



The Beaches of Agnès

A film by Agnès Varda



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3	Introduction
4	Background Information
4	Agnès Varda
6	Selected Varda films and other projects referenced in The Beaches of Agnès
6	Selected Artists referenced in The Beaches of Agnès
8	French New Wave Film
9	The Left Bank Group
9	General Discussion Questions
10	Discussion Prompts
13	Resources
15	How to Buy the Film

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INTRODUCTION



The Beaches of Agnès is the playful and reflective autobiography of accomplished filmmaker and photographer Agnès Varda. As we might expect from this influential artist, Varda turns her life into art, inventing a kind of documentary self-portrait format in which she stages herself among excerpts of her films, images and reportage. Watching the movie is akin to spending the afternoon with a favorite aunt, turning the pages of a family scrapbook as she shares her rich verbal and visual descriptions of the stories behind the photographs.

Varda's collection of treasured memories spans some of the most important social and political events of the last century, including the Nazi occupation of France, the birth of the film movement known as the French New Wave, Algeria's war against French colonial rule, the anti-war and civil rights struggles of the 1960s, feminist battles for women's reproductive rights and against gender-based violence, early

Agnès Varda surrounded by her production company, Cine Tamaris, in "The Beaches of Agnès."
Photo courtesy of The Cinema Guild

encounters with AIDS and the very personal challenges of being a woman trying to break into the nearly all male world of filmmaking while negotiating a two-career family and raising two children with husband (and renowned filmmaker in his own right) Jacques Demy.

The resulting montage, though largely presented in chronological order, feels more like free association than a linear narrative. Rather than lecturing the audience about a theory of filmmaking or a political ideology, Varda invites viewers to join her creative journey so that it may spur them to think about their own lives in new ways.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Agnès Varda in “The Beaches of Agnès.”
Photo courtesy of The Cinema Guild

Agnès Varda

Award-winning French film director Agnès Varda has been producing and directing films for over 55 years. She was born on May 30, 1928, in Brussels, Belgium, to a Greek father, Eugene Jean, and French mother, Christiane (Pasquet) Varda. Varda trained as a photographer and had little early exposure to cinema, yet her unlikely union with filmmaking has been an enormous boon for the world of cinematography and its viewers.

In 1954, Varda produced and directed her first film, *La Pointe Courte*. The film presaged the techniques later associated with French New Wave filmmakers, earning her the informal designation “grandmother of the French New Wave,” though today many critics consider her to be more closely aligned

with the younger, more politically engaged Left Bank filmmakers, who count Chris Marker, Alain Resnais, Jean Rouch and Varda’s husband, Jacques Demy, among their number.

Varda’s major films include *Cléo From 5 to 7*, *Happiness*, *One Sings, the Other Doesn’t*, *Jacquot de Nantes*, *One Hundred and One Nights*, *Ulysses and The Gleaners and I*. On April 12, 2009, she was given the rank of Commandeur of the French Legion of Honor. **The Beaches of Agnès** is one of Varda’s most critically acclaimed films, and it won the 2009 César for best documentary.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Agnès Varda and her family in "The Beaches of Agnès."
Photo courtesy of The Cinema Guild

In addition to writing her own films, Varda has written dialogue for the works of others, most notably for Bernardo Bertolucci's *Last Tango in Paris*. She also served as producer for Jacques Demy's *Lady Oscar*.

Varda resides in France and has two children, Rosalie Varda-Demy and Mathieu Demy.

Sources:

Farmer, Robert. "Marker, Resnais, Varda: Remembering the Left Bank Group." *Senses of Cinema*, Sept. 2009.

<http://www.sensesofcinema.com/2009/52/marker-resnais-var-da-remembering-the-left-bank-group/>

Film Reference

<http://www.filmreference.com/Directors-St-Ve/Varda-Agn-s.html>

Scott, A.O. "Agnès Varda Topics Page." *The New York Times*, 25 June 2009.
http://topics.nytimes.com/topics/reference/timestopics/people/v/agnes_var-da/index.html

Vincendeau, Ginette. "La Pointe Courte: How Agnès Varda "Invented" the New Wave." *The Criterion Collection*, 21 Jan. 2008.

<http://www.criterion.com/films/524-la-pointe-courte>

Yahoo! Movies

<http://movies.yahoo.com/movie/contributor/1800103328/bio>

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Selected Varda films and other projects referenced in *The Beaches of Agnès*

- **1955 — *La Pointe Courte*** - Varda's first film, set in a fishing village, is based on the William Faulkner novel *The Wild Palms*.
- **1958 — *L'Opéra Mouffe*** - This characteristic Varda portrait portrays one of the places where she lived.
- **1962 — *Cleo From 5 to 7 (Cléo de 5 à 7)*** - A real-time exploration of a pop singer's fear as she awaits the results of a test for cancer this film was shown at Cannes and nominated for a Golden Palm.
- **1963 — *Salut les Cubains*** - This film is comprised of photo montage of Varda's stay in Cuba.
- **1965 — *Happiness (Le Bonheur)*** - A man thinks he can live with both his wife and his mistress.
- **1966 — *The Creatures (Les Créatures)*** - Varda cut up prints of this film and used the pieces to recreate a physical structure — a literal house of cinema.
- **1968 — *Black Panthers*** - A tribute to activist Huey Newton, this film was made while Varda lived in Hollywood, where she witnessed the beginnings of the radical Panthers.
- **1969 — *Lions Love*** - Made while Varda lived in the United States, this film follows Jerome Ragni and James Rado, creators of the musical "Hair," and Andy Warhol muse Viva as all three try to break into Hollywood and shows how difficult it could be for female filmmakers to raise financing for their projects.
- **1970 — *Nausicaa*** - The portrayal of Greeks living in France in this story about a girl with a Greek father studying ancient art was so controversial that the film was banned in Greece.
- **1976 — *Daguerrotypes*** - This film focused on shopkeepers living on Rue Daguerre in Paris, where Varda lived.
- **1977 — *One Sings, the Other Doesn't (L'Une Chante, l'Autre Pas)*** - A feminist take on female friendship and abortion, this film marked the first release of Varda's production company, Ciné-Tamaris, and her daughter Rosalie's screen debut.
- **1981 — *Mur Murs*** - This documentary considers outdoor murals in the city of Los Angeles, including one called *Pigs' Paradise* on the side of a slaughterhouse.
- **1981 — *Documenteur*** - This film captures a lovers' quarrel on the street.
- **1985 — *Vagabond (Sans Toit Ni Loi)*** - This docudrama about a young, beautiful female drifter won the Golden Lion at Venice.
- **1991 — *Jacquot de Nantes*** - This film pays tribute to Varda's husband, filmmaker Jacques Demy.
- **1995 — *One Hundred and One Nights (Les Cents e Une Nuits de Simon Cinéma)*** - Actor Michel Piccoli embodies Mr. Cinema in this tribute to the craft.
- **2000 — *The Gleaners and I (Les Glaneurs et la Glaneuse)*** - This depicts scavengers living off the castoffs of others.
- **2003 — *Patatutopia*** - This video installation features 700 kilograms (more than 1,500 pounds) of real potatoes; Varda roamed the opening in a potato costume to attract attention.
- **2006 — *L'île et Elle*** - This is the exhibition at the Fondation Cartier in Paris mentioned near the end of the film.

A complete filmography is available at the Internet Movie Database: www.imdb.com/name/nm0889513/filmyear

In addition to writing her own films, Varda has written dialogue for the works of other filmmakers, most notably for Bernardo Bertolucci's *Last Tango in Paris*.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION



Agnès Varda in "The Beaches of Agnès."
Photo courtesy of The Cinema Guild

Selected Artists referenced in *The Beaches of Agnès*

- **Sandrine Bonnaire** – Actress who won several awards for her role in Varda's *Vagabond*
- **Alexander Calder** – Widely acclaimed sculptor and Varda's neighbor
- **Jean Cocteau** – Avant-garde filmmaker, writer and poet
- **Jacques Demy** – Varda's husband and a filmmaker best known for *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg*
- **Mathieu Demy** – Varda and Demy's son, whose appearances in several of their films launched his acting career
- **Catherine Deneuve** – The "grande dame" of French cinema, who appeared in several Demy and Varda films
- **Gérard Depardieu** – French actor whose first screen appearance was directed by Varda
- **Jean-Luc Godard** – French New Wave filmmaker credited with giving Varda her first real "break," best known for his film *Breathless*
- **Chris Marker** – Acclaimed French filmmaker with whom Varda went to China as a photographer
- **Michel Piccoli** – Award-winning French actor whom Varda cast as "Mr. Cinema"
- **Jim Morrison** – Lead singer of The Doors
- **Philippe Noiret** – Actor with credits in films such as *Cinema Paradiso*
- **Alain Resnais** – French New Wave film director
- **François Truffaut** – French New Wave film director
- **Rosalie Varda-Demy** – Varda's daughter, who acted in several of her films and Demy's films and now works as a costume designer

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Agnès Varda in “The Beaches of Agnès.”
Photo courtesy of The Cinema Guild

French New Wave Film

The French New Wave, or *La Nouvelle Vague*, represented a major — and influential — shift in cinema in the 1950s and 1960s. The work of New Wave-affiliated newcomers, including François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, Éric Rohmer, Claude Chabrol and Jacques Rivette, challenged traditional filmmaking techniques. Many of the group’s ideas were published in the journal *Cahiers du Cinéma*, for which the noted New Wave directors also served as critics.

One of the key concepts of the New Wave was the *auteur* theory — the notion that a director of a film is analogous to the author of a book. Signature techniques of this school of filmmaking include shooting on location, using natural light, improvising dialogue, featuring existential themes and em-

ploying long tracking shots or jump cuts (a jarring style of editing in which a continuous shot is unexpectedly, and often illogically, interrupted). Many of these then-ground-breaking conventions have been adopted by later generations of filmmakers and have even become commonplace — contemporary filmmakers from Quentin Tarantino to Wong Kar-wai have acknowledged the movement’s influence on their work.

There are various explanations for what started the movement. At the time, young people were challenging social conventions, and those involved in filmmaking were no ex-

**BACKGROUND INFORMATION****GENERAL DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

ception. Lack of financial resources may also have played a role in the decision to shoot the long takes that would become a defining feature of the style. Varda's first film, *La Pointe Courte*, shot on location with a minimal budget and a combination of professional and amateur actors, has been called the first New Wave film. Varda, who was 26 at the time she made the film and had had little previous exposure to filmmaking, has been termed the "grandmother" of the movement.

The Left Bank Group

In the 1960s a new group of filmmakers emerged that was dubbed the Left Bank group. Critics and scholars generally disagree on who coined the term and even on whether the group — whose films were characterized by strong political content, experimentation and a literary sensibility — was a subset of the New Wave or stood in opposition to it. The primary members of the Left Bank group — Varda, Demy, Chris Marker and Alain Resnais — had been creating films as long as or longer than some of the New Wave directors and had often been characterized as New Wave themselves. According to scholar Robert Farmer, the group was "indeed the intellectual/political/feminist/literary/avant-garde wing of the French New Wave," though Varda biographer Alison Smith counters, "Varda maintains that there was never anything more shared by the group than friendly conversation and a love of cats."

Sources:

Farmer, Robert. "Marker, Resnais, Varda: Remembering the Left Bank Group." *Senses of Cinema*, Sept. 2009.

<http://www.sensesofcinema.com/2009/52/marker-resnais-varda-remembering-the-left-bank-group/>

Smith, Alison. *Agnès Varda*. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1998.

Vincendeau, Ginette. "La Pointe Courte: How Agnès Varda "Invented" the New Wave." *The Criterion Collection*, 21 Jan. 2008.
<http://www.criterion.com/films/524-la-pointe-courte>

- **If you could ask the filmmaker a question, what would you ask and why?**
- **What did you learn from this film? What insights did it provide?**
- **If a friend asked you what this film was about, what would you say?**
- **What is the significance of the film's title?**
- **Describe a moment or scene in the film that you found particularly disturbing or moving. What was it about that scene that was especially compelling for you?**

**DISCUSSION PROMPTS**

Agnès Varda in “The Beaches of Agnès.”
Photo courtesy of The Cinema Guild

The Power of Remembering

- What do you learn from this film about memory?
- How does this film compare to other autobiographical works that you have read or seen?
- Varda says, “Everyone says childhood is a foundation — provides a structure, I don’t know. I don’t feel a strong link to my childhood. It’s not a reference in my thought processes. It’s not an inspiration.” And she reports that during the process of making the film, she considered the trip to her childhood home a flop, saying, “But the house and I were separated by the war anyway.” Where in the film do you see reflections of Varda’s childhood? Why might she feel distant from childhood influences? What role do you think your own childhood experiences play in shaping who you are today?
- Varda recalls that as a teenager she was a daydreamer, saying, “Reality meant little to me, and I knew absolutely nothing of life. I didn’t ask questions.” Juxtapose that comment with her recollection of wartime trips to the Swiss Alps and her realization years later that those who split off from the group on those trips were secretly escorting Jewish girls to safety in Switzerland. What are the advantages and disadvantages of daydreaming and not asking questions? How does war alter the advantages and disadvantages of not asking questions?

DISCUSSION PROMPTS



Agnès Varda with a circus troupe of acrobats
in “The Beaches of Agnès.”
Photo courtesy of The Cinema Guild

- Varda turns events from her life, from the mundane to the momentous, into scenes for this film. If you were making your own autobiography, which life events would you include and what would you say if someone asked you why you made those particular choices?

Insights and Life Lessons

- What do you think Varda means when she says, “If we opened people up, we’d find landscapes. If we opened me up, we’d find beaches”? What do you think we would find if we “opened people up”?
- What insights does Varda offer on the process of aging (and the role that gender might play in that process)? How

would you describe her views on youth and on aging? How do her views compare to your own?

- Varda says of her children and grandchildren, “Together, they are the sum of my happiness,” even though she isn’t sure she knows them or fully understands who they are. What is the role of children in your life?

**DISCUSSION PROMPTS****Political Issues**

- In terms of political activism, what kind of model is Agnès Varda?
- Varda says, “I’m not sure when I realized that it wasn’t just a question of freedom. The feminist struggle had to be collective to exist.” Why would a political struggle need to be a collective endeavor? In which other areas does community or collective action play a role in Varda’s life? How important is community in fomenting new ideas?
- Varda says, “I tried to be a joyful feminist, but I was very angry.” How do you balance seeing and responding to injustice and also seeing and experiencing the joys of life?
- In musing about her involvement in feminist struggles, Varda says, “Magic wands aren’t always where you expect them.” In your life, where have you encountered political or personal “magic wands”?

Cinema

- Varda reflects, “I don’t know what it means to recreate a scene like this. Do we relive the moment? For me, it’s cinema. It’s a game.” If, as Varda says, cinema is a game, what are its rules?
- Varda says, “Memories are like flies swarming through the air . . . bits of memory, jumbled up.” How do her film and the techniques she employs reflect this view of memory?
- How would you describe Varda as an artist? What is her approach? Does she seem to have particular goals for her art? (Provide evidence for your answer.)
- How does Varda navigate the sometimes complex intersections between art and politics?

Additional media literacy analysis questions are available on POV’s website:
pbs.org/pov/educators/media-literacy.php



RESOURCES

FILM-RELATED WEB SITES**Original Online Content on POV Interactive (www.pbs.org/pov)****POV's *The Beaches of Agnès* companion website www.pbs.org/pov/beachesofagnes**

To further enhance the broadcast, **POV** has produced an interactive website to enable viewers to explore the film in greater depth. The companion website to **The Beaches of Agnès** offers a streaming video trailer for the film; an interview with filmmaker Agnès Varda; a list of related websites, organizations and books; a downloadable discussion guide; and the following special features:

- A timeline of Agnès Varda's career;
- An overview of her role in the French New Wave and the Left Bank filmmakers; and
- Contemporary filmmakers sharing how Varda has influenced their own work.

Film-related**THE BEACHES OF AGNÈS**

www.cinemaguild.com/beachesofagnes/

The film's official website includes a trailer, reviews and screening locations.

What's Your POV?

Share your thoughts about **The Beaches of Agnès** by posting a comment on the *POV Blog* www.pbs.org/pov/blog or send an email to pbs@pov.org.

Agnès Varda:**INDIEWIRE: WAVE GOODBYE:****AGNÈS VARDA'S "THE BEACHES OF AGNÈS"**

www.indiewire.com

Michael Koresky, the managing editor and staff writer of the Criterion Collection, offers a review of Varda's film. (June 30, 2009)

DOCUMENTARY.ORG: LIFE'S A BEACH:**AGNÈS VARDA TELLS HER CINEMATIC TALE**

www.documentary.org

In an interview, Agnès Varda discusses her life's work and filmmaking style.

INTERVIEW MAGAZINE: "AGNÈS VARDA"

www.interviewmagazine.com

Filmmaker Liza Béar interviews Agnès Varda at the French Embassy in New York City.

THE BELIEVER: "AGNÈS VARDA"

www.believermag.com

Varda's responses during a group interview at the Toronto Film Festival are compiled here. (Oct. 2009)

FRIEZE FOUNDATION

www.friezefoundation.org

Video footage portrays Agnès Varda's talk. (Oct. 17, 2009)

**RESOURCES****French New Wave:****THE CRITERION COLLECTION: FRENCH NEW WAVE****www.criterion.com/explore/4-french-new-wave**

The Criterion Collection website offers a brief description of the New Wave era and includes a list of other films made during its definitive period.

ZEITGEIST FILMS: JACQUES DEMY**www.zeitgeistfilms.com**

Jacques Demy was married to Agnès Varda and was a respected filmmaker. Zeitgeist provides a short biography and a link to his film “The Umbrellas of Cherbourg.”

THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN PRESS:**A HISTORY OF THE FRENCH NEW WAVE CINEMA****<http://uwpress.wisc.edu/Presskits/Neupertpresskit.html>**

Richard Neupert, associate professor of film studies at the University of Georgia, contributes an overview of the French New Wave that charts the movement’s progression and cites specific films.

**HOW TO BUY THE FILM**

To order **The Beaches of Agnès** visit: www.cinemaguild.com



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POV Interactive www.pbs.org/pov

POV's award-winning Web department produces special features for every POV presentation, extending the life of our films through filmmaker interviews, story updates, podcasts, streaming video and community-based and educational content that involves viewers in activities and feedback. POV Interactive also produces our Web-only showcase for interactive storytelling, *POV's Borders*. In addition, the *POV Blog* is a gathering place for documentary fans and filmmakers to discuss and debate their favorite films, get the latest news and link to further resources. The POV website, blog and film archives form a unique and extensive online resource for documentary storytelling.

POV Community Engagement and Education

POV works with local PBS stations, educators and community organizations to present free screenings and discussion events to inspire and engage communities in vital conversations about our world. As a leading provider of quality nonfiction programming for use in public life, POV offers an extensive menu of resources, including free discussion guides and curriculum-based lesson plans. In addition, *POV's Youth Views* works with youth organizers and students to provide them with resources and training so they may use independent documentaries as a catalyst for social change.

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American Documentary, Inc. www.amdoc.org

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Front cover: Chris Marker as Guillaume-en-Egypte (the cat) and Agnès Varda in "The Beaches of Agnès."

Photo courtesy of The Cinema Guild

