



DREAM PALACE

The Gleaners and I

With a pre-recorded introduction by director Zhu Shengze.

Agnès Varda describes her latest film, *The Gleaners and I*, as a ‘wandering road documentary’. While it covers some of the same ground as *Vagabond* – for instance, rural poverty and subsistence living – it returns to the start of her career in that it could be described as a fascinating digital updating of the *nouvelle vague* essay-documentary form.

The French verb *glaner* means ‘to glean’ and *glaneurs* were those who gathered the leftovers after a harvest. Represented in classical French painting by Jean-François Millet and Jules Breton – whose images Varda uses in her film – the venerable tradition is protected by a statute in the French Penal Code. Between September 1998 and April 1999 Varda filmed present-day gleaners in urban and rural France. The resulting film is a study of those living at the margins of French society. But it’s also a digressive self-portrait, a first-person documentary detour through the edges of consumer society and a discourse on rubbish whose lightness of touch and deft political approach have made it a surprise hit in France. ‘There are those who glean because they need to, those who do it because they are artists and others who do it because they enjoy it,’ Varda says. From rural caravan-dwellers who live out of refuse bins and waste dumps to bricolage artists who find material for their work in scrap, what Varda describes as ‘this same modest gesture of gleaning’ unites the gallery of people she encounters.

Call it recycling, salvaging or just getting by, in Varda’s examination this ‘modest gesture’ becomes complex and highly political. In one sequence a robed rural legal eagle consults his penal bible in a field full of cauliflowers and defines gleaning as picking up ‘that which others have thrown away or abandoned.’ ‘It’s a film about waste,’ Varda says. ‘I did a press conference in New York where 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.’ (The film informs us that 25 tons of the 4,500 tons of potatoes harvested each season are dumped because they exceed the two- to four-inch diameter deemed marketable.) ‘What follows,’ Varda adds, ‘is the full-scale marginalisation of all manner of people.’

‘It’s not a harsh documentary,’ she insists. ‘It’s the treatment of reality that’s interesting, the way beauty is emphasised. It may be unfashionable to say so, but I like beauty. Though that might seem strange in a social documentary.’ Strange and possibly even risky in less adept hands. But one of the pleasures of Varda’s approach lies in the way it accommodates and even encourages digression. A visit to a vineyard reveals the owner to be a distant relative of Etienne Jules Marey, which allows Varda to include a short homage to the man she calls ‘the father of all filmmakers’. ‘There’s a liberty of tone that perhaps comes with age,’ she acknowledges. ‘This allowed me in making a social documentary not to hide the fact that I love paintings, or that I’m talking

about myself as well as about others. Obviously incorporating Marey into a film about gleaning is difficult but that was one of the surprises. I allowed myself the freedom to discover such things. So I'm saying something about my journey in search of the gleaners as well.'

La glaneuse of the French title is Varda herself and 'gleaning' can also be applied to the way she approached her material – both its gathering and its assembly. And appropriately the film's success in France – where it pulled in 43,000 Parisian spectators over the first nine weeks of its summer release and as late as November was still playing on four screens having attracted an audience of 70,000 – has owed less to traditional methods of distribution than to word-of-mouth. A film about gleaning that was itself gleaned by the public? Varda dismisses my overextended metaphor. The film wasn't 'gleaned', she insists, but 'loved'. 'I've never in my entire career felt that people have loved a film of mine as much as this one. The numbers of people who've seen it, who've talked about it – they were our publicity because documentaries can't afford much advertising. The Centre Nationale de la Cinématographie paid for three prints to go into small towns, even villages. Rural audiences may number only between 40 and 80, but that was the idea. When I worked as a photographer with Jean Villar at the Theatre Nationale Populaire after the war the idea wasn't to reduce culture to the lowest common denominator, but to bring people something that was intelligent, concerned, unusual and generous. That's what's happened with this film.'

One of the most interesting aspects of *The Gleaners and I* is how it is both informed by the past and absolutely of the moment. Its juxtaposition of classical painting with documentary images of present-day social reality is akin to its use of digital video to revitalise the personal and digressive documentary form of the film essay. Varda dismisses the importance of the digital element of the equation. 'What's missing in all this talk of digital technologies is the understanding that they're only tools to shoot and edit with, they're not ends in themselves. To see stuff that's technically sophisticated but that says nothing doesn't interest me. For me, the DV camera and the Avid are tools I use to get closer to people more easily and to shoot on my own – and to collapse the time lapse between wanting to film something and actually being able to do it.' For Varda, the first-person, artisan filmmaking encouraged by digital video is nothing new. In her case, DV really does mean *déjà vu*. 'My working with digital cameras always amuses people – there goes grandma with her DV,' she jokes. 'But I have the last laugh. It took 10 months to do the editing but I'm in the habit of editing at home because I like to work in this artisan way. I'll do the editing or make up my press dossiers, go out to take some shots, come back and cook. I've always worked like that. The editing room, the production quarters and the house form the three parts of my domestic set-up. So for me, a film is a slice of life, it's not a production.'

Varda calls her own approach *cinéécriture*, a kind of 'filmic writing', and there are several moments in *The Gleaners and I* where she doesn't so much intrude into the reality before the camera as remind us who's holding it. And she's well aware of both the possibilities and the pitfalls of DV. At the beginning of the film she presents a short visual poem praising the

opportunities opened up by these cameras and the ‘stroboscopic, narcissistic and hypnotic’ effects they allow. DV enables her to present strangely direct self-portrait sketches: returning home from Japan, she takes in her apartment, filming her cats, her plants and a damp patch on the ceiling which she finds resembles a piece of abstract painting by Antoni Tàpies. Unpacking her suitcase, she relates how she came across a group of Rembrandt self-portraits in a Japanese department store and her handheld camera glides across a postcard reproduction of a late Rembrandt before coming to rest on her own hand. ‘I enter into the horror of it,’ she narrates as she focuses on the signs of ageing, the wrinkles and the liver-spots. ‘I’ve a feeling that I’m an animal. Worse, an animal I don’t know.’

‘That shot wasn’t foreseen or planned,’ Varda tells me. ‘It happened intuitively and I would never have been able to do it if I’d had to tell a DP to film my hand. One hand filmed and the other hand was the subject.’ The sense of awed self-recognition in this image of ‘death at work’ is oddly moving yet manages to avoid being either solipsistic or narcissistic because it’s part of a strategy of sidelong glances the film incorporates. Taking to the road to investigate legal proceedings brought by a supermarket chain against a group of young homeless people who’ve been going through its rubbish bins, Varda films a man sitting on a bridge watching peacefully as the river rolls by. She says she considered talking to him but didn’t. This glimpsed, noncommittal moment acts almost as a declaration of the film’s desire to glance at the life that’s going on over its shoulder, off screen and out of shot.

‘Documentary is a school for modesty, you have to put your artistic ego on hold because you’re at the service of the people you film,’ Varda says. ‘But I like to feel there’s someone behind a film and I think people feel that I’m behind this film, to judge from the letters I’ve received. They have the impression of having met me and the people in the film, there’s a real sense of intimacy.’ Varda’s achievement in *The Gleaners and I* is not only to remind wannabe DV documentarists of the vitality of the first-person essay, but also to present a masterclass on how to negotiate the perilously thin line between solipsism and subjectivity, the ‘self’ of the filmmaker and the ‘other’ of the social reality being filmed. As a film about left-overs, it’s anything but throw-away.

Chris Darke, *Sight and Sound*, January 2001

THE GLEANERS AND I
(LES GLANEURS ET LA GLANEUSE)

Director: Agnès Varda
©: Ciné-Tamaris
Production Company: Ciné-Tamaris
With the participation of: CNC – Centre national de la cinématographie, Canal+
With the support of: Procirep
Presented by: Ciné-Tamaris
Producer: Agnès Varda
Production Secretary: Anita Benoliel
Production Administrator: Jean-Marc Vignet
Commentary Writer: Agnès Varda
Collaborating Photographers: Stéphane Krausz, Didier Rouget, Didier Doussin, Pascale Sautelet, Agnès Varda
Editors: Agnès Varda, Laurent Pineau

Assistant Editor: Laure-Alice Hervé
Post-production Assistant: Marina Loubet
Titles: Excalibur
Laboratory: GTC
Original Music: Joanna Bruzdowicz, François Wertheimer, Agnès Bredel, Richard Klugman
Sound: Emmanuel Soland
Sound Mixer: Nathalie Vidal
Sound Editors: Raphaël Sohier, Thaddée Bertrand
Foley: Nicolas Becker

France 2000©
82 mins

DREAM PALACE:
THE FILMS THAT CINEMAS WERE BUILT FOR

The Gleaners & I
(Les glaneurs et la glaneuse) + pre-recorded intro by Zhu Shengze
Thu 27 May 18:15; Fri 26 Jun 14:30
Hair + pre-recorded intro by Kleber Mendonça Filho
Fri 28 May 17:45
The Seventh Seal (Det sjunde inseglet) + pre-recorded intro by Mike Williams, Editor *Sight & Sound*
Fri 28 May 20:50; Wed 30 Jun 14:30
The General
Sat 29 May 12:45
Footloose + pre-recorded intro by Francis Lee
Sat 29 May 18:00
Winner of the Dream Palace Audience Vote: Portrait of a Lady on Fire (Portrait de la jeune fille en feu)
Sun 30 May 12:20
Broadcast News
Sun 30 May 15:40 (+ intro by Sarah Smith);
Sat 19 Jun 20:20
Beau Travail + pre-recorded intro by Kirsten Johnson
Sun 30 May 18:20
Car Wash
Mon 31 May 18:50
Blow Out
Tue 1 Jun 20:40
Goodbye, Dragon Inn (Bú sàh)
Wed 2 Jun 20:50
The Shout + pre-recorded intro by Mark Jenkin
Thu 3 Jun 18:00
The Wonders (Le meraviglie) + pre-recorded intro by Mark Cousins
Thu 3 Jun 20:30

Magnificent Obsession + Fear Eats the Soul (Angst essen Seele auf)
Sun 6 Jun 18:40
Black Narcissus
Mon 7 Jun 17:50
Mirror (Zerkalo) + pre-recorded intro by Malgorzata Szumowska
Wed 9 Jun 14:30
David Byrne’s American Utopia
Mon 14 Jun 18:00
The Elephant Man + pre-recorded intro by Prano Bailey-Bond
Tue 15 Jun 17:45; Sat 19 Jun 12:00
Syndromes and a Century (Sang sattawat) + pre-recorded intro by Chaitanya Tamhane
Sat 19 Jun 17:50
The Warriors
Mon 21 Jun 18:00 (+ intro by Asif Kapadia); Mon 28 Jun 14:30
Beginning + pre-recorded intro by Luca Guadagnino
Tue 22 Jun 20:30
The Cook, the Thief, His Wife & Her Lover
Thu 24 Jun 20:30

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