

Tribute
Pradip Biswas

Agnes Varda: The *Maverick* Director Died At 90



“I don’t do films pre-prepared by other people,” she said. “I don’t do star system. So I do my own little thing.” Agnes Varda

Agnès Varda, a groundbreaking, defiant French filmmaker who was intimately associated with the New Wave — although her re-imagining of filmmaking conventions actually predated the work of Jean-Luc Godard, François Truffaut and others identified with that movement — died at her home in Paris. She was 90. Her death, from breast cancer, was confirmed by a spokeswoman for her production company, Ciné-Tamaris.

In recent years, Agnes Varda had focused her directorial skills on nonfiction work that projected her life and career as a foundation for philosophical ruminations and visual metaphor. *“The Gleaners*

and I,” a 2000 documentary in which she used the themes of collecting, harvesting and recycling to reflect on her own work, is considered by pioneer critics to be her masterpiece.

To be frank, it was not her last film to receive widespread acclaim. In 2017, at the age of 89, Varda collaborated with the French photographer and muralist known as JR on *Faces Places*, a road movie that featured the two of them straying into rural France, meeting the locals, celebrating them with enormous portraits and forming their own fast friendship. Among its many honors was an Academy Award nomination for best documentary feature. Though the film did not win, but that year Agnes Varda was given an honorary Academy Award for lifetime achievement. It was her early dramatic films that helped established Agnes Varda as both an iconic feminist and a cinematic firebrand — among the *Cléo From 5 to 7*” (1962), in which a pop singer spends a fretful two hours awaiting the result of a cancer examination, and “Le Bonheur” (1965), about a young husband’s blithely choreographed extramarital affair.



Agnes Varda established herself as a maverick cineaste well before such milestones of the New Wave as Truffaut’s *The 400 Blows* (1959) and Godard’s *Breathless* (1960). Her *La Pointe Courte* (1955), which blended the strife of an unhappy couple with the struggles of a French fishing village, anticipated by several years the narrative and visual rule-breaking of directors like Truffaut, Godard and Alain Resnais, who had edited *La Pointe Courte* and would introduced Varda to a number of the New Wave principals and disciplines in Paris.

Said she: “I just didn’t see films when I was young,” she said in a 2009 interview. “I was stupid and naïve. Maybe I wouldn’t have made films if I had seen lots of others; maybe it would have stopped me.”

She started totally free and crazy and innocent .Then she saw many films, and many beautiful films. And she tried to keep a certain level of quality of my films. She never made commercials. Said she: “I don’t do films pre-prepared by other people, I don’t do star system. So I do my own little thing.”

Agnes Varda explored the texture of daily life and philosophical ruminations with a groundbreaking visual style. Her “thing” often involved straddling the line between what was commonly accepted as fiction and nonfiction, and defying the boundaries of gender.

“She was very clear about her feeling that the New Wave was a man’s club and that as a woman it was hard for producers to back her, even after she made *Cléo’ in 1962*, T. Jefferson Kline, a professor of French at Boston University and the editor of *Agnès Varda: Interviews (2013)*, said in an interview for this obituary. “She obviously was not pleased that as a woman filmmaker she had so much trouble getting produced. She went to Los Angeles with her husband, and she said when she came back to France it was like she didn’t exist.”

The *Gleaners and I* was ahead of its time in its eco-consciousness. said she: “ I try to capture what is, in French, *l’air du temps*. As a visual artist, I do a lot of recycling. I don’t know if you heard, but I build big shacks with the actual composite prints of my films. She was called the The grandmother of the New Wave! Said she : “I found it funny, because I was 30 years old! Truffaut made *The 400 Blows* and Godard made *Breathless*, but I had done that five years before with [1955’s] *La Pointe Courte*, my first film. When I was younger, people were inventing a new way of writing – James Joyce, Hemingway, Faulkner. And I thought we had to find a structure for cinema. I fought for a radical cinema, and I continued all my life.

It is important for you to tell stories about women. Well, *Cléo* is a woman. “But, you know, I’ve fought with a lot of women for

women's rights. I made a film about women's rights, *One Sings, the Other Doesn't* [1976]. But we cannot say, "We won, that's it," because the struggle for women's rights is still going on. It's getting slowly better. Now they say to the festivals: "you should have the selection committee half women, half men." Why should it be chosen only by men?

In the year 2000, it was a change of century, and it changed her life in a way. she discovered little [handheld] cameras, and she started to understand that she could film alone. That's how she made *The Gleaners and I*. According to her : "When you approach people who eat what they find on the floor, you cannot be with a big crew. I didn't want to frighten them."



She said in grave mood : "I'm a discreet person, but I can do crazy things. For the Venice Biennale in 2003, I did a big triptych called *Patatutopia* – I became the specialist of heart-shaped potatoes. I wore a potato costume made of resin to the opening. I wanted to be noticed. Now I'm noticed because of my hair. It should be white, and I made it a little fantasy by giving it another colour. That's how I've been named punk. My grandchildren called me "*Mamita punk*" when they were small. Sometimes I do things that are not really the right way, because I'm daring in a way.

Finally she confessed that she would like to be remembered as a filmmaker [who] enjoyed life, including pain. This is such a terrible world, but "I keep the idea that every day should be interesting. What happens in my days – working, meeting people, listening – convinces me that it's worth being alive."

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