make are incredible to look at.

AV: They are strong, they are more strong than beautiful. Especially that subject which is dying from the cold, has to deal with being outside and homeless, and the landscapes—which I know because it is the area where I was raised—the landscapes of that part of France in winter are great, they are strong, they are hostile. Just to watch the remainings of the vines, the black things which stay there—the vine stock. They make the wine and then they cut the vine (what we see in the film), and this dark mini-tree remains—like a bonsai. And these little pieces of dark black in a huge landscape make the landscape very strong—I love it.

BQ: Not just the landscape, a window with people and goats, even what you do with a wall.

AV: There are goats all over the world, there are shepherds all over the world.

BQ: But what you do with them.

AV: This has to go somewhere. The technical and frames are only the means to go through what has to be felt. And it deals with strong feelings. And that's why I put her dead at the beginning of the film—we discover her dead. We're not telling the story of that girl so people will think, "Maybe they'll save her." It's clear that she died. Alone in a ditch, frozen, which is an awful death. And the way she looks—she's a mess—she's the colors of the ditch almost, like the color of a gun. The way the story is told is not to be pitiful, not for understanding, that is not what it's about. It's about what it is to be so much in the "no" situation—she says no all the time—and I don't know why she ended up on the road and saying no. But I like to see how her "no" opposed to the society gets reactions in such different ways according to who is meeting her. So by trying to capture more or less, less rather than more, who she was and what was in her mind, since we go through other people's reactions, we discover more about them than about her.

BQ: I like the openness of it and the contradictions, but it doesn't feel confused, it feels totally in control, but open and rich.

AV: And rich because there is no way to say, "This is good, this is bad, this is mean, this is nice." So obviously we got to the point where that *structure* or *portrait* is more important than knowing did she have a lover, did she escape from a jail, or who knows?

BQ: You didn't want to deal with her as pathological.

AV: No, not even with psychology. Not even with social-psychology.

BQ: Why?

AV: Because I'm interested in now and here.

BQ: Do you see her as making a philosophical choice?

AV: Certainly not. She doesn't look to have a philosophical head to me. The shepherd made that kind of choice, but that was in '68 or in the seventies.

BQ: Was he really who he says he was—did you find someone who lived that life?

AV: Yes. But I made his lines for him, because he didn't want to speak for himself. Like he would have refused to make a documentary. When I made it clear that it was a fictional film, then he said, "Well, if you write my lines then I'm acting—then I'm being paid, and I'm acting."

BQ: Do you see the film as about the late sixties, what has happened to the sixties mentality, as Flora Lewis wrote about the film in the *New York Times*?

AV: Certainly not. Anyway, I found that article very confused.

BQ: You have talked about having a new experience with feminism in the early seventies.

AV: What do you mean, "a new experience"? I've been a feminist since I was nineteen years old, fighting for serious rights, for the same wages, for contraception. I started early, early, really.

BQ: I'm surprised because I had the sense that you had a change of vision in the early seventies and through the seventies.

AV: No, what happened was that there was a huge number of feminist women around and sometimes they used me, sometimes they pushed me away, sometimes they manipulated my work so it would be feminist or not. Some radical feminists hated my work, some feminists loved it—I was like a ping-pong ball. But in terms of real-life simple things, and not theoretical—because I never was, never read anything about feminists—all these people, they knew about Babel and Engels, which I came to know very late. But I was naturally involved in fighting whatever was prejudicial to women. So we started in France—I'm speaking about '48, '49, '50—going with other groups to the government, making petitions, I was there, helping women with that, and trusting women and working with them, giving them confidence and pushing them to be technicians—way ahead of others.

BQ: How did you have the courage to do it yourself?

AV: There is no courage there, I really believe it is natural. I had no reason to believe that my brothers were better. They were okay, but I didn't see anything that I didn't have which could make me do less than what they could do. Well, I hated war, it was clear that I wouldn't use weapons. I hated violence right away, I found it stupid mostly. And I hated a certain

kind of stupidity which is related to power, showing the power, showing the strength. And using violence against other people disgusts me. But not only against women, against other people, against Africans, against Vietnamese, against whatever. The Algerian War was a great drama. But I was mostly an artist, let's put it that way. I was very much involved with taking pictures, using my eyes like mad, discovering things, but not just traveling like a tourist, I never was that.

BQ: Were you conscious of yourself as alone among filmmakers as a woman?

AV: I was not a filmmaker even to start with but a photographer. And when I started my first film I was alone for sure as a woman, but I didn't see myself as a woman, a courageous woman, I saw myself as a courageous artist, a filmmaker, because nobody was making films at my age at the time—men or women. The young New Wave came later. So when I did my first feature-length film in '54, at that time nobody young was making films. Orson Welles maybe had done that here. But in France at the time you had to be third assistant, then second assistant, then first assistant for years, and then you would have a chance to direct after age forty-five. That was more or less the way it was done. Some people started earlier, some artists like Jean Gremillon, but it was not in the hands of youth—writing a film and doing it like this. What I started was, not so much to be young, but deciding that a film should follow inspiration and not, again, the story, the screenplay. My first film was a very strange construction. Since you teach literature, you know about *Wild Palms*, Faulkner?

BQ: Yes.

AV: This is the book that made me think a lot about what narration is because I was so impressed that the two stories in *Wild Palms* never meet. One story is about two men escaping from a penitentiary in a flood, the other is about a couple with a difficult love story. It moves back and forth.

BQ: *Vagabond* does that, doesn't it? Move back and forth.

AV: No, no, I'm sorry. *Vagabond* is really constructed about different people looking at Mona—like building together an impossible portrait of Mona. This is not back and forth. *Wild Palms* is very precisely one chapter about the escape, one about the couple. So in my first film, one chapter—if I call that a chapter—was a couple discussing their love, a kind of failed love after five years; and then there was a village trying to

get themselves together as a union—fishermen—in a very neorealistic way. So you went from the village to the couple and they would never meet. And this was very daring. This came from Faulkner because I noticed—not that I liked the book so much, this is not the point—I was trying to notice the effect of that narration on me. And how it works is that you get nervous, because you want to go to the second story. So I read it once like it is, first chapter A, then B, A, B. Then I got so nervous I read all the As together, jumping a chapter to get the story. Then I read the other one, all the Bs. Then I understood I was stupid. Then I went back to read it the way it is, which includes disturbance, it includes being frustrated from the narration.

BQ: Because so many of your films are no longer available here, the film that is very familiar to me because I saw it recently is *Les Créatures*, and you do interesting things with narration there too.

AV: This is what cinema is all about. Images, sound, whatever, are what we use to construct a way which is cinema, which is supposed to produce effects, not only in our eyes and ears, but in our “mental” movie theater in which image and sound already are there. There is a kind of on-going movie all the time, in which the movie that we see comes in and mixes, and the perception of all these images and sound proposed to us in a typical film narration piles up in our memory with other images, other associations of images, other films, but other mental images we have, they pre-exist. So a new image in a film titillates or excites another mental image already there or emotions that we have so when you propose something to watch and hear, it goes, it works. It’s like we have sleeping emotions in us all the time, half-sleeping, so one specific image or the combination of one image and sound, or the way of putting things together, like two images one after another, what we call montage, editing—these things ring a bell. These half-asleep feelings just wake up because of that—that is what it is about. This is not to make a film and say, “Okay, let’s get a deal, let’s tell the story, let’s have a good actress, good-bye, not bad,” and we go home and we eat. What I am dealing with is the effects, the perception, and the subsidiary effects of my work as proposals, as an open field, so that you can get there things you always wanted to feel and maybe didn’t know how to express, imagine, watch, observe, whatever. This is so far away from the strong screenplay, the beautiful movie, etc., that sometimes I don’t know what I should discuss. You understand, this is really fighting for that “Seventh Art” which is making films.

BQ: That's why your work has a dimension that none of these other people's do. There's a largeness of vision about your work.

AV: It is a question of our minds. What culture deals with is not that we have to learn to see all the Italian painting, all the Spanish painting, this is piling up information about culture. But what culture means is that we are able to associate real things, nature, paintings we have seen, music we have heard, a book we have read, a film we saw, with our real life, our emotional life, which means a lot.

BQ: To get back to women, I found the relationship between the tree expert in the film and Mona quite moving.

AV: Well, I have mixed feelings about it. It is written as mixed feelings. It is nice and also very different, one character is like a WASP and she has knowledge and she's a teacher and she's also a tree scientist and she's clean and she has a bathroom and she has friends and she has nail polish and she's got a car, okay. And the other one is homeless and dirty, knows nothing, and stupid, and stubborn and all that. She picks her up like this, out of nothing. What I like about the teacher, she has one quality that I gave her, which is just to be natural. She naturally suffers from the stink, she naturally overcomes it, because in a way she naturally speaks with that young outlaw runaway. She's the only one relating naturally, asking natural questions, whatever is the answer. Proposing food, but to eat it together.

BQ: That's a fine intimacy that you create.

AV: I wouldn't call it intimacy. What is intimacy? The other one doesn't even say, "Are you okay? Are you in good health? Do you have kids? You work?" The young one never asks a question, she's not interested in anything. I would say that the other one, because of her academic background, is sort of used to ask questions and to try to find where the mind of the other one is. It's almost professional.

BQ: You think so? It's more human to me.

AV: It is human, but she's also got the culture to ask the questions, and the right ones. But she's totally humanized. I like the way she buys these little cookies, and they eat them together and she says let's have coffee. She knows she won't take the girl home, so she buys her food, she gives her money, and she says bye-bye. That's what I call natural, she already has the situation in hand. She won't adopt the girl. What would you say, would you take her home?

BQ: Did you ever have a similar experience in your own life?

AV: I had a thousand experiences of that kind—with men and women I picked up on the road, and took home also. Sometimes I'd take them home, sometimes I didn't. I just follow what is there at the time. I don't have any kind of rule about that.

BQ: Why were you drawn to that?

AV: I always picked up people. I remember once in California I picked up a man—I was with my daughter at the time, she was about eleven—and he said. "Do you mind if I lie down in the back of the car?" I said, "Lie down, sleep." Then we arrived where we were going, and I said, "We are arriving, so we'll drop you off," and he said, "No, I'd rather stay here." We said, "We have to go and we can't leave you in the car." And he said, "Well, I don't want to go, I feel so good in your car, I want to sleep here." And I thought, what are we going to do, this huge man, one of those vagrants, and I didn't know what to do, he looked strong and maybe he was sick. I started to be afraid he was an addict on drugs or something. You can be in a situation when you can no longer make it nice and cool. I always did that. I've always been interested in people who have nothing because whatever you do they'll take it—this I found out very easily. You give them money, they'll take it, you give them food, they'll take it, you give them board, they'll take it. They don't ask you, they don't speak to you, they don't want you, they don't like you—they just need.

BQ: It's so interesting to me that you see them with all their flaws, that you're willing to be generous though you see them for what they are.

AV: I don't do it so they love me. They won't. They don't need my love or to love me. Recently we found one on the road when we were making the film already and she stayed with us, with the crew. We gave her board and food for a little while. She would ask for grass or money or food, but she never asked anybody something that you would relate to, not me or another. She got whatever she could out of us, out of me—and then she went.

BQ: Did you mean the maid who feels envious of the girl to be silly? The woman who keeps talking as if she envies Mona's freedom and her lover.

AV: Innocent—but innocent in a stupid way, stupid with her lover, stupid even with her boss. By seeing Mona with her boss, with the old lady, we understand that she could have another relationship. Nobody obliges her to play the maid that much. We find out that Mona wears the same

housecoat and ends up sitting on the couch and enjoying herself drinking and laughing. Why shouldn't Yolanda do that and say, "You're so alone, let's have a drink and play cards." I guess the old lady would love that.

BQ: You have such strong sympathy for the working person but you see her limits very strongly and clearly. I'd also like to ask, is there anything that binds your women together or even your films together? I mean, there are certain women directors, like von Trotta, who are obsessional—they go back and back over the same themes, the same kind of characters.

AV: Terrorists, you mean?

BQ: Sisters, two women together, obsessively. I try to think about your women characters and they seem so different from one another.

AV: Well, they have one thing in common too—women and men characters. I'm interested in contradiction—the inner contradiction—which makes everybody three persons at the same time, everybody is able to be so different from one moment to another. Even *Cléo from 5 to 7*, there was a contradiction between the objective time, which is 5:05, 5:10, 5:15, and what I call subjective time—that we feel so different when we have a good time, it lasts so little, and when we wait for something, it's endless. So that different and subjective way of perceiving the time made the film a very contradictory film. What I always had was two subjects in one, like *One Sings, the Other Doesn't*. In the first film I spoke about, the village and the couple are two entities you can't put together, collective life and private life. You can understand a union problem, and you can understand your own private life, but it's so difficult to perceive your private life in the middle of the union problem. And my two films about Los Angeles, *Mur Murs* and *Documenteur*—one is about Los Angeles, a portrait of the city through what is shown in the street, palm trees and sun and all these murals and everybody expressing themselves. And then the second film, which is like the shadow of the first one, which is what you don't see in Los Angeles, the nowhere city inside the city. And that was again my contradictory perceptions of the same city. A flamboyant place, and a totally dark end of the end of the end of the West scene. These two films were supposed to go together. So I would say the cinematic ability to perceive the contradictions at the same time has been the main element in my work. With *Mona*, I would say it's our society's contradictions that come out very clearly. We have all these social ideas that we should have night shelters, Salvation Army, welfare, charity, to help out other people, but

we don't know what to do when people don't want to be helped. There is a contradiction in our indifference and caring at the same time. So to get back to that woman, she seems to carry that very naturally, the ability of being naturally involved, slightly generous but with the exact limit of our society, which is not more than that little bit. And coming back to her house, to her job, to her bathroom, she gets away quite okay, some money, some food, bye-bye. But later on she has a guilty feeling that she should, she could, have done more. To tell the truth, I don't know what more she could have done. I don't think she was ready to adopt that vagrant—who, by the way, would not have been pleased to be adopted. So sometimes a film pushes us toward the wall where we have to face the limits of our vague understanding, vague generosity, and vague not understanding what it's all about. So I ended up structuring the film in the shape of an impossible portrait.

BQ: You've never been interested in putting a woman like yourself in one of your films?

AV: What is a woman like myself?

BQ: I don't know but not the wife in *Les Créatures* unless it's part of yourself, some domestic part of yourself.

AV: Well, look, I can see myself as a contradiction. I'm a grandmother but I'm also a very young director, in the meaning that I really fight for the same struggle that I have always been fighting, which is cinematic independence, cinematic vision, which is related to keeping a very alive mind about making film.

BQ: I'm astonished by how you keep breaking new ground.

AV: That's what I'm saying because I'm getting old also.

BQ: You seem to have amazing energy. That must be how you do it.

AV: Well, I'm losing my energy, little by little. I'll be dead soon. But the way I see my work is that I respect that work. Not in the meaning that I praise my work, but in the meaning that this is the work which is worth fighting for so much, being out of money, out of power, out of consideration, out for a while because people don't want me. They don't want me to make these films. They don't give me the money, even though they respect my finished work.

BQ: *One Sings* must have turned that around.

AV: This one is making a big amount of money in France. We have

reached a million people already. But what it does is more important than how much money it makes and if we will reimburse—which it will—because I borrowed, I took risks like nobody takes here.

BQ: Did you? Did you have to? Because I would think that *One Sings* would have done very well in the box office.

AV: It did. But with each film I have to fight like a tiger. They don't want me.

BQ: With everything you've done? With the size of your achievement?

AV: Oh, I'm a perfect cultural gadget, they have me in all libraries and cinémathèques. I'll be unforgotten. But they don't want me to make films.

BQ: Why? France the great film center?

AV: But still they do films to make money. Very few people are involved in creating that pile of pieces of films as you do paintings. I make shorts sometimes just to keep alive in my own research. You know, you saw *Ulysses*, who would give money for that? There is no market for shorts, very strange.

BQ: There seem to be many younger women directors in France now, people starting out, but they seem quite commercial.

AV: Oh, it's everywhere in the world, young men and young women, most of them look for money and fame. They make deals and become part of this stream of commercial films and it's fine if it fits them. If they like that, fine. We need products anyway. We know we cannot feed the need with only these research films or special films.

BQ: With art, you mean?

AV: But my last film, *Vagabond*—I was amazed that I did it with no compromising at all with my way of working. And so many people were touched and intrigued by the film. The film questions people, but not with guilt. I don't judge so it's not saying you should see the film, because shame on you, you don't give money to your neighbor. Nothing to do with that. I make it clear that not only nobody's perfect, but nobody's totally bad and nobody's totally good, nobody's generous really, nobody's mean really. They all do their own way. The shepherd gives her a whole lot, and he gives her a piece of land if she wants to raise potatoes, but then he's the worst judge of all because he wants to be marginal but in *his* way. He doesn't accept other people. He's the one who condemns her.

BQ: You feel harshly toward him?

AV: Yes, because he says errancy is wrong. How does he know what's good and bad? He just knows about his goats and his wife. So the film is really about tolerance also. How with tolerance you can accept other ways of existing which are so difficult to tolerate, difficult for me, difficult for everybody. And the film is made in such a way that it's more interesting because it's a woman. Because the same case could be a man in a way. But by making it a woman we add a lot of questions there—a different kind of solitude, but also a woman alone is a sexual prey, and for half the people a woman is alone because she didn't find the right man. So the film shows that she's not looking for a man, even though when she has them she can drop them like this, even in a bitchy way—as with the man she is with in the castle, and she leaves him hurt. She's mean, she's selfish. The Tunisian gives her an ability to work on something, he's not judging that she's lazy, she doesn't do a thing at home. He seems to accept her as she is. But then you see he's the victim of a group. He can't even hold his own opinion. So all these contradictions that I see all the time are what make me be touched—not only her dying from the cold, and a lonely frozen death is an awful one—but also all these contradictions that we can't stand and I can't stand. And I try to give a shape to it, not to make people cry but to give a shape to it that looks like a film.