

## *Les glaneurs et la glaneuse*: Transcript

What does it mean to live in France when you have little money for food or clothes? What happens to furniture or possessions, which people leave out for recycling on French streets at night? What if a filmmaker took these ideas and decided to tell all the different stories of people who pick up what gets thrown away – people who glean – from the fields after harvest, from the pavement and even directly out of rubbish bins where it's been dumped? Agnès Varda's film *Les glaneurs et la glaneuse* does just this, examining the people, the environmental issues and even telling a story about herself. They are 'les glaneurs' and she is 'la glaneuse'. It's a documentary about modern French society but very much in Varda's own individual style.

I'm Rona and I'm a researcher who concentrates on women filmmakers. Here's what I hope this next 20 minutes or so will cover:

We'll look at how the film:

- Is a documentary about French social issues, in particular, about the practice of gleaning where its title comes from, an ancient practice of picking up unwanted parts of the harvest left by farmers. In modern society, it also covers picking up food from urban waste bins, unwanted furniture or materials. We'll see how Varda expands it even further to look at how it's used in art.
- How it introduces a set of characters who represent a variety of aspects of French society

I'll talk a little about:

- Agnès Varda and her background, especially her relationship to the French New Wave (an important cultural movement in France just after the war) and mention other films of hers that make good companions to this one. She's original in her approach and there's plenty to look at for her.

I'll touch upon:

- how the film is made so it's a kind of gleaning itself i.e. how its style as a documentary matches its subject matter. This will mean you'll be able to discuss its originality; how Varda has picked up small fragments, still and moving images, and has made something new out of them artistically

In the resource materials there will be some target vocabulary which will be useful for you if you want to study the film in more detail.

I'll start with the key, general points about Varda's film. It was very successful in France (and elsewhere). In particular, audiences responded personally to Varda – who appears throughout the film – and to the stories she tells. This makes it unusual, because there was such a direct public response to her.

In *Les glaneurs et la glaneuse*, Varda travels around France talking to people who take part in the activity of gleaning – how they collect food or other things other people have thrown away so that they can use, re-use or recycle them. It's a film that tells you about Varda herself as well as people who are living on the margins of French society It's worth looking out for how Varda makes connections between the different types of gleaning:

- ones to do with surviving and looking after yourself and
- others to do with recycling materials to express yourself and make art.

Its success is as a result of its subject and its style. It is also (*un auto-portrait*) a self-portrait of Varda, who is now an older woman (a mother and a grandmother). What you'll notice, watching the film, is how she brings together these two strands – the portrait of the gleaners (*les glaneurs*) and portrait of the artist (*la glaneuse*) and the way in which time is important to both.

So, starting with the activity of gleaning. This film makes a strong environmental statement - beginning with how much food is wasted which could be eaten. Varda starts in the French fields with the harvest. It's an ancient practice. The bible mentions leaving parts of the fields unharvested to allow the poor to collect food – to glean – as a duty of all landowners. The image of the gleaner in the fields is similarly a well-known and powerful one in French art and culture. Varda, herself, has studied art history, is a visual artist and photographer, as well as a filmmaker. It is paintings of gleaners that capture her as well through the whole film. In the old paintings, it is women who glean. Varda mentions how this gesture of bending down to pick up food has a particular feeling of humility: “le même geste modeste de glaner”.

What types of people carry out this humble activity in modern France? In the first sequence in Beauce, poor people and charities pick up potatoes which have been rejected because they do not fit supermarket regulations on size. Varda is quoted in one film magazine's review as saying that:

Someone very correctly observed that the film is also about the people who aren't 'pre-formatted', the human equivalents of the potatoes that aren't the right size for the supermarket shelves.

In the hands of Varda, then, this becomes a story which is very much about the people involved. An immediate strength in her documentary style is her warmth and her accessibility. She has a sense of humour about herself and others and is interested in their stories. Elsewhere in Varda's work (in *Les plages d'Agnès* (2008)) she has said that, unlike Jean Paul Sartre [who is quoted as saying 'hell is other people'] she loves to engage with others' lives. Through all her documentary films, this is exactly what she does. And in *Les glaneurs et la glaneuse*, she continues to allow people – those who would never have the chance to speak in a film – to speak directly on camera about their experiences. Not only how they recycle or find produce, but also what their lives are like and how they manage in the modern world. Varda made a film in 1985 called *Sans toit ni loi* about a young woman who chooses to live outside conventional society. In Sandrine Bonnaire's passionate performance, the protagonist, Mona, is often rude and dismissive of people who want to help her, but the story becomes (overall) a really affecting and emotional one about being a vagabond (the English title). Varda, therefore, is clearly interested in what happens to the people who refuse ordinary rules and returns to this subject more than once.

So, what about some of those stories?

We've established that this is a film about those who glean because they need to, those who do it because they are artists and others who do it through an active choice. I've chosen – or gleaned – certain of the stories from the film which demonstrate these different forms and which show key aspects of her content and style.

Number One. Varda meets an unnamed man (who we later learn is Claude). This character seems to live a very unconventional life, dependent on alcohol. Notice how Varda does not try to impose any other kind of ‘world view’ on him when they talk. She, as a documentary maker, appears on screen but has a great capacity to listen to her subjects. She lets them set the agenda. We can compare this to many forms of more conventional documentary-making where the film-maker appears to direct the commentary or choose the aspects of the conversation. In conventional documentaries we may be used to an authoritative voiceover, which tends to guide us to what to think. Representing people who are poor or live on the margins of society is a very sensitive social issue. You might want to think about television programmes which cover these topics, and how their representation might differ from Varda’s. Varda’s aim appears to break this convention by sitting alongside them and being non-judgemental.

Number Two. Her meeting with François. François appears as someone living very unconventionally. He gleans in town – walking around as ‘le seigneur de ville’ in his large boots and living entirely on reclaimed food from dustbins (les poubelles) – in his case, very deliberately to make a statement about waste in modern society. He makes a point of telling Varda he has a social security number and works – he is part of the ‘ordinary’ community and his gleaning is a social statement not out of need.

There are many other interesting stories - you could look at VR2000 (Verre Deux Milles) , an artist who reclaims small items from the furniture refuse to make his collages. Or Alain, who gleans food in the market and teaches new immigrants French. Varda returns to some of these characters in the follow up documentary *Deux ans après* (2002), where we see the huge public response to the film (all kinds of items were sent to Varda directly).

But for ‘Character Number Three’ I’m going to turn from ‘*les glaneurs*’ to ‘*la glaneuse*’ herself. Travelling round France, Varda is picking up all these stories. She begins to discuss how it is an ‘*autoportrait*’ a self-portrait. In one sequence, looking at a postcard of a Rembrandt self-portrait – an art painting – Varda is inspired to turn her digital camera on herself, to record her aging skin on her arms and hands. This has become a famous section of the film because it shows someone reflecting on what it is like to grow old, to see your own body as if it is separate from yourself (the person you feel you are inside). This image seems unconnected to the rest of the piece, until you think of the heart-shaped potatoes growing roots that Varda includes elsewhere. Suddenly, you realise images appear throughout relating to time and decay and that the whole film is very playful in its style, suggesting you can connect these pieces and fragments into a theme. What does Varda seem to say about time passing and getting older? As she leaves it very open, that is something I would leave with you to interpret through the images yourselves. In the same way, art – and its importance – runs through the film through many diverse images and comments e.g. the paintings of gleaners, the artists she interviews, the exhibitions she attends, the way in which she plays in her own filmmaking using the tiny digital camera she takes with her.

### **The Essay or ‘Essaie’ Film: Linking Images Through the Film**

This gives you more than one way in which you can discuss how Varda has a very individual approach to the documentary. As a film-maker, she recognises that linking a number of unrelated pieces of film is a kind of ‘gleaning’ in itself. Critics have commented on this, pointing out that she is creating a whole story from small fragments that might seem (in themselves) insignificant. But like the other artists she features, she creates a new complete,

artwork out of these many pieces. Something which can have impact, can be important. In the same way, Varda is showing you how the gleaners' stories – and the gleaners themselves – are collectively very important.

For you as French students, you can focus on how the vocabulary in relation to gleaning – *glaner, remasser, récupérer, bricolage* – appears across different sections of the film to link them. You can consider how the vocab also alters. What is the difference between *grapiller* and *glaner*? Also, how does urban compared to rural gleaning perhaps need a different language?

### **The Essay Film: Questions of Art**

Agnès Varda has a background in fine arts and photography and this influences the style of her filmmaking (which we can call avant-garde or art film). She studied art history at the École du Louvre, but developed an interest in practical photography. A key film style to use to discuss Varda is that of the 'essai' film. The essay film can include all kinds of filmic material e.g. still photography as well as filmed sequences and can explore a topic in quite an idiosyncratic and unconventional way. How she developed into that style is part of the story of the French New Wave – *la nouvelle vague* – a group of filmmakers which Varda worked within (although she is not talked about as much as directors and writers such as Jean-Luc Godard, Alain Resnais or François Truffaut, for example). This important cultural movement – involving both film criticism and film-making – comprised a number of different styles and approaches. Varda – alongside Resnais and Chris Marker – was part of the Left Bank group (a name given to them later on) who produced more of these documentary and essay films.

Varda is, therefore, a very important French filmmaker. She has been writing and filming since 1954. She has worked consistently, funding all her productions through her own company, Ciné Tamaris, receiving many awards at home and abroad. *Les glaneurs* was made when she was 72 years old and she is still producing work in her eighties. Varda was called the grandmother of the French New Wave because of her influence in that film movement. In recent years, she has appeared as a friendly grandmother character in her own documentaries, and (in something that's a little different to other film-makers) she has forged a direct relationship to her audience. In the follow-up, *Deux ans après*, Varda shows all the letters, artworks, heart-shaped vegetables she has received from those who saw and loved the film. The heart-shaped potatoes she gleans in *Les glaneurs* are important to the ideas on recycling in that environmental essay film. They're also important to the people. But, in addition, it is a very powerful symbol you could discuss in relation to Varda; the kind of persona she shows on-screen, her warmth and her ability to connect with others. So, her individuality as a film-maker is that she can be counted as a celebrity as well as a film director in French culture.

## **Conclusions**

Let's bring together some of the strands we have discussed above by suggesting a few directions to go in, if you want to research this film:

- looking at the film thematically, connecting up ideas about gleaning (the different types), or ideas about time and decay, or about the importance of art

- looking at Varda herself, and how she is interested in those who live in non-conventional ways in French society (by looking at this here and in other films)
- Varda as she appears on screen in her different documentaries
- How environmental issues are represented – particularly through the different stories told by the individual characters on screen.

It's a very layered and very rich film. I've been coming back to it for years and I always find new things in it. I hope you'll enjoy discovering it and Varda for yourselves.

## **References**

### Filmography

*Sans toit ni loi* (1985)

*Les glaneurs et la glaneuse* (2000)

*Les glaneurs et la glaneuse – deux ans après* (2002)

*Les plages d'Agnès* (2008)

### Useful Articles

Anderson, Melissa (2001) 'The Modest Gesture of the Filmmaker: An Interview with Agnès Varda. *Cineaste*. 26:4, pp. 24-27.

Darke, Chris (2001) 'Refuseniks', *Sight and Sound*. 11:1, pp.30-33.

Jacobson, Harlan (2001) 'Review: The Gleaners and I'. *Film Comment*. 37:2, p. 76.