

The Kindred Spirits of *Faces Places* (2017)

90-year-old Agnès Varda is the second-most-famous Agnès under the French fashion designer agnès b. who, incidentally, claims to have 'got her eye by looking at movies'. From the crux of confessional interviews, Agnès Varda couldn't have found her eye by looking at movies – after all, she got behind a camera well before stepping foot in a cinema. Varda, as a young photographer with a thirsty wonder of what it would be like 'to make photographs move', got her eye from looking at the everyman and their humble habitat which makes *Faces Places*, co-directed with the artist officially known as JR, apt to her essence.

36-year-old 'pervasive artist' JR, has made a legacy of flyposting portrait photography of everyday people. As a teenage graffiti artist also with no formal art education, JR found a cheap camera on the Metro, took shot at his fellow vagabonds and found aim in a career as a photographer. JR's official identity is unconfirmed and he conveniently refuses to remove his dark sunglasses. A subtle activist, JR doesn't believe in asking permission to exhibit his work and uses the streets as his gallery and landscapes as a canvas.

JR's identity may be ambiguous but the footprint of his work in the footsteps of Varda, gives us all the character we need. Somewhere along the line, and despite the generation gap of 55 years, the visions of JR and Varda aligned with *Faces Places* as a result.

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I first watched *Faces Places* in Egypt whilst on a jury for a feminist Film Festival. The happy chaos of the event meant resorting to watching the film on a conference room projector with my head cocked to one side to level the skewed aspect ratio. The milky sunlight intruding through the curtains drowned its clarity and the frequent loss of sound through fizzing speakers made it a ridiculous watch. Regardless of this inelegant viewing, Varda's affection for people shone through as she documented her shared journey through rural France.

My fellow jury members were made up of people I'd never met, from countries I'd never been to and from gaping age ranges. Yet our common ground of film fanaticism had brought this congregation of critics, filmmakers and producers here in Egypt to unanimously agree that *Faces Places* was one of a kind.

Alongside age, the appearance of Varda and JR couldn't be less alike as their polarising height gives them a Bert and Ernie resemblance. *Faces Places* sees them sit and gaze at a landscape from a bench, Varda's toes brush at the floor while JR's lanky frame sees his feet firm on the ground. Yet as they both agree upon an unintentional journey after meeting once and on a nonchalant whim, their similarities resign to a shared focus as their compassion for people come to a harmonious par. From that bench, they share a view.

The pith of their unlikely connection is human curiosity and the empathetic bonds they create. Anyone who's seen Varda's *The Gleaners and I* (2000) or JR's *Unframed* portraits – including a gigantic image of baby Kikito looking over the Mexican border or his *Women Are Heroes* images – will recognise that their work invests in the understated beauty of everyday people.

In the dawn of her career as a director, Varda took her eager eye and snap-happy camera to Cuba as it thrummed with rebellion in 1963. Fidel Castro had been at large for four years and Varda caught the responding pride and grateful glory of a post-Fulgencio Batista nation. The trip resulted in her documentary *Salut les Cubains* (1971) which was the result of the thousands of photographs she took serenading the energy and people of the Caribbean island. A few generational leaps forward, and a young JR ventured to Cuba with a keen lens on the spirit of its people. *Winkles of the City* was the result and makes a great complementary piece to Varda's adventure which treads a similar path, just at a different time.

From factory staff, isolated farmers and the wives of striking workers, JR and Varda insist on the star quality in everyone. In *Faces Places* they drive through rustic France casually meeting villagers who agree to have their photos taken which are then enlarged to eccentric proportions and pasted on landscapes.

Cleaning Truths: Agnès Varda Nationwide Touring Programme

The labour of their work connects the villagers both physically and mentally. A happy scene sees bystanders clamber around to observe the commotion as JR invites people to put a breadstick between their mouth and say cheese. The huge portraits are printed there and then JR's team meticulously wean them out and paste them up. It's a rare treat to see the physicality of a photographer's work beyond its result on a tiny digital screen, even more so to see a group of people make art together after being so accustomed to working in isolation. As the results materialize, those who partake are honoured and exhilarated and as they finally see their image larger than life on paper not pixels. Perhaps for the first time, they feel seen.

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One of the most obtrusive measures of age is the different ways generations grapple with new technology. Despite the decades between them, JR and Varda share a gentle observation and acceptance in how we handle modern communication. Their roving camera enjoys the view as the young and old try out their selfie skills. Neither Varda nor JR sniff at the evolution of technology, besides digital photography has allowed their project to be instantaneous and Varda has an Instagram account thanks to JR's recommendation. However, they both emit the snap-happy indulgence that comes with this technological age and seize back the old-school soul of being economical, collaborative and physical when capturing on camera. Even with Varda's Instagramming, there's poignancy in her feed's frugality; she herself admits – a slew of images lessens the impact.

JR and Varda place creativity in collaboration and recognise collaboration as an art. In *Faces Places*, wallpaper paste is hand-mixed using gallons of water from the taps of the last remaining resident of a demolition-bound street. Volunteering locals offer ladders and scissors as they muck-in with the arts and crafts soirée kicking off on their doorstep. Crane drivers step up to align storage containers in a brick wall formation so their 'rarely mentioned' wives can finally be adorned on their industrial site. This work is as pleasing as it is plural.

Varda and JR's dots also connect in their forget-me-not approach to their subjects. For Varda, the journey of people in her documentaries doesn't end in the final cut. The *Gleaners And I: Two Years Later* (2002) presents how she treats her work as an ever-evolving process and appreciates the never-ending stories of those she documents. For JR's portraits, he sends the prints to those he photographs so they can choose how they want to use those images next. Both find narrative in the people they meet yet believe their subjects should tell their own story.

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Faces Places reminds us that the ambition to provide pedestals for those in the cracks has always been in the souls of artists. The materials may change and the stages will shift, yet tender observations of everyday life remain an insuppressible muse. In a digital world where we confuse social media for worthy heralds and curate our media feeds from echo chambers, it's rare to witness such a sumptuous dialogue of those we assume different. There's faith in the connection of JR and Agnes who personify how artists, young and old, share an ageless vernacular and can inspire each other to create. If only there were more opportunities for other such cross-generational connections.

– Corrina Antrobus

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