

## The Gleaners & I (1985)

Part ethnographic study, part travelogue, part social critique and part portrait of the artist as an aging woman, *The Gleaners and I* is a film that contains multitudes – a mosaic in both form and content. It was a big hit with audiences and critics when it was released in 2000 (the enthusiastic response is documented in the sequel, *The Gleaners and I: (Two Years Later)*) and saw Varda returning to the documentary format and embracing the new creative freedom afforded by digital technology.

What begins as an examination of gleaning – a traditional rural practice enshrined in French law that allowed the poor to collect leftovers from the fields after the harvest – morphs into a deeper and more broad-ranging sociological study of salvaging, recycling and foraging in its many forms, as Varda uncovers the multiple ways that gleaning has evolved and continues to exist in French society. Casting her net wide, she encounters those who glean for pleasure, those for whom salvaging is a question of ethics or social responsibility, and those like Claude M and Alain F, two of the most memorable subjects, who forage for food as a means of survival. She also meets artists, gallery owners, legal officials and illicit oyster gatherers, but it is those individuals living on the margins of society that linger longest in the mind.

Varda also makes the case for gleaning as a metaphor for her own creative process, a connection that the film's French title (*La Glaneurs et la glaneuse*) makes clear. As a director she sees herself as a collector of stories, artefacts and images – disparate fragments that she captures with her camera and fashions into art. The film is as much a reflection on her own artistic process as it is a work of social commentary, but the one informs the other. By drawing attention to her presence and her creative process, both through on-camera appearances and stream-of-consciousness narration, and then playfully undermining them ("there goes grandma with her DV"), she subverts the notion of omniscient authority found in more classically objective investigative work. This has a profoundly levelling effect whereby she limits her own authorial authority and gives her subjects the space and platform to author themselves, and material that might have felt voyeuristic in other hands instead becomes an act of generous empathy.

Like much of her earlier work (*Daguerrotypes* in particular springs to mind) *The Gleaners and I* is informed by the conditions in which it was made. She filmed in piecemeal fashion over eight months and without a script or guiding structure, and the result is a loose, meandering cine-essay full of spontaneous digressions and playful asides, but one that feels exuberantly alive. Shooting with a single handheld DV camera enabled her to work quickly, cheaply and with great agility, but it also allowed her to film with discretion and gain access to individuals and communities who might not have been so forthcoming had she turned up with a crew in tow.

Varda delights in the textures of the digital format – the moments of pixilation and blurriness or the instance where she forgets to put the lens cap back on – and these 'imperfections', along with the standard definition and lack of gloss, give the film a charming DIY quality that exudes a spirited air of independence. It also gives the film the flavour of an intimate home movie, and we catch Varda in moments of vulnerability as she reflects on ageing and the passage of time, turning the camera unflinchingly on her greying hair and liver-spotted hands.

With warmth and playful wit, and demonstrating a subtle control that belies the slightly ramshackle approach, she deftly weaves these disparate theses on ageing, social inequality and the artistic process into something that feels both deeply personal and quietly political, and that is as unforgiving in its scrutiny of Varda herself as it is generous and non-judgemental of the people she meets.

– Rowan Woods