

# The Modest Gesture of the Filmmaker: An Interview with Agnès Varda

Melissa Anderson / 2001

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Often hailed as the grandmother of the French New Wave, Agnès Varda has been making films for nearly fifty years. Her latest film, *The Gleaners and I* (*Les Glaneurs et la Glaneuse*)—awarded the Melies Prize for Best French Film of 2000 by the French Union of Film Critics—documents those who scavenge and salvage to survive in both rural and urban areas of France. Varda spent several months traveling through France to meet these present-day gleaners, using a digital camera to record her encounters. Varda’s warm, wry voice-over narration is heard throughout *The Gleaners and I*, making the “I” of the film’s title a vital, visible presence in the film. Varda captures—sometimes inadvertently—her own signs of aging, such as the graying of her hair and the age spots on her hands. Fittingly, she speaks of her role as filmmaker as one who gleanes images and ideas. Fully realizing that her subjects have the power to instruct her on the subject of gleaning, Varda never condescends to or sentimentalizes her interviewees. The gleaners in the film—particularly François, a formidable young man who survives solely on what he finds in the garbage—are compelling individuals who speak candidly about their lives and economic situations. Varda’s is a serendipitous path, one which leads her to film a man who rummages through the detritus left over in a Paris market; later Varda discovers that this man has been teaching literacy for six years and interviews him in his classroom.

Varda’s observations during her travels in *The Gleaners and I*—a film that she has described as a “road documentary”—reveal the class disparities in France. Filming a group of school children who make art

projects from recycled goods, she wonders, “How many of these children have ever shaken hands with a garbage collector?”

*The Gleaners and I* marked a return for Varda to the documentary format after her 1995 film, *One Hundred and One Nights*, which presents a rich assortment of film clips culled from cinema’s one-hundred-year history and a host of cameo appearances by international stars and features Michel Piccoli and Varda’s son, Mathieu Demy. Prior to that celebration of film’s centenary, Varda, in the early nineties, commemorated the life and work of her husband, Jacques Demy, who died in 1990. *Jacquot* (1990) is a narrative film about Demy’s childhood interspersed with footage of his films and brief interviews with Demy himself.

The documentary *The World of Jacques Demy* (1993) features interviews with both Demy and the collaborators on his films. *The Young Girls Turn 25*, also from 1993, revisits the French port town of Rochefort, where Demy filmed his 1967 musical *The Young Girls of Rochefort*, starring Françoise Dorleac and Catherine Deneuve. Like *The Gleaners and I*, *The Young Girls Turn 25* features Varda’s own ruminations on memory loss, and the significance of place. Melissa Anderson spoke with Agnès Varda last October about *The Gleaners and I*, documentary filmmaking, and her films of the nineties.

**Melissa Anderson:** How did you become interested in filming the gleaners?

**Agnès Varda:** There were three things. The first one was noticing the motion of these people bending in the open market. The second one was a program on TV. The third reason—which pushed me to begin and continue this film—was the discovery of the digital camera. I picked the more sophisticated of the amateur models [the Sony DV CAMDSR 300]. I had the feeling that this is the camera that would bring me back to the early short films I made in 1957 and 1958. I felt free at that time. With the new digital camera, I felt I could film myself, get involved as a filmmaker. It ended up that I did film myself more, and it did involve me in the film. Later on, I felt that I was asking so much of these people to reveal themselves, to speak to me, to be honest with me, that I should reveal something of myself, too. I felt that although I’m not a gleaner—I’m not poor, I have enough to eat—there’s another kind of gleaning, which is artistic gleaning. You pick ideas, you pick images, you pick emotions from other people, and then you make it into a film. Because I was also at a turn of age [Varda turned seventy in 1998], I thought it should be mentioned somehow. That’s how I ended up changing my hair, and showing my

hands as a sign, as an exterior. It's like I always say: it's both objective and subjective—like the way I used time in *Cléo from 5 to 7* [1961]—and then inside that time we feel, we can *see* the time in a very subjective manner. For this film I thought the same way—I can show my hand, or my hair, but then it is my perception of my aging as a subjective thing. It's joyful and it shows in the film. I can feel very childish when I play with the trucks. I can use my hand, I can see things and I enjoy them, so, again, it's always very objective and subjective.

**MA:** How were you able to establish the rapport you have with both the rural and urban gleaners? There's very little sentimentality in the film, and that's usually a sign of the filmmaker's ability to establish trust with her subjects.

**AV:** As you know, there is a way of saying, "Oh, my God, these poor people." At the beginning, this sentiment led me to make the film. I felt bad for them. I could see an old woman bending with difficulty, and I remembered that image so strongly. I felt she's obliged to do it—if she could afford to buy without bending, she'd do it. There was a kind of . . . not sentimental, but pitiful feeling. When I slowly approached the gleaners, some of them didn't want me to speak to them, didn't want me to film. One person said, "You will ruin our business. If you tell everybody, they will come and pick the fruit." It was so interesting. Some people were not aggressive, but discussed the facts of the subject. I respected them. If somebody didn't want to be filmed, I wouldn't steal an image. Only in one scene in the market, and from very far, or from the back. I wanted to show that gesture, that humble gesture, of picking up things from the ground. In France, we have a saying: "*le geste auguste de semeur* [the majestic gesture of the sower]." That's why I spoke in the film about *le geste modeste de glaneur*.

**MA:** The cafe owner puts it very well when she says, "Stooping has not disappeared from our society."

**AV:** Yes, but it has totally changed, not only because the things that people glean are totally different—it's no longer some grain here and there—but gleaning today is also by chance. And it's no longer just women having that "modest gesture"; men also glean. So the social behavior has totally changed. I got very excited about discovering how the image of gleaning—the image which is in the painting of Millet—had changed. When I thought about the people in the street, I could see that was the same gesture of Millet. Yet Millet portrayed an era when gleaning

was collective, in that women would be together, and enjoying it in a way. I could sense that the gleaning of today is totally different: it's men alone, there are tons of food, tons of waste, much more than before. And then I noticed the same thing in the streets and in the cities. I think that documentary means "real," that you have to meet these real people, and let them express what they feel about the subject. The more I met them, the more I could see I had nothing to make as a statement. *They* make the statement; they explain the subject better than anybody.

So it's not like having an idea about a subject and "let's illustrate it." It's meeting real people and discovering with them what they express about the subject, building the subject through real people. So it is a documentary, but the shape that I gave to it—including the original score and the editing—is really for me a narrative film. Not that documentary is "not good" and narrative film is "good." But I really work as a filmmaker, I would say, to give a specific shape to that subject. And so far it's worked, because whether people are cinephiles or not, they like the film. They like the people they meet in the film.

**MA:** How did you meet François, who so proudly announces that he has lived "one hundred percent from garbage" for the last ten years?

**AV:** I met him through one of my assistants on *One Hundred and One Nights*, whom I asked to help me on *The Gleaners*. His family has a country house near Aix-en-Provence. Our method for *The Gleaners* was to ask all the people we knew to talk to everyone—the peasants, the owners, the farmers, the fruit growers—about our film.

I said to my assistant, "Call everybody you know." By calling people in his parents' village, he was told there was a man in Aix-en-Provence. We looked for him, but didn't find him. So when my assistant told me François cleaned dishes in a pizzeria, he went into all the pizzerias, like an inquiry, almost like a detective, to get him.

He found him one day, and said, "We are looking for this . . . would you be willing to speak about that?" And François said, "Yes, as long as I can express my very strong ideas that waste is related to not knowing what to do with the waste, or badly handling the waste, and it's related to the oil catastrophes of the Erika boat." You may not have heard of it, but that incident ruined half the coast of France. François was the first one who made the connection. So we made an appointment to meet in a cafe. We're sitting in the cafe, and here he comes, with his boots, and we filmed that the way it really happened. He said, "I'll have a coffee," and we started to talk. I felt that we should do the interview walking. This is

something you have to grab right away: what the movement of the person is, how the person reacts, how the person will best express him- or herself. François was in a walking mode, don't you think?

**MA:** Yes, he has a very defiant walk.

**AV:** Defiant and so vigorous. I said to the cameraman, "Why don't you just go with him?" That scene was made with a cameraman and a sound boom and my little camera. I'm asking him the questions. François really eats out of garbage. He says he never buys anything. Whatever he finds—including clothes—it's all in the street. He says he doesn't want to buy one thing because of the waste. I learned that he had studied economics at the university in Aix-en-Provence. So we spent all afternoon filming him. He's very opinionated. He spoke about what we call the Black Tide, which had happened two months before. I had been filming the Black Tide because I was shocked. I didn't think it had a connection with my subject, gleaning. I went to the ocean to see it—it was horrifying, all these black beaches. Thank God I had filmed that so I could, when he spoke about it, edit in my footage. What I learned—and I learn this always when making documentaries—is that people are surprising.

This is a man who has nothing. At the end of the day, the assistant said to him, "Well, we can give you some money." "Oh, I don't want money!" he said. He got very mad. But he said he'd like a book. The shooting is finished, so we go into a big bookshop. He rummages through the books about art. I'm wondering what kind of painting he would like, and I say, "Choose whatever you want." Know what he picks? He picked very refined, very sophisticated eighteenth-century drawings of rich people. He said to me, "I love that period." So I bought this big, expensive book depicting the times of rich people in castles and giving balls. I was amazed. What I'm saying is that a screenplay—and I am a screenplay writer when I make fiction films—often does not have the distinctive quality of imagination that real life has. I buy the book, and I tell him, "I'll let you know when the film is coming to the theater." So the film comes to Aix-en-Provence. I write to him and say, "Please be my guest; I would like you to be with me to speak to the audience and to answer some questions." I started the question-and-answer session, and somebody asks how we found the people. I tell the story of François and then I say, "Here he is." He comes up with his boots and he's very joyful and he gives the same speech. He tells a funny story that the best time for him is June because that's when the "stupid" students of Aix-en-Provence University go back to their families and they throw away whatever is in their fridge. He said,

“I can pick all kinds of good food; I have it in my own fridge for three months.” It was very funny, his explaining the “high season” of gleaning in the street.

Then he started talking about another one of his favorite topics—expiration dates. He said, “You should not follow the rules; use your nose. I’ll give you proof: I brought you gifts—cakes I found in the garbage.” The audience laughed. He said, “Well, they were supposedly good until two days ago. I tasted them; they are perfect.” Then he gave them to the audience and asked, “Tell me, are they good? See, I told you, they’re good.” Somebody asked him, “Do you like what has been done about you in this film?” He said, “It’s OK, but it’s too short.” It proves that there was a real relationship. He admitted to being a participant in the film; I didn’t steal him. The way he reacted to the audience was so nice and so interesting. He wanted to prove to them that he was right and that the film had a meaning—that we should talk about big waste. He was incredibly strong. What I’m saying is that this kind of film has two very important things for me: it really deals with the kind of relationship I wish to have with filming: editing, meeting people, giving the film shape, a specific shape, in which both the objective and subjective are present. The objective is the facts, society’s facts, and the subjective is how I feel about that, or how I can make it funny or sad or poignant. Making a film like this is a way of living. It’s not just a product. It has been organized and finished and delivered: what I had to do just to meet the people, what came before the film, and what happened with the film, with the people we met. Afterward I go with the film to festivals and to different cities. I also show the film to peasants, in villages and other places.

**MA:** What has their response been?

**AV:** They all love it, they really love it. They know it deals with something they know. What is difficult is that you have to be very vivacious when you shoot. You have to understand right away where the right place is, what the right move is.

**MA:** Did using a digital camera give you more freedom?

**AV:** The filmic decision has nothing to do with the camera. Since something will not happen again—you cannot make people repeat an action—you have to grab the feeling right away, and you decide to do it very slowly or still or running with them or, perhaps different things with the same person. With François, I knew I had to walk with him, capturing the movement of his very energetic, very angry way of strolling in

the streets. At one point he says, "With my boots I'm protected from the hostile world. I'm the *seigneur de la ville*." [Both spellings *vile* and *ville* are given, leading to one of Varda's puns: I'm master of the city and the vile.] But these shots are done here and there, and you have to constrict the description of his character with strengths . . . and there is no pity, no reason to be pitiful of François.

In another case, let's say; how I found the man in the trailer park. What I did was, I drove along—anyplace—I saw a lot of trailers, I parked my car, and I asked for somebody who didn't exist. I asked for, say, "Philippe Garnier." I said, "I've been told that Phillippe Garnier lives here." "Philippe Garnier? I don't think so. Maybe you should ask the next trailer." I said, "Is there another place like this?" I went in like this, lying, in a way, but they started speaking to me. After a while somebody would say, "Would you like to sit?" I would say, "Yes, I wouldn't mind sitting with you for a while." I looked around, I saw they had no heating, no lights. Then I'd say I'm a documentarian and that I would be interested in speaking with them, and they'd say, "Well, why not?" Then I would come later and film. Being alone when you do location scouting is one thing, but people scouting is much better if you're alone. Sometimes I had my little camera, sometimes I didn't. Sometimes I said, "Do you mind if I take some shots?" When they asked what it's for, I said, "Some is for television, some is for me." I told the truth. Sometimes I had my tripod; sometimes I said, "I may come back with a crew." They were nice. I have a feeling that the people never thought I would betray them. They must have felt right away that I would share what they said, that I would really listen to them.

**MA:** Would you talk some more about this idea of filmmaking as artistic gleaning? You did a lot of "gleaning" for your film *One Hundred and One Nights*, a celebration of film's first century.

**AV:** My idea for that film was that a bad memory can become an unorganized gleaning. Simon Cinema [Michel Piccoli] picks things that he has in his mind, but are not well-organized. His "saving" of memory isn't too good, so he mixes things up. And I like the idea that he makes mistakes all the time in his memory. He allowed me to be free about the history of cinema and very free about what I picked. One film writer came up to me and said, "You are unfair! You didn't show Russian films." And I said, "So what? Do we have to show the history of cinema exactly as it was?"

**MA:** Did you have fun when you were choosing the film clips?

**AV:** I had a lot of fun. I love this film for two reasons. At the time, everyone was speaking about cinema very seriously, planning a big commemoration. I remembered a line of Bunuel's: "I hate commemorations. *Vive oubli* [forgetfulness]." I found that so beautiful. I have a bad memory, so I thought, what if you're very old, and even though you love film, you just pick this image and that image, and you mix up names and the titles of films? I thought it was an interesting way of approaching the desire for memory. Sometimes, even with a film I really love, I cannot tell the story precisely. Sometimes I cannot even tell what happened chronologically. But I'll have flashes of some things. Sometimes it looks almost like a still. What I know, what I can remember is the emotion I felt. I know I loved a film because I remember feeling good in the film or feeling odd when I came out, either in tears or touched or mad. So because of that bad memory, which leads to very subjective emotion, I thought we should work on that, on a man who's so old he grabs this and that. Using the star system, which I've been avoiding all my life, was a way of saying I can bring stars into this film, but just as visiting guests. So it was fun for me to have Delon or Belmondo or Depardieu—famous people. But nobody loved the film—it was a flop everywhere, even in France.

**MA:** Memory and the documentation of aging seem to be themes in your more recent work, especially in *Jacquot* and *The Young Girls Turn 25*.

**AV:** Right, but that happened only after Jacques died. I had always been very much into the present, which I'm now back to. I was not really interested in memory, but it started with *Ulysse*, which was made in '82. Then I made other films, such as *Kung-Fu Master* [1987], *Jane B. par Agnès V.* [1987] and then Jacques died. *Jacquot* was made in his memory. The experiment was very challenging. Can you go into someone else's memory? He had a very good memory; he could remember everything. So traveling in his memory was wonderful for me because it was difficult—I had to make it up.

**MA:** Were you traveling in both your memory and Demy's memory when you made *The Young Girls Turn 25*?

**AV:** Yes. Jacques' death brought back a lot of memories. He was my memory of where we'd been together. *The Young Girls Turn 25* and *Jacquot* were his memory, and I did *The World of Jacques Demy*, which is a documentary that is an "answer" to *Jacquot de Nantes*. A kid dreams of being a filmmaker [in *Jacquot*], and the documentary is about an adult filmmaker—people speak about his films. There are clips of other films in *Jacquot*, but



they are related to his youth. *The Young Girls Turn 25* came about because the city did something to commemorate the twenty-fifth anniversary of Demy's musical [*The Young Girls of Rochefort*], and I went to Rochefort for that. Now I'm really trying to get out of that. This film [*The Gleaners*] is not really about memory. I think *now* is so interesting: now as a society, my own life, situations I see, the rotten politics everywhere.

**MA:** Do you think your combination of the documentary esthetic within a narrative film—so present in *Vagabond* (1985)—has inspired contemporary French filmmakers such as Bruno Dumont (*La Vie de Jesus*, 1997, and *L'Humanité*, 1999), and the Dardenne brothers (*Rosetta*, 1999)?

**AV:** Some people come from documentary, like the Dardenne brothers. And when they started to make narrative films, like *La Promesse* [1996] or *Rosetta*, they really used a documentary technique to approach the subject, and made what I think are beautiful films. What I'm trying to do—what I've been trying to do all along—is to bridge the border of these two genres, documentary and fiction. In my first fiction film, *La Pointe Courte* [1954], I used the real people of the village, but I also had actors. In *Cléo from 5 to 7*, which is a fiction film, when Cléo [Corinne Marchand] is in the street and starts to look at other people, I had to have a texture of documentary so that we would believe what she sees in the street such as the man swallowing frogs. I've been trying all my life to put into fictional films the *texture* of documentary. Like in *Vagabond*, with the exception of Sandrine Bonnaire and a few others, all the other people are real workers, real people in the fields. But I asked them to say my words, so it still is written; it's not improvised at all. I asked them to do it, we rehearsed, but because they knew how to behave with their own tools in their own surroundings, they acted very much like people within a documentary.

Now, when it comes to documentaries, like *Daguerreotypes* [1975] or *Mur Murs* [1980], in *Mur Murs* there are some incredible, real people, but I made them so strong they are like fictional characters. That's something in *The Gleaners*: you will never forget François, you will never forget the man who teaches. So they become fictional characters, in a way. In documentaries you have to be smart, to propose something, to set up something like François's walk. Then the subjects say something that a screenwriter would never invent; they almost become fictional characters. So I've always been working on the border. But I know when fiction is fiction, and documentary is documentary. It still is very precise. I didn't ask any of the people in *The Gleaners* to say anything specific. We never cheated because it wouldn't make sense. Although my narration

and my presence in the film are elements we added, the film is also a reality.

**MA:** What are your current projects?

**AV:** To—slowly, slightly—get out of this film. I admire people who can say, “I’m doing this in 2001, this in 2002, and this in 2003.” I cannot plan anything. I have to have the desire to make a film. Then it’s a joy. You have to pick something you believe in. You have to believe it’s worth it, and that it makes sense for you to do it. If I don’t have that much passion, I won’t work. I thought *The Gleaners* would be a very modest film that nobody would see. I was lucky that the people selecting for Cannes came to see it as a work in progress and they picked it. So we had to finish it. I would’ve been working on it longer—perhaps looking for more real people on the subject. You have to fill the audience with excitement about meeting different people, thinking about the subject, covering different aspects. I was lucky to meet so many different people. I really think of the audience a lot. I think they should not be bored with the subject.

Every time you make a film, you learn something. You approach other people, other people’s work, some landscape you never noticed before. It’s like giving sudden life to what you see and capturing the beauty in it.