



SIGHT AND SOUND GREATEST FILMS OF ALL TIME 2022: 67=

The Gleaners and I + La Jetée

Agnès Varda describes **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.'

Chris Darke, *Sight and Sound*, January 2001

La Jetée is stunningly successful, a short story whose beauty packs a strong emotional charge. In this 29-minute film, which makes nonsense of the usual distinctions between short and feature, Chris Marker's surface brilliance is replaced by a deeper visual imagination, the style and power of tragedy harnessed to a story of flawless simplicity.

To challenge logic through the paradox of time is not a simple matter. Marker has brought it off, thanks to an almost classical elegance, a perfect structuring and control of the film's mechanism, and an intelligently unconventional handling of the science fiction element. The men of the future, for instance, are not three-eyed Martians with waving antennae, and the only extraordinary creatures – a touch of mischief, this – are the prehistoric animals in the museum. The fact that we are not confronted with a world with which we have no point of contact is one reason why *La Jetée* has the power to move us. The voyage to the future is summed up with rare discretion in a few shots, a network of abstract lines reminiscent of certain Henri Michaux sketches; and in its evocation of the future itself, the film is carefully imprecise, both realistic and unrealistic.

By electing to use stills to embody the terror and immobility of death, Marker prolongs the rigour of his conception. For the technique employed in this photo-novel is as original as it is perfect for its purpose. We are a long way from the *roman-photo* of the station bookstall where actors have been photographed in pre-arranged poses. Here, actors are frozen in motion, and paradoxically it is the freezing of the image which evokes the sense of life – halted but always on the point of movement. Only one image brings movement right into the frame, for six seconds: when the sleeping girl, surprised as she snuggles in bed while the birds twitter, blinks slowly as she awakens to smile at the man she loves. A defiance of logic, an exception to the rule, this is the one moment in the film when the convention of the frozen shot is broken: a stroke of genius whose beauty is intensified just because the

moment is unique. In the next shot, the birds are now stuffed, and the girl once more motionless. This tiny flash of pleasure in living, the only one to elude surveillance, is all that the mind has been able to grasp of life.

Unlike Robbe-Grillet, who leaves one with the feeling that his characters are fixed for all eternity, Marker's art in *La Jetée* is to intensify the impression of life, as a sculptor might. Moreover, the static quality of the images suggests the stratification of memory. To remember something is to halt time. And *La Jetée* is a film about time, the only escape route open to the survivors of the Third World War. So Marker has edited his work as a film of which he has kept only one twenty-fourth of each second, but with that fragment of time prolonged for as many seconds as he needs. Time is controlled at will, by the length allowed each frozen twenty-fourth of a second, with the normal techniques of speeding-up and slow motion relegated to the prop shop.

La Jetée surely proves once and for all that Marker must be numbered among the *auteurs*. His eye is fixed on the conjugation of time, on the mutation of man, for whom '... there is neither destiny nor ill-fate, only forces to overcome.' 'Soon darkness will cover those men who try to come to terms with the world, leaving the light to those who wish to change it.' Observing man and history, observing the future as it matures in the present, Marker not only watches but wonders: perhaps, by contagion, he might conjure the same wonder in us.

Gilles Jacob, *Sight and Sound*, Autumn 1966

LA JETÉE

A photo-roman by: Chris Marker

Presented by: Argos-Films

With the participation of: Service de la Recherche de la R.T.F.

Producer: Anatole Dauman *

Screenplay: Chris Marker *

Photography: Jean Chiabaud *

'Micromatières' by: Jean-Pierre Sudre

Still Images Assembly: Germano Facetti *

Special Effects: D.S.A.

Special Effects Operator: Cs Olaf

Special Effects Technician: Ledoux

Editor: Jean Ravel

Drawings: Duffort

Laboratory: LTC

Music by: Trevor Duncan

Music Performed by: Choeurs de la cathédrale St. Alexander

Music Publishers: Boosey & Hawkes, Disque Philips

Sound: SIMO (Paris)

Sound: Antoine Bonfanti *

Cast:

Jean Négroni

Hélène Chatelain (*the woman*)

Davos Hanich (*the man*)

Jacques Ledoux (*the experimenter*)

André Heinrich

Jacques Branchu

Pierre Joffroy

Étienne Becker

Philbert Von Lifchitz

Ligia Borowczyk, Janine Klein (*women from the future*)

Bill Klein (*man from the future*)

Germano Facetti

France 1962 29 mins

* Uncredited

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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 Sohler, Thaddée Bertrand

Foley: Nicolas Becker

France 2000© 82 mins

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