



the beaches of agnes Les plages d'agnès

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Review by Peter Bradshaw, *The Guardian*:

The remarkable Agnès Varda, at the age of 81, has sketched a witty and engaging cine-autobiography, or rather assembled the materials for an autobiography and made a filmed record of her thoughts on how to shape them. What results is an elegant, eccentric and distinctively literary meditation on the Proustian themes of memory and self, and a reminder of her own previous discussions of film-making as *cinécriture*. It features enigmatically masked contributions from Chris Marker, who appears in the form of a cartoon cat, with a voice rendered in computerised form like Stephen Hawking.

Varda's film is also intriguingly evasive; it conceals as much as it reveals. Her poignant set pieces, reconstructing and reimagining the past, are not exactly intended to encourage an unstoppable emotional flow. The technique manages and controls the subject. Some details are amplified and magnified - others are passed over in near silence, particularly in the area of what appears to have been a happy marriage to Jacques Demy. Varda hints at time spent apart, and does not enlarge on the fact that his death, in 1990, was Aids-related.

Varda is the veteran film-maker and, latterly, installation artist who started out as a stills photographer, and who, quite without the cinephilic obsessions of Godard, Truffaut and the new wave generation, became their fellow traveller with her real-time 1962 feature *Cléo from 5 to 7*. She went on to win the Venice film festival Golden Lion with her 1985 film *Vagabond*, though perhaps her most heartfelt work was the 1990 film *Jacquot de Nantes*, a vision of her husband's boyhood, and the family memories that fed into his famous film *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg*. Her 2000 documentary *The Gleaners and I*, about her identification with France's poor rummaging for discarded food, certainly anticipates the thrift-aesthetic in this movie, recycling materials and memories from her own life.

The film is an essay-cum-collage, composed of photos, theatrical tableaux, film archive and video. At the centre of it all is the impossibly youthful and airily vibrant figure of Varda herself: narrator, guide, witness and participant. The unifying motif is the beach, an arena outside time, where Varda sets up some entertaining surrealist spectacles: particular an assemblage of huge mirrors in which shorelines and skies endlessly reflect back on each other. She also constructs an entire circus trapeze, complete with tumbling acrobats, on the sand - an image that brought to mind Charlie Kaufman and Dick Lester. In a playfully experimental spirit, Varda assembles items from her family home on the dunes and suggests that the sudden, vivid shift of context triggers a much more authentic jump into the past than, for example, an actual trip to the Brussels house in which she was brought up, which turns out to be a rather unsatisfying experience.

"Imagining oneself as a child is like walking backwards," says Varda, "imagining oneself ancient is funny, like a dirty joke." Somehow it is difficult to imagine Varda as either young or ancient from this film, and the pictures of her as a young mop-haired gamine - she has artlessly kept the same hairstyle all her life, now variously dyed - look like that of a distant cousin. But Varda gamely extends the image of walking backwards throughout the film, placing herself in the middle of a scene and then going weirdly into reverse.

It is distinctive and suggestive, and each of her insights seems to breed a dozen more. Varda loves the potency of the single photographic image, and the juxtaposition of that image, frozen from the past, with the uncertain, unstable present in which it is now being viewed. She revives the startling photograph from her 1982 short film *Ulysse*: an image of a naked man and a boy on a beach - a father and son, in fact - next to what appears to be a dead goat. *Ulysse* was about the serio-comic idea of tracking down this man, and asking him to submit to an interview, while naked. Varda is always gripped by the idea of grafting a theatrically contrived response to a recorded image. She has the idea of tracking down child performers from her earliest films, now old men and women, and juxtaposing their current reality with the flickering monochrome record. Is this a sort of *séance*, making the filmed dead images come to life - or a wistful acknowledgement that in freezing actions on film you have paradoxically intensified the sense of loss and the utter inaccessibility of the past?

The overwhelming impression of Varda's creative procedure is control. Her memories are affecting, but she herself always stays on an even keel. Something is being kept back, or being transformed into something else. Perhaps this tact has its own artistic force. Varda has said all that she wishes to say about Demy's life and their marriage, and the film is more interesting for what it doesn't say. *The Beaches of Agnès* is stringently cerebral, but gentle, too.



Sukhev Sandhu, Daily Telegraph:

French directors seem to be immortal. Jacques Rivette, Eric Rohmer, Alain Resnais: all are in their eighties and all are still making films. (Sadly, Rohmer no longer... -ed.) So, mercifully, is Agnès Varda. Ever since her first feature, *La Pointe-Courte* (1954), she has carved out a singular career, encompassing the Nouvelle Vague classic *Cleo From 5 to 7* (1962), social-realist heartbreaker *Vagabond* (1985) and the captivating cine-essay *The Gleaners and I* (2000).

The Beaches of Agnès, her latest film, is an essay too, playful, intelligent and delicate like all her work, in which she looks back on six decades of life and art. It begins with her scampering across a Belgian seaside and directing a team of assistants to set up a half-dozen mirrors that frame and reflect her in arresting fashion. What do we see? "I'm playing the role of a little old lady, talkative and plump," she says.

Later, she declares: "I am alive, and I remember." What a life she has led. She recalls her marriage to Jacques Demy, the director of *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg*, who, she reveals, died of AIDS. She gives space to another maverick genius, Chris Marker, who appears in the form of a digital cat. She performs a beautiful ballet alongside her children and grandchildren next to the sea.

Varda journeys through the decades, gleaning incidents and memories both rare and moving. The photographic images she took of the revolutions in China and Cuba are a revelation. In one spine-tingling sequence she has two old fishermen watch a film she shot of them when she — and they — were much younger.

Time — its abrasions, consolations, passing — is evoked with arresting sharpness, a defiant lack of sentimentality, surrealistic humour (there is enchanting footage of her moving around an art gallery dressed in a potato costume).

Tender, truthful, happy-making: *The Beaches of Agnès* is a wonderful film by a wonderful woman.