

A Selfish Soul Poisons Happiness – *Le Bonheur* (1965)

Happiness is simple until it is elusive. This goes for the state and it goes for the film. In *Le Bonheur* (1965) the life of the gorgeous Chevalier family [played by the gorgeous Drouot family] is sunny, idealistic, and perfectly run, with poison at its centre. Writing about *Le Bonheur* comes with a responsibility to proceed with delicacy to avoid focusing on a climactic event which is executed without emphasis – just one ice shard in a daisy chain of sunflowers. Varda lays out her vignettes, but does not tell you how to interpret them. The meaning shifts in every set of eyes and with every watch. At this current moment in my life, writing as a straight single woman who longs to believe that romantic love can be a nucleus, *Le Bonheur* scans as a personal barb.

François Chevalier (Jean-Claude Drouot) is a joiner who resembles a sexy French Bill Hader with a perma-rakish smirk and the sense that the world is for him. As he dashes past a woman holding a baguette, he rips off an end, helping himself to sate his hunger.

His wife, Thérèse (Claire Drouot), is a dressmaker. Everything about her is serene sensuality: strawberry blonde hair, baby-smooth skin, feminine dresses, even her voice exudes softness like a sweet peach ripe to be devoured.

"Does your wife make honey?" asks one character.

"You could say that," says François. "She cooks well and she's nice."

The Chevaliers have two children: a boy and a girl, as per the patriarchal ideal. Each is an apple-cheeked angel in possession of sweet outfits and *joie de vivre*. Varda's daughter Rosalie was born in 1958, seven years before *Le Bonheur*, which channels the rapt admiration of a parent gazing at their miracle child.

Pleasure saturates every frame of the location of the Parisian suburb of Fontenay-aux-Roses. Happiness is presented as the harmony that comes from living side-by-side in kindness with loved ones. A mood of content envelops the active days of this healthy family. Long tracking shots lose us in the sweep of the countryside. In the Chevaliers' small but neat home production design is euphorically colour-coded in terms of clothes, walls, accessories, flowers.

This heightened and heady aesthetic – Fassbinder gone rural – is a notable outlier for Varda who regularly plays with colour, but rarely uses it as the film fabric itself. Shot on vibrant Eastmancolor 35mm negative, *Le Bonheur* was her third feature and her colour debut – *La Pointe Courte* (1955) and *Cleo from 5 to 7* (1962) were both black and white – and she emerged all guns blazing, attempting, she said, to find the very colour of happiness.

Agnès's palette holds many variations on bright blue. Slathered abundantly it creates a serene under-water feeling, reflected in the cloudless sky. Cerulean blue washes the bedroom walls of the Chevaliers' home; François brushes thick strokes of the same hue onto a homemade wooden toy.

His cigarettes live in an arctic packet, while a true-blue brassier colours the white-trimmed uniform of the post-office girl. Her name is Emilie. She is icily pretty and breezily flirtatious. François takes her for coffee as easily as he ripped into a stranger's baguette. They sit opposite each other smiling as small everyday sounds are heightened and the camera pulls focus in and out of body parts, both on the couple and various passers-by. A rapturously alive sense of lust hangs across the cafe like a hot gauze. There are signs of where things will lead. Literally. Varda cuts between shots of their faces and signs dangling on nearby shop doors that read: 'TEMPTATION', 'MYSTERY'.

A more conventional film would use the affair that follows as a narrative motive for switching the tone, slapping sour notes into the previous harmony. Not Varda. François proceeds to love two women with zero sense of trouble and they take his lead. "I have enough joy for both of you," he will explain to one of his women. If Varda disbelieves her lead man she keeps that to herself, leaving it to the audience to question

Cleaning Truths: Agnès Varda Nationwide Touring Programme

whether they are watching an unconventional vision of loving happiness, or whether there is a moral sting coming.

The answer is not so simple as one thing or the other. Something bad happens, sure. The shard of ice crashes to earth, but we are not fed a particular way to judge its fallout or even shown that what happens is a consequence of what has come before. So as to avoid spoilers, this essay is now my personal interpretation, which is not definitive. I have reason to believe that Varda is more sympathetic to François than I am, because she is more of a grounded individual. As I wrote in the opening paragraph, the meaning of happiness is in the eye of the beholder – and mine still wear the rose-tinted glasses of one dying to believe in ideal love.

One wants to believe as a woman – no, as a human – that the individual loving connections we forge occur in a place of transcendence and that a man loves *menot* a woman who ticks whatever boxes I tick, that another woman could tick equally well. The comedian Tim Minchin pays lip-serve to the absurd romanticism of believing oneself to be special in love in his satirical song 'If I Didn't Have You':

*Your love is one in a million
(One in a million)
You couldn't buy it at any price
(Can't buy love)
But of the nine-point-nine-nine-nine-hundred-thousand other possible loves
Statistically, some of them would be equally nice
(Equally nice)*

This speaks to the pragmatism skirted around when occupying romantic happiness with one's chosen partner. The atmosphere of intimacy is designed to make each lover feel irreplaceable, yet to an extent this is a performance of an ideal. By making *Le Bonheur* so visual in its splendours, Varda knowingly offers up women as slightly different riffs on similar shades of pink, yellow and blue.

The arbitrary nature of love is nothing personal or gendered, however, in a patriarchal society, everything is gendered even the seemingly unrelated microcosm that is a personal relationship. "Gender roles grip us, tugging at our shirts when we try to escape," wrote Claire Dederer in 'What I'd Like To Tell My New Mom Self' (The Cut, May 2018), a piece about battling to defeat the ancient pattern of inequality trying to impose itself on her family, despite her husband's feminism.

What gender means in the context of heterosexual romantic relationships is having more or less leeway/freedom to fuck the other over without either party noticing until it's too late. This cautionary tale is particularly pertinent to straight men wanting to do right in love with women. Yet the fruits of *Le Bonheur* are not angled towards anything other than pure behavioural observation. It is designed to slip into your brain and flush out profound meditations and private theories.

To me it says: Be satisfied with your share of romantic happiness. Not because wanting more isn't tempting, and not because "true love" is a real thing, but because happiness *does not* work by addition. Happiness is a balance of souls and when, in monogamy, one person pursues selfish gains, the other loses more than they can bear.

– Sophie Monks Kaufman

CURZON

LOTTERY FUNDED   **BFI**