

The Feminine Eye: lecture 6: THE BEACHES OF AGNES: 2008: 110m:

**May 9:**  
week #6

**Filmmaking as Memoir:**

Summarizing the Semester

Current Films by Women

French Filmmaker: Agnes Varda

Screening: **THE BEACHES OF AGNES** (Agnes Varda, 2008)

class business: last class:

Fran Claggett

DVD library

Spring 2012

Summarizing the Semester:

films we've seen this semester:

1916: WHERE ARE MY CHILDREN?

1953: THE BIGAMIST

1976: HARLAN COUNTY, U.S.A.

2003: JAPANESE STORY

2006: WATER

2008: THE BEACHES OF AGNES

which films focus on women's stories?

all of them

which films focus on social problems / issues?

WHERE ARE MY CHILDREN?:

birth control / abortion

THE BIGAMIST:

post-WWII male anxiety re: gender identity:

traditional patriarchal role: male dominant

or become more help-mate: 50-50 relationship

HARLAN COUNTY, U.S.A.:

coal miners: workers' rights

JAPANESE STORY:

cultural stereotyping / gender stereotyping

WATER:

widows: distortion of religion for economic gain

THE BEACHES OF AGNES:

evolution of 1 life within cultural span:

interaction of personality with environment

women directing sex scenes?

1916: WHERE ARE MY CHILDREN?

1953: THE BIGAMIST

1976: HARLAN COUNTY, U.S.A.

2003: JAPANESE STORY

2006: WATER

2008: THE BEACHES OF AGNES

other points these films share?

Current films by Women:

Debra Granik:

director, cinematographer, writer:

NYU: Graduate Film Program:

won awards for short film:

SNAKE FEED: 1997

1997: attended writers & directors labs:

Sundance Institute:

developed SNAKE FEED into feature film script

2004: premiered 1<sup>st</sup> feature film: Sundance FF:

DOWN TO THE BONE:

Granik: won Best Director award

Vera Farmiga: young working class mom:

struggling to kick cocaine addiction:

eventually learns: hard way:

she can't stay clean unless she changes her environment

most recent film: 2010:

WINTER'S BONE: filmed on location: Ozarks:

society that's been left behind:

look of film: Dorothea Lange:

photos of Great Depression

3 movies in one:

mystery

char study

doc-like examination of alien place

Ree Dolly: Jennifer Lawrence:

17 years old: just a kid:

must take care of 2 little ones:

brother & sister

chops wood / feeds kids:

only one: holding family together

resilient / mature / patient

finds out: to save family home:

she must locate her father:

must investigate mountain community:

insidious, near-tribal culture:

alienated from US culture

**clip: WINTER'S BONE: ch 6: 3.5m**

Current films by Women: continued:

Lisa Cholodenko:

b. 1964: L.A., CA:

MFA: Columbia U Film School:

short film: DINNER PARTY: awards

mentor: Milos Foreman:

grip / producer / editor / assistant director

director: 1998: HIGH ART

2002: LAUREL CANYON

2004 CAVEDWELLER

2010: THE KIDS ARE ALL RIGHT:

mostly: writes her own films

also: TV: 6 FEET UNDER / THE L WORD / HOMICIDE

Cholodenko's films:

focus on neuroses of well-off hipsters:

who live alternative lives in conservative times

new person: enters established situation:

serves as catalyst

pull between 2 lifestyles:

conservative / artistic, free

complicated relationships between chars:

demonstrate her talent for directing actresses:

TKAAR: 2 stars: Bening / Moore:

Cholodenko: makes their rapport:

her key performance

film: presents gay marriage without comment:

no political message:

just human beings living their lives

**clip: THE KIDS ARE ALL RIGHT: ch**

Agnes Varda:

b. 1928: Brussels, Belgium:

father: Greek engineer

mother: French

1940: family: escaped from Belgium:

to live in Sète, France: where she grew up

education: Ecole du Louvre: art history

Ecole des Beaux-Arts: photography

Paris: Theatre National Populaire:

worked as photographer

1954: 1<sup>st</sup> feature film as director: LA POINTE COURTE:

filmed near Sète: where she grew up:

young couple tries to save their marriage:

set vs.: fight of local fishermen vs. big combines

French film community:

saw film as breath of fresh air:

& forerunner of French New Wave

1961: 2<sup>nd</sup> feature film: CLEO FROM 5 TO 7:

superficial pop singer: awaits results of cancer diagnosis:

during 2 hours: her char evolves:

arrives at kind of emancipation

arranged in chapters: each one announces:

time it encompasses

whose POV: almost all: Cleo:

some: other chars

plays with concept of time:

objective time vs. subjective time

**clip: CLEO FROM 5 TO 7: ch 8: 3m**

Agnes Varda: continued:

subsequent years: Varda made wide variety of films:

not easy to pin her down to genre or form:

shorts & feature films

docs & fiction films:

many of these films: clips in TBOA

1985: VAGABOND: her greatest success:

won Golden Lion: Venice FF:

17-year-old Sandrine Bonnaire: Best Actress Cesar

Varda: said she made “one mistake”:

having hit film: because:

“it gave people unrealistic expectations of what would follow”:

begins with discovery of frozen corpse in ditch:

teenaged wild child: dropped out of society:

chosen freedom of non-responsibility

as VAGABOND unfolds: Varda explores Mona’s identity:

as she wanders thru rural French countryside:

hitching rides & begging for the necessities of life

film: constructed as series of sequences:

shows way she impacts lives of those she meets:

truck driver / gas station owner / fellow drifters / etc.

on broader level: film: not only analysis of Mona:

also: analysis / vivisection of French society

**clip: VAGABOND: ch 4: 2m**

2000: THE GLEANERS & I:

contemporary look at capitalism & urban life:

made with latest in digital technology

personal doc: re: people who live on leftovers of others:

gleaning: reclaiming what others have discarded:

people who scour already-harvested fields:

to find odd potato or turnip

personal connection for Varda to her subjects:

as filmmaker: considers herself gleaner

Agnes Varda: continued:

Varda: in her life has been:

photographer / film director / author of books  
professor of film & docs:

European Graduate School

latest art form she works in:

gallery artist: making art installations:

2003: 1<sup>st</sup> exhibition: Venice Biennale:

*Patatutopia*: 3 screens playing footage:

potatoes in various stages of decay

tons of real potatoes on gallery floor

Varda: greeting visitors dressed as potato

“I love the idea that you have the representation:  
& something which is true”

Varda: known as “mother” / “grandmother” of French New Wave:

her early films show stylistic tendencies:

which New Wave directors used:

but her work: maintains her own unique perspective:

focuses on themes of eroticism & age

death & time

all her work emphasizes:

doc realism

feminist issues

social commentary

her own subjective POV:

which she doesn't try to disguise / cover up:

“she readily integrates herself [& family] into her films”

her work: also: distinct from French New Wave's work:

in its crossing of genres: docs / shorts

feature-length dramas

doesn't limit herself to making films in France:

she's made movies in: U.S., Cuba, Iran

over the years: Varda has received many prizes / awards:

including; 2002: received prestigious French Academy Prize:

*Prix René Clair*: for her overall cinematographic work

2009: given highest French decoration:

*National Order of the Legion of Honor*

today: Varda's production company: created in 1954:

Ciné Tamaris: produces her films:

doubles as shop: visitors can:

buy DVDs of her & Demy's films: which she's helped restore

browse the collection

even watch her editing

says she enjoys direct contact with consumers:

like buying tomatoes at farm

THE BEACHES OF AGNES:

Varda: approaching her 80<sup>th</sup> birthday:

decided it was time to write her own autobiography: as cinema:

must have taken lot of courage to make film:

to reveal so much of herself:

no fear re: losing dignity

TBOA: playful & inventive film:

part: autobiographical survey:

from her childhood to her lifelong activism

part: career retrospective of her body of work:

as photographer, filmmaker, artist

in film: at 1<sup>st</sup>: she takes role of “a little old lady, pleasingly plump”:

its a protection of a sort:

which soon falls away:

we see her in times of sadness:

& times of joy & excitement

production of film:

shot in 2- & 3-week sequences:

between August 2006 & June 2008

alternating between shooting & editing:

“I wrote the narration & invented the film day by day”

costumes: “I wore my own clothes, as this is a doc”

Varda: “I was daydreaming. I saw myself, navigating that ancient sail, on the canals in Sète, then on the Seine in Paris. One of the purposes of this film was to make those dreams real.”

1:30 pm: break

BEACHES: French Cesar: Best Doc Feature Film

warning: explicit nudity!

**1:35 pm: screening: THE BEACHES OF AGNES**  
**explicit nudity!**

post-screening:

Varda: playfulness / sense of fun: thruout film:

treats movie like it's wish fulfillment

sense of wry self-awareness:

kind of distancing: from the start:

allows her to be so intensely personal

beaches in film: shooting locations:

Brussels, Belgium: La Panne beach

Sète, France: port / canals / Pointe Courte neighborhood / La Corniche beach

Los Angeles, CA: Venice beach / Santa Monica beach

Noirmoutier Island: La Guénière beach

Paris, France: beach created in middle of Rue Daguerre:

between house & editing room:

6 truckloads of sand unloaded

beach: used as springboard for her memories & thoughts:

intercutting: photos

archival footage

clips from films

reenactments

start: Varda: playing role of old lady:

but it's others who interest her

"If we opened people up, we'd find landscapes.

If we opened me up, we'd find beaches."

mirrors: like memories:

we're never sure what's real & what's reflection:

Varda: transforms the ephemeral: the momentary:

into the physical:

mirrors on beach: experimenting with mirror angles:

film crew: alternating as both:

documenters / subjects in film

ambiguity: can we trust our eyes?

can we trust our memories?

memory: Varda:

“In the film I ... mention that my mother was losing her memory. I'm losing mine now, more or less. Everyone does. At least what's in the film won't be forgotten. .... forgetting is a form of freedom. Loss of memory is a subtext thruout *Beaches*”

BEACHES: chronological: but diversions:

Varda: “the chronology's there, but an emotion will throw it off”:

“memories are like flies”

film's leitmotif: memory:

act of walking backwards:

going into past

film: structured by the idea of a puzzle

1971: Manifesto of the 343 Bitches:

Varda: 1 of 343 women who signed it:

admitting they had had an abortion:

making them vulnerable to possible prosecution

in France at time:

working class women who had abortions:

went to jail

bourgeois ladies who had money:

went to Switzerland

manifesto: led to passing of abortion rights law: 1975

house on Rue Daguerre: squat little building:

for Varda: since 1951: both:

her home / her place of work

in semi-derelict state when she acquired it:

intended to make it photographic studio

doubled as film set many times:

also: where she raised her kids

nursed Demy thru final stages of AIDS

Varda: "A house is something alive, moved all the time, changed all the time.

I hope that if I die, I hope not violently, but I hope to die peacefully here if I could. Because it's like a relation with where you are, your work."

house: still radiates Varda's astonishing creative energy:

exemplifies blurring of boundaries between art & life:

that is absolutely crucial to her work

women in her films:

she takes their side: presents them:

not as: beautiful, dangerous, unknowable objects of desire

but: as complex, intelligent, vulnerable, desirous human beings:

how she presents herself in BEACHES

name-dropping in film:

like all good showbiz memoirs:

big names: French New Wave:

Godard / Resnais / Marker / etc.

Robert Rauschenberg

Jim Morrison

Zalman King: soft-porn auteur

Varda: not only concerned with the famous:

Sète: reunited with kids in POINTE COURTE:

now elderly adults

Varda: quotes:

"I love what life brings you, the surprises of people. People who are original or independent or who care about others or the reasons for things, you know. This is what I find so exciting that I can't stop. I'm alive when I travel, I'm alive when I speak with people."

"Sometimes it gives me the feeling that justifies my 'unsuccess'. *Je tiens le livre!* I think the world of cinema needs people like me. We are millions, I am not the only one. They work whether they have success or not, they work on the matter of cinema, trying to understand."

viewing:

music: Schubert's Unfinished Symphony:  
     setting up mirrors  
 credits: Varda's kids & grandkids acknowledged:  
     oral credits: introducing her helpers by name:  
         Varda holds mirror  
 Belgian beaches: changing her name:  
     middle child: she felt independent  
 photos of her in 2 bathing suits:  
     little girls: play next to her:  
         wearing bathing suits like hers  
     Brussels: revisiting childhood home  
 1940: leaving Belgium  
 Varda: in "whale"  
 fragmentation / memory  
     photos / memory:  
         the dead all lead her to Jacques  
 looking at the camera:  
     where negatives become images  
 potatoes: talking potato costume:  
     her portrait: changing heads  
 Chris Marker: represented by cat:  
     Guillaume: asks her why she went from photos to cinema:  
         "I thought if you paired images with words you'd get cinema.  
         Of course I soon learned it was something else."  
     Varda: didn't go to film school or apprentice:  
         used her imagination: "I took the plunge"  
 China: 1000s of images:  
     "I focused on the work"  
 walking with Jacques on beach  
 French New Wave::  
     CLEO FROM 5 TO 7:  
         combining objective time / subjective time  
 1962: Cuba: revolution: 4000 photos:  
     "socialism & cha cha cha"  
 Rosalie & Matthew: kids:  
     watching them grow up on screen  
 office in the sand:  
     day 2: rain / birds  
 gleaners: some have so much:  
     others: in need  
 film cards: "before we were cinema cards with cardboard heads:  
     we were flesh & blood beings":  
         Magritte

Hollywood: because of UMBRELLAS:  
     town: “immediately seduced me”:  
         Harrison Ford  
     RFK: assassination  
 times in CA: get confused:  
     “my memories swarm around me like confused spies”  
 crosses on beach:  
     Vietnam / Iraq  
     murals  
 beach love story:  
     Patricia Knop / Zalman King  
 back in France: working on less gentle films: VAGABOND:  
     feminist struggle: not just question of freedom:  
         has to be collective to exist  
     Varda: very angry: abortions in pink house:  
         Manifesto of 343 bitches  
             same struggles: women’s rights / workers’ rights  
 Jacques: fell ill: fatal disease:  
     Varda: making film from his memories of childhood:  
         everyone knew he was dying:  
             no one talked re: it  
     AIDS: then: shameful disease  
 widows: filming them:  
     on beach / interviews:  
         old filmmaker becomes young artist  
 Kids & grandkids: sum of her happiness:  
     but she doesn’t know if she knows them  
 house with celluloid strips:  
     house of film  
 “while I live, I remember”  
  
 nudity / erection: disturbing?  
     woman director: lets us see what’s always hidden  
  
 Varda: “boundaries between contemporary art & cinema are so rigid”

**thank you all**