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— The Gleaners and I —

*a film by
AGNES VARDA*

A ZEITGEIST FILMS RELEASE

The Gleaners and I

Here and there in France, Agnès Varda has come across gleaners, foragers, rummagers and scavengers. Through necessity, purely by chance or out of choice these people pick up left-over items discarded by others. Their world is a surprising one.

It is a far cry from the world of yesterday's gleaners, peasant women who rummaged for bits of wheat left after the harvest.

Potatoes, apples and other discarded foodstuffs, things without owners, clocks without hands are the fare of today's gleaners.

But Agnès Varda herself is just as much a gleaner, and her documentary is subjective.

There is no age limit to curiosity. Filming itself is gleaning.

DIRECTOR'S NOTE

This film is a documentary woven from various strands: from emotions I felt when confronted with precariousness; from the possibilities offered by the new small digital cameras; and from the desire to film what I can see of myself—my aging hands and my grey hair. I also wanted to express my love for painting. I had to piece it together and make sense out of it all in the film, without betraying the social issue that I had set out to address—waste and trash: who finds a use for it? how? can one live on the leftovers of others?

Films always originate in emotions. This time it was that of seeing so many people combing the market place or rummaging through supermarket trash containers for leftovers. Seeing them made me want to film them and specifically that which cannot be filmed without their consent. How can one testify for them and yet not hinder them?

During the wheat harvest in the summer of 1999, I saw on TV a farmer sitting on top of his combine harvester. He was explaining that if the machine was badly adjusted, and left one grain on each stalk, he would end up losing a staggering amount of wheat and an equally staggering amount of money.

This grain on a stalk struck me. It reminded me of gleaning in the old days, a rural custom which has now disappeared (for obvious reasons), and of the paintings of woman gleaning. I also wanted to roam around. To meet people. To seek them out.

Rather than a “road movie”, I would say a “wandering-road-documentary.”

I first had to investigate the rural world (gleaning and picking), and then the urban world (salvaging), and I permitted myself only digressions indirectly related to the topic.

This is why this film includes a winegrower who descends from the extraordinary Etienne-Jules Marey; the owner of a vintage wines who is also a psychotherapist; the anecdote of a couple who run a cafe; and a class for illiterate adults.

I wanted to glean images as one jots down travel notes, and feel free to show a funny dog I met on the way (why is it wearing a red boxing glove around its neck?). Or the Dard overflowing. Free to linger over a painting by Van der Weyden. To observe couples. But always coming back to the gleaners, trying to win their confidence, listen to them, converse with them rather than interview them, and film them.

My intention became clearer to myself throughout the shooting and editing stages. Little by little, I found the right balance between self-referential moments (the gleaner who films one of her hands with the other) and moments focused on those whose reality and behavior I found so striking. I managed to approach them, to bring them out of their anonymity. I discovered their generosity. There are many ways of being poor, having common sense, anger or humor.

The people I have filmed tell us a great deal about our society and ourselves. I myself learned a lot as I was shooting this film.

It confirmed my idea that documentaries are a discipline that teaches modesty.

– Agnès Varda



FILMING THE GLEANERS

SHOOTING, EDITING ETC

Thanks to the freedom granted to me by a production company I more or less control (Ciné Tamaris), I can start shooting for two weeks and then immediately proceed to edit. Meanwhile we keep finding new locations. Then we start shooting again and editing more.

Then the commentary text begins to take shape, words give rise to new ideas and call for new images. New information comes up, new contacts. We then go back on the road again. And last comes the editing, the music, the mixing and the finishing touches.

The definition I gave to film writing (*cinécriture*) applies more specifically to documentary films. The encounters I make and the shots I take, alone or together with a team, the editing style, with echoing or counter pointing moments, the wording of the voiceover commentary, the choice of music, all this isn't simply writing a script, or directing a film or wording a commentary, all this is chance working with me, all this is the film writing that I often talk about.

TECHNICAL

The team work was done with the help of a digital SONY DV CAM DSR 300 and SENNHEISER 416 mike. I shot using a MINI DV SONY DCR TRV 900 E (3CCD) + mike ECM-77B by SONY, plugged into the camera (the cord is visible at various moments!) and filmed 15 out of the 80 minutes of the film on my own. Editing was done on AVID X PRESS.

LOCATIONS

The film was shot in the North of France, and in Beauce, Jura, Provence, Pyrenees Orientales, and in Paris and its suburbs. Between September 1999 and April 2000 we shot for 29 days in teams, going on for 4 to 7 days at a go. And I went on traveling alone or often filmed for 2 or 3 hours regularly, especially at the close of markets, between 2 and 4 pm.

LUCK

We never cheated when filming abandoned objects on the streets, or what the rummagers found in the garbage cans. We really enjoyed our stroke of luck when we found a painting on gleaning exhibited in a curiosity shop. And we immediately filmed it.



Information gleaned on the right to glean

“The community at large has various rights on private lands: right to glean ears of wheat left over or forgotten by the croppers, a right derived from the Holy Scriptures and implemented by Saint Louis. This right was reserved for the old, the young, the sick, the widowed, who couldn’t lease their hands during the harvest. The right to pick grapes left over by the harvesters. The right to rake up dried grass. The right to pick up wild berries in the bushes. And also the right to graze, every other day, one’s herd along the roads so as to allow for transhumance.”

– A History of Property, by J-Ph. Lévy (Que sais-je collection)

Mr. Dessaud, our “country lawyer” flicked through his books before entering the fields, in his robe, to tell us about the right to glean. The harvest has to be over, and the gleaner is only allowed to come from sunup until sundown. See criminal law article R26.10. Mr. Dessaud found a decree in an old law book from 1554 which allowed the poor and the destitute to pick in the fields after the harvest.

The uses and regulations regarding gleaning come from even further ago, from the Old Testament:

Leviticus, 23, 22

“And when ye reap the harvest of your land, thou shalt not make clean riddance of the corners of thy field when thou reapest, neither shalt thou gather any gleaning of thy harvest: thou shalt leave them unto the poor, and to the stranger.”

Deuteronomy 24, 19

“When thou cuttest down thine harvest in thy field, and hast forgotten a sheaf in the field, thou shalt not go again to fetch it: it shall be for the stranger, for the fatherless, and for the widow.”

I asked Mr. Dessaud: “What about those who glean for the fun of it?” His answer was: “If they glean for the fun, they need something to provide the fun. If the rules and hours are adhered to, they can glean like the poor used to.”

Information gleaned on the right to salvage objects

Res Derelictae are ownerless goods. Their owners’ will has been clearly expressed: they deliberately left them. Mrs. Espie, our “city lawyer” commented on the Penal Code: “these objects cannot be stolen since they have no owner. People who come to retrieve these objects become their legal owners. They acquire this piece of property in an original manner, since they acquire it from no one. They come, take the object, and it belongs to them, irrevocably.”



GLEANERS ON GLEANING

Claude, unemployed, living in a caravan

"We are not afraid of getting our hands dirty, you can always wash your hands".

Josiane, who used to glean

"My mother would often tell me: 'pick up the last bits, don't let them go to waste'."

François, the man with the big rubber boots on

"I live 100% on things I retrieve from trash. I have eaten 100% trash for 10 years, I've never been ill."

Robert, a gleaner of many crops

"That's nature, it shouldn't go to waste. To fill a whole basketfull, it takes us a while. Gleaning is not a piece of cake, it's hard work".

Agnès, gleaning images on the road

"Again one hand filming the other hand, and still more trucks..."

"I feel like capturing them. To try and stop the flow ? No, just to play."

Salomon, a gleaner of food...

"It's like a lottery: sometimes you get good cold meats, sometimes fowl, sometimes both".

...and of domestic appliances

"I patch and fix fridges, and once the machine works again, I sell it, or I give it away to my neighbors".

Louis Pons, a painter

"It's small streaks that I pick up around, that I glean, and that become my paintings... Skirting boards, frames, things like that. This is... a windshield wiper. But to me, they're just streaks... Horizontal statements, nothing else".

VR 2000, a gleaner cum artist

"All you need to do is wonder about the streets, locate heaps of objects and then help yourself like in a real department store. It's like a present left on the street. it's like Christmas, these leftovers".

GLEANERS IN PAINTING



Orsay Museum - Paris

Les Glaneuses (Women Gleaning) by Jean-François MILLET (1867)

Le Retour des Glaneuses (the Return of Gleaners) by Jules BRETON (1859)

(12,000 postcard reproductions of Millet's painting are reported to have been sold in 1998)

Arras Museum of Fine Arts

La Glaneuse (Woman Gleaning) by Jules BRETON (1877)

Nantes Museum of Fine Arts

La Petite Glaneuse (The Little Gleaner) by Hugo SALMSON (1864)

Museum of Villefranche-sur-Saône (in the reserves)

Glaneuses à Champbeaudouin (or Glaneuses fuyant l'orage, Gleaners Fleeing Before the Storm)

by Pierre Edmond HEDOUIN (1852)

Amsterdam Rijkmuseum

Femmes de Schewinger glanant dans un champ de pommes de terre

(Women gleaning in a potato field) by Ph. Saade

...and other paintings and sketches to be spotted.

THE MUSIC

Joanna Bruzdowicz had composed the score for VAGABOND, KUNG FU MASTER and JACQUOT DE NANTES. I asked her to write a music theme for THE GLEANERS AND I (and told her jokingly that the theme would be Aging-Agnès). Yves Cortvint (alto), Luc Dewez (cello), Olivier Dufour (trumpet), Karol Goledowski (piano) and Sophie de Tillesse (voice) interpreted this theme and the variations on it, such as a little fugue. There is also an electronic version.

Pierre Barbaud did the twelve-tone music for LA POINTE COURTE in 1954. In 1964 he worked on a Bull computer to compose the score for THE CREATURES. I chose to borrow from his homage to Newton, *Apfelsextett* (1977), a piece of music we often hear when filming on the road.

Ocean. This band headed by Isabelle Olivier has released a CD, *Funny Streams*, from which we borrowed beautiful moments, such as *Cinq à Quatre part 3* which she composed, and a duet between Sébastien Texier and Nicolas Krassik.

François Wertheimer did the Jérôme theme for L'UNE CHANTE L'AUTRE PAS and a little ditty he was still humming along 24 years later. He plays a little harmonica. He does it *For Alain*.

RAP - Why rap ?

Rappers are familiar to denunciations of injustice, racism and everything going wrong. The moment on those who rummage through leftovers from the market was sad. It appeared to me I had to express sadness and revolt with energy and rhythm. In short, with rap. I suggested the theme and a few lyrics to two rappers, **Agnès Bredel** and **Richard Klugman**. But I still wonder whether it isn't more staggering to watch them in utter silence picking up food after the market has closed (since silence slows down one's visual pace) ; rather than join together with the rapper's rhythmic denunciation (which speeds it up) ?

I also wanted to use an excerpt of the Trombone Concerto by **Luciano Berio**. But I never managed to reach the rightful owners of the recording, despite Berio's agreement.



AGNES VARDA

Agnès Varda was born in Brussels, Belgium in 1928. Sometimes called “the grandmother of the French New Wave,” she has been making films for more than 40 years.

FILMOGRAPHY

- 1954 LA POINTE COURTE (89 mins)
1957 O Saisons, O Châteaux (22 mins)
1958 L'Opéra-Mouffe (17 mins)
1958 Du Côté de la Côte (24 mins)
- 1961 CLÉO DE 5 A 7 (CLÉO FROM 5 TO 7) (90 mins)
1963 Salut les Cubains (30 mins)
1964 LE BONHEUR (HAPPINESS) (82 mins)
1964 Les Enfants du Musée (7 mins)
1966 Elsa la Rose (20 mins)
1966 LES CRÉATURES (105 mins)
1967 Uncle Yanco (22 mins)
1968 Black Panthers (28 mins)
1969 LIONS LOVE (...AND LIES) (110 mins)
- 1970 NAUSICAA (90 mins) [Vanished]
1975 DAGUERRÉOTYPES (80 mins, documentary)
1975 Réponse de Femmes (8 mins)
1976 Plaisir d'Amour en Iran (6 mins)
1976 L'UNE CHANTE, L'AUTRE PAS (ONE SINGS,
THE OTHER DOESN'T) (120 mins)
1977 Quelques Femmes Bulles (58 mins, video)
- 1980 MUR MURS (MURAL MURALS) (81 mins, documentary)
1981 DOCUMENTEUR (AN EMOTION PICTURE) (63 mins)
1982 Ulysse (22 mins)
1982 Une Minute Pour Une Image (170 two-minute spots for TV)
1984 Les Dites Caryatides (13 mins)
1984 7P., cuis., s. de b... (27 mins)
1985 SANS TOIT NI LOI (VAGABOND) (105 mins)
1986 T'as de beaux escaliers, tu sais... (3 mins)
1987 JANE B. PAR AGNES V. (97 mins)
1987 KUNG-FU MASTER (LE PETIT AMOUR) (78 mins)
- 1990 JACQUOT DE NANTES (JACQUOT) (118 mins)
1992 LES DEMOISELLES ONT EU 25 ANS
(THE YOUNG GIRLS TURNED 25) (63 mins, documentary)
1994 LES CENT ET UNE NUITS (ONE HUNDRED
AND ONE NIGHTS) (100 mins)
1995 L'UNIVERS DE JACQUES DEMY
(THE WORLD OF JACQUES DEMY) (90 mins, documentary)
- 2000 LES GLANEURS ET LA GLANEUSE
(THE GLEANERS AND I) (82 mins, documentary)

The Gleaners and I

{Les Glaneurs et la Glaneuse}

Directed and narrated by Agnès Varda

Photography Stéphane Krausz, Didier Rouget, Didier Doussin
Pascal Sautelet and Agnès Varda

Sound Emmanuel Soland, Nathalie Vidal

Original score Joanna Bruzdowicz

Editing Agnès Varda and Laurent Pineau

Produced by Ciné Tamaris
with the help of Centre National de la Cinematographie,
Procirep and Canal +

Filmed from September 1999 to March 2000 in DV Cam and Mini DV
in various regions of France. Transferred to 35mm.

France • 2000 • 82 minutes • Color • 1:1.66
In French with English subtitles



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The New York Times

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A Reaper of the Castoff, Be It Material or Human

By A. O. SCOTT

"The Gleaners and I" takes its title, and some of its inspiration, from an 1867 painting by Jean-François Millet that shows three women in a wheat field, stooping to pick up sheaves and kernels left behind after the harvest. The image is well known; it appears in the Larousse Dictionary of the French Language alongside the definition of the verb "gleaner" (to glean). The painting itself, which hangs in the Musée d'Orsay in Paris, shows up early in Agnès Varda's wonderful new documentary, thronged by camera-wielding tourists.

The painting — or, more accurately, the activity it depicts — sent Ms. Varda, a warm, intrepid woman in her early 70's and one of the bravest, most idiosyncratic of French filmmakers, on a tour of her own. From September 1999 until May of this year, she crisscrossed the French countryside with a hand-held digital video camera and a small production crew, in search of people who scavenge in potato fields, apple orchards and vineyards, as well as in urban markets and curbside trash depositories. Some are motivated by desperate need, others by disgust at the wastefulness all around them and others by an almost mystical desire to make works of art out of things — castoff dolls, old refrigerators, windshield wipers — that have been thrown away without a second thought.

Ms. Varda, their patient interlocutor, also sees herself as a gleaner in her own right. (The film's French title, "Les Glaneurs et la Glaneuse," makes this plain.) She plucks images and stories from the world around her, finding beauty and nourishment in lives and activities the world prefers to ignore. She is a constant,

funny presence in the film, providing piquant voice-over narration and allowing herself visual and verbal digressions on the state of her aging hands, the water damage on her ceiling and her portable camera's dancing lens cap.

She is also an indefatigably curious, skeptical and sympathetic observer. "The Gleaners and I" is both a diary and a kind of extended essay on poverty, thrift and the curious place of scavenging in French histo-

Finding beauty in lives and things that the world does not notice.

ry and culture. The patrons of a provincial bar explain the difference between gleaning and picking; a magistrate in black robes stands in a cabbage field and cites the section of the French penal code (Article R-28.10) and the royal edict of Nov. 2, 1554, that establish the right to glean. This bureaucratic side of the national temperament is also embodied by an apple farmer who explains the system he has developed for registering and licensing those who wish to gather his unharvested fruit.

For all its gentle humor — there is a hilarious dispute about just how many oysters one is allowed to gather after a storm — Ms. Varda's film uncovers a subterranean world of poverty and loneliness in the midst of plenty. An elderly peasant woman recalls the old days, when, as in Millet's painting, gleaning was a communal activity, festive and so-

THE GLEANERS AND I

Directed by Agnès Varda; commentary (in French with English subtitles) by Ms. Varda; directors of photography, Stéphane Krausz, Didier Rouget, Didier Doussin, Pascal Sauter and Ms. Varda; edited by Ms. Varda and Laurent Pineau; music by Joanna Bruzdowicz; produced by Ciné Tamaris; released by Zeitgeist Films. Running time: 82 minutes. This film is not rated. Shown with a 10-minute short, Eric Oriot's "Later," tomorrow at 7 p.m. at Alice Tully Hall as part of the 58th New York Film Festival.

WITH: Boden Litnanski, Agnès Varda and François Wertheimer.

ciable even as it was backbreaking. Now, Ms. Varda notes, people scavenge alone, and they gather not only agricultural surplus but supermarket trash as well.

And yet "The Gleaners and I" is never depressing. Even at their most desperate — a former truck driver, fired for drinking on the job, who lives in a shabby trailer; a group of disaffected young people who vandalize hulking trash bins — Ms. Varda's gleaners retain a resilient, generous humanity that is clearly brought to the surface by her own tough, open spirit.

The film is studded with found metaphors and serendipitous insights, like the collection of heart-shaped potatoes Ms. Varda brings home from her travels. They're coarse, homely objects, misshapen and flecked with dirt, unmarketable in the view of the potato growers. But their poetic value is self-evident. "I'm something of a leftover myself," Ms. Varda remarked to journalists covering the New York Film Festival, where "The Gleaners and I" will be shown tomorrow night. This was a charming bit of modesty. She's a treasure.