

The Beaches of Agnès (2008)

BE BEACH BODY READY this summer: if any film can defeat our defeatist belief in the singular, normative body beautiful (or in mainstream cinema's tired old stories), it is Agnès Varda's walk backwards "playing the role of a little old lady" through a six decade career, *The Beaches of Agnès* (2008). See it this summer – and be inspired to head to the sand or the barricades dressed (as the filmmaker is at one point) as a potato, as a spangled acrobat, naked, in a 1930s stripy swimsuit, or (my favourite) in a papier maché cetacean. Since her short film *Du côté de la côte* (1958) Varda has shown her love of a postcard, and *Beaches* may be the greatest cinematic postcard of all time.

Varda's wildly inventive bio-documentary opens with the filmmaker on a windy Belgian beach suggesting that, "if we opened people up, we'd find landscapes. If we opened me up, we'd find beaches," and ends with her in an art gallery, in a shack made of reels of her 'failed' fiction feature *Les Créatures* (1966), musing that "in here, it feels like I live in cinema, cinema is my home. I think I've always lived in it." A mind-boggling *matryoshka* – Varda notes that she loves a puzzle – *The Beaches of Agnès* reveals the landscapes inside the filmmaker through the cinema, made in those landscapes, in which she has lived.

As she notes in the film, Varda was documenting the Black Panthers in Oakland in 1968 rather than ripping up the streets of Paris, but *Beaches* makes playful hay with the famous Situationist slogan of '68, without ever quoting it: *Sous les pavés, la plage!* (Beneath the paving stones, the beach!). We see a beach laid over the cobbles of Rue Daguerre, outside Varda's house and office, complete with the staff of Ciné-Tamaris, the film production company she set up for her first film *La Pointe Courte* in 1954, working at desks in their beachwear. Who needs to tear up and throw the paving stones when the beach is right there all along? Such is Varda's gently radical approach, which includes realizing many such whimsically meaningful daydreams as she looks back across a life in art.

Mediating – and meditating – between the life and the art is the remarkable filmmaker herself, the body that contains beaches and that lives exuberantly in film. *Beaches* makes clear that, with Varda, we are truly looking at a *body* of work. Which is not to make a reductive claim that women filmmakers can only produce autobiographical work directly from their bodies. "Biology isn't destiny!" as Pomme and Groupe Orchidée sing at the protest in front of the Bobigny courthouse in 1977's *One Sings, The Other Doesn't*. Instead, we might think of Varda's filmmaking body as both mirror (*Beaches* opens with mirrors) and magician (like the neighbourhood performer in *Daguerreotypes*), both reflecting and transforming the experiences of her life.

Varda herself, as she relates in *Beaches*, was in Bobigny 1972, protesting for the right to legal abortion. Not just there but "pregnant up to [her] eyeballs! They pushed us against the barriers, and we laughed and shouted." The scene wove its way into *One Sings*, her musical tale of two friends who become mothers. Varda filmed herself pregnant in the 1958 short *L'Opéra Mouffe*, and in *The Cleaners and I*, she filmed her ageing body. "I always like bringing in old people, very old people, senior citizens and beyond," she notes in *Beaches* over a dreamy shot of white feathers falling around a naked elderly woman sitting in a feathered room – but here are young people too, including two of her granddaughters dressed in 1930s swimsuits, playing as young Arlette (Varda's birth name) and her sister.

Beaches bring out the body: Varda's glorious inventions here include not only a fantasy of worklife as a beach, but of herself as an acrobat in a dazzling trapeze sequence that involved building a 10 metre-high camera tower (look out also for the snapshot of Varda shooting *La Pointe Courte* by standing on the back of a willing male assistant). The caped and spangled trapeze artists also draw a curtain of nets over lovers tumbling from a hammock as Varda's voice-over talks about the mystery of sex for a young woman in a small town in the 1940s. Later, we see Varda and her husband Jacques Demy, also a filmmaker, walking together on Bréton beaches close to his hometown of Nantes; and we see Demy in double denim through Varda's lens shortly before his death, reclining on the dunes.

Beloved men, fishermen, men who appear as 2D animated cats (that'll be Chris Marker), and naked men – but when Varda talks about losing her virginity, there's a cut to a giant papier maché whale. Less *Moby Dick*, more a suggestion that Jonah wanted to remain inside the whale. Equally whimsical is Varda's realization of

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herself and Jacques as youthful "flesh and blood beings" before they became film legends, through her restaging René Magritte's famous painting *The Lovers II* (1928). Except *this* Belgian-born surrealist pulls off the polite disguise: her lovers, pillow cases over their heads, walk (carefully) backwards from the camera, while the male lover sports an eye-popping erection.

Whether that erection (which earned the film a ridiculous and unnecessary 18 certificate), or bodies that are ageing, poor, pregnant, and/or black: Varda has been putting unseen bodies on screen, with tenderness and respect for their inherent beauty and dignity. And nowhere are bodies more tenderly apparent than on the beach, where myths arise from the waves in naked vulnerability. "Any man who gazes at the sea is a Ulysses," Varda states over a shot of a naked man looking out to the horizon. But it's different for girls, as Varda knows only too well: Mona, the protagonist of *Vagabond*, strides out of the sea near Nîmes at the start of the film as two lairy bikers not only watch her, but contemplate raping her.

"I tried to be a joyful feminist," says Varda of her 1970s activism in between clips of a raging Mona, "but I was very angry." Never considered a capital-P political filmmaker, despite her reproductive rights musical, Varda's films place politics where they are most strongly felt, and where it moves from the screen to the viewer: in the body. In *Black Panthers*, her 1968 documentary banned in the US, she engages the women of the movement in a conversation about natural hair and the apprehension of Black beauty as political strategies. And in *Beaches*, it is her own body that carries the freight of a life lived from her family fleeing the bombing of Brussels by the German army to renewed protests for equal rights in the twenty-first century.

Her body, self-aware of its mortality, also marries to the philosophical resonances of the beach: of the sands of time and the motion of the waves changing the landscape. Varda excerpts a multi-screen installation she made called *Widows of Noirmoutier* (2006), the island where she had lived for thirty years with Demy. In the large central screen, surrounded by smaller individual close-ups, the widows in their weeds dance on a beach. This ritual of joy and mourning, of reflection and celebration, is the secret heart of *Beaches*, which salutes the persistence of the body in its sensual relation to the world.

What is a beach body but this? Watch *Beaches* and feel the salt breeze in your hair, the childhood excitement of the circus, the daring of an eighteen year old girl running away to Corsica to mend fishing nets, the melancholy happiness of watching your grandchildren play as you did. Walking with her childhood friend Andrée Schlegel-Vilar, who has dementia, Varda prompts her to recite Paul Valéry's poem 'Le cimetière marin,' with its beautiful line "La mer, la mer toujours recommencée": the sea, the sea renewed forever. Endlessly inventive, *Beaches* shows an experimental artist, at 80, renewing herself at the edge of the sea. And when you finish watching the film, you too will want to start over.

– So Mayer

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