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A Summer Peach with a Worm Inside: Agnes Varda's *Le Bonheur*

In a 1998 interview, director Agnes Varda described her vision of *Le Bonheur* (Agnes Varda, 1965) as such: "I imagined a summer peach with its perfect colors, and inside, there is a worm" ("Agnes Varda on *Le Bonheur*"). This image is an apt description of the film, which unfolds as a candy-colored nightmare that exposes the corrupt reality of a beautiful façade. The movie is complex and difficult to pin down, even decades after release; it is a purely singular vision. *Le Bonheur* captures Varda's independent spirit, one which permeated the French New Wave as a whole. This is evident both in the production history of the film and in Varda's approach to the movie's themes, from feminism to the natural vs. the modern world. Her impressionist style and bold use of color further cement her status as the sort of innovative and creative filmmaker who defined the New Wave.

The only prominent female director of the movement, Varda is often referred to as the mother of the New Wave. Her first feature, *La Pointe Courte* (Agnes Varda, 1955), anticipated many of the conventions which became trademarks of the French New Wave, from location shooting to the use of non-professional actors. Despite her non-traditional background (one in photography rather than filmmaking or even film viewing) and her unique trajectory (she began with feature filmmaking rather than shorts or documentaries), Varda emerged as a key director during this movement. After the success of *La Pointe Courte*, which was lauded by the likes of Andre Bazin, Varda really burst onto the scene with *Cleo from 5 to 7* (Agnes Varda, 1962). This film, which follows a beautiful singer over the course of two hours as she awaits a cancer diagnosis, established an international reputation for Varda as a trailblazing feminist filmmaker. The film received widespread acclaim for its intelligence and experimentation without formally being a part of the French New Wave.

Varda's informal alignment was not with the Cahiers du Cinema, which included major figures such as Jean-Luc Godard and Francois Truffaut, but with the Left Bank, which was composed of directors such as Chris Marker and Varda's husband, Jacques Demy. According to Geneviève Sellier, Left Bank filmmakers had a commitment to stylistic experimentation along with political purpose. Additionally, and importantly in the context of *Le Bonheur*, these filmmakers "also showed themselves sensitive to the question of women's emancipation" (Sellier 211). This is notable when we take into consideration the sociopolitical context of the 1960s in France. This decade was marked by newer, looser rules about gender and sexuality. The sexual revolution taking place encouraged greater sexual exploration and freedoms. Likewise, in the aftermath of the Second World War, women were negotiating new freedoms and opportunities with their obligations to husband and family and questioning their socially

designated roles for the first time. This newfound sexual freedom and questioning of roles are both reflected in *Le Bonheur*.

The film opens in a paradise of Biblical proportions. The opening credits show a family in the distance approaching the camera in a field of sunflowers. The next scene gives us a closer look at this family: Francois (Jean-Claude Drouot), his wife Thérèse (Claire Drouot), and their two young children (Sandrine and Olivier Drouot). In the midst of nature, the family eats, sleeps and enjoys each other's company. Such scenes of familial harmony extend through most of the film. We learn that Francois is a carpenter, Thérèse is a seamstress, and together the two embody the idea of domestic bliss. Their evident happiness and contentment with life makes it all the more surprising when Francois meets another beautiful blonde, this one a postal worker named Emilie (Marie-France Boyer), and begins having an affair with her. He professes himself that this is not due to any lack of happiness in his relationship with Thérèse, but that rather being with both these women simply doubles his happiness. His marriage is not shown to suffer from his affair at all and he carries on with his wife as a dedicated father and husband. One afternoon, as he spends time with Thérèse, he reveals to her that he has found another woman to love. Utilizing the metaphor of an apple orchard, he explains "You and I and the kids, we're like an apple orchard, a square field. Then I notice an apple tree that grows outside the field and blooms with us. More flowers, more apples." At first it seems that Thérèse understands and is supportive of this arrangement, and the couple make love and fall asleep. However, when Francois wakes up, he discovers his wife to be missing and later finds that she has drowned (whether this drowning was deliberate or accidental is left ambiguous). He mourns briefly, and then marries Emilie, who takes over Thérèse's duties without skipping a beat. The film ends with the new happy family walking away, this time into the distance.

Though Varda is not as creative with film form in *Le Bonheur* as she is in films such as *Cleo from 5 to 7*, certain aspects of her storytelling in this movie are worth pointing out. For one thing, she employs long takes, a hallmark of her style since *La Pointe Courte*. These long takes are used to their greatest effect in two separate conversations, one between Francois and Emilie and the other between Francois and Thérèse. Each of these conversations unfold like those between the central couple in Varda's first feature, uninterrupted and lengthy, around five minutes each. These long scenes are not the only time Varda draws parallels between the two women in Francois' life. She often cuts away in scenes where Francois spends time with Emilie to show Thérèse tending to the family. There are also montages of both women partaking in domestic activities, suggesting their socially determined roles make them interchangeable, replaceable.

According to Varda's own account, the story of *Le Bonheur* did not emerge during a period of happiness, but rather one of anger. She describes in an interview that her producer had presented Varda's script for a film called *Les creatures* (Agnes Varda, 1966) at a government film commission meeting, and despite Varda's previous success with *Cleo from 5 to 7*, they denied her funding. Varda took such offense that she decided to write and present a new script to the commission in time for their next meeting, which happened to be in four days. She pinpoints her inspiration as people in her neighborhood, "modest couples who had no other ambition but to be happy and spend Sunday in the country" (Dupont). This new script she presented, which was approved for funding by the commission, became *Le Bonheur*. For her cast, she sought out the

television actor Jean-Claude Drouot, who starred in *Thierry la Fronde*, and in keeping with her usage of non-actors, cast his real-life wife and children, Claire, Sandrine, and Olivier Drouot, to play his family in the film. She chose actress Marie-France Boyer to play Emilie, Francois' mistress. As Varda puts it, she "wrote the film fast, and shot it fast" ("Agnes Varda on *Le Bonheur*").

The response to *Le Bonheur* was decidedly mixed. Though Neupert writes that the film "only attracted 86,000 people" in Paris, according to both Varda and the film's two lead actresses, *Le Bonheur* stirred up a great deal of controversy upon its release in France (Neupert 348). Varda noted in an interview that "it provoked much commentary" and Boyer mentioned in a separate interview that "people were horrified" and shocked by the film's content, especially by the rapidity with which Francois moves on from his wife's death ("Agnes Varda on *Le Bonheur*"; "The Two Women of *Le Bonheur*"). One review noted that there were demonstrations in opposition to the film in Paris (Hobson 4). Still, some French critics loved the film, such as those at *Le film français*, who, according to Neupert, wrote that Varda "demonstrates an originality and an inspired richness that have no equivalent in French cinema to-day" (Neupert 349).

On the other hand, the international response to Varda's movie was much more ecstatic. The film won the Silver Bear at the Berlin Film Festival and had long runs both in the United States and other locations abroad. Marie-France Boyer recalled traveling to Argentina several times to promote the film over the course of its months-long run there ("The Two Women of *Le Bonheur*"). Many American critics appreciated the film's "exquisite color photography" and Varda's "rich rein to her eye, ear and penetrating imagination" (Coe 1). Strikingly, across the board, critics read *Le Bonheur* as an endorsement of Francois' behavior. Harold Hobson of *The Christian Science Monitor* wrote that the movie "carries no criticism of the carpenter...Mlle. Varda presents his attitude so objectively that she seems to endorse it" and Kevin Thomas wrote in the *Los Angeles Times* review of the film that Varda "seems to be saying that the way her hero Francois lives is the only way to live" (Hobson 4; Thomas 1). These reviews seem to align with interpretations of *Le Bonheur* as a misogynistic, anti-feminist film.

Gender is obviously a major concern of Varda's generally throughout her career, and in this feature specifically. The film portrays a dynamic between men and women that many found to be cruel or unjust, leading to accusations of misogyny. Neupert suggests that reviewers may have been seeking out "a more obviously ironic tone, or harsher narrative judgment" towards its characters (Neupert 348). Rather than dealing with the interiority and emotions of either woman in her movie, Varda ostensibly positions Francois as her protagonist. The concern of the film is with his emotions, his happiness, his pleasure. Especially in the context of Varda's previous feature, *Cleo from 5 to 7*, which was considered "one of the milestones of feminist cinema" that centered on a female protagonist "maturing from passive object to an active subject position," Varda's apparent lack of attention or empathy towards the women of *Le Bonheur* struck discomfort and confusion in many viewers and critics (Neupert 339). As Neupert mentions, Varda's own defenses of Francois suggested that she supported his behavior (Neupert 348). In one interview with *The Real Paper* in 1977, for example, she told interviewer Gerald Peary "If his wife committed suicide, and he wants to feel good with another woman, he has the right! Do you think he should cry for twenty years?" (Kline 89) In their interview with Varda's daughter, Rosalie Varda-Demy, both actresses from the film similarly seem to side with Francois. Claire

Drouot calls Thérèse “weak” for being unable to accept her husband’s affair, while Marie-France Boyer suggests that Francois’ revelation about his affair was “beautiful” (“The Two Women of *Le Bonheur*”). The time period of the film’s making also suggests acceptance of Francois’ actions. As *Slant Magazine* writer Andrew Chan wonders in his piece on the film, “in the peak decade of the sexual revolution, could [Varda] have meant at least some of her questionably utopian vision sincerely?” (Chan)

Nevertheless, there is a strong case to be made for *Le Bonheur*, beyond not being misogynistic, actually being a feminist film. Many contemporary writers have interpreted Varda’s movie as a scathing critique of the patriarchy rather than a promotion of it. Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, in *To Desire Differently: Feminism and the French Cinema*, writes that Varda’s films are all concerned with “constructions of femininity as they are socially inscribed” and that *Le Bonheur* utilizes irony for an “incisive critique of patriarchal social relations” (Flitterman-Lewis 264). This aligns well with Varda’s statement in one interview that the film was about how society reduces women down to social functions, which makes them easily replaceable (Dupont). Academic Rebecca J. DeRoo suggests that the film uses visual irony in order to question and critique feminine ideals by utilizing the imagery of 1960s French periodicals, which romanticized domesticity and the toil of being a wife and mother. DeRoo uses a montage of close-ups on Thérèse’s hands as she carries out domestic tasks as evidence of this. Though magazines frequently utilized close-ups of this “serving hand,” Varda’s repetition of the image highlights the banality of work assigned to women and the lack of happy figures appreciating the work in the background highlights its hollowness (DeRoo). Yet another feminist reading can be found in an essay for *Criterion*, in which Amy Taubin argues that, like *Cleo from 5 to 7*, *Le Bonheur* is also interrogating female subjectivity, albeit in a different way. Rather than depicting a woman who reappropriates her identity and image, this film depicts two women who repress their own thoughts and desires for a man, asking “Who speaks for women’s experience and subjectivity in a society—global patriarchy—where women are conditioned from birth not to speak for themselves?” (Taubin).

Though arguments can be made for *Le Bonheur* as a misogynistic or feminist film, the very existence of this debate is proof of the differing standard to which Varda was held as a female filmmaker in the New Wave. Perhaps no other filmmaker from this movement was scrutinized for their gender politics in the way she was. Flitterman-Lewis suggests Varda’s gender politics may even be the reason she is often overlooked as a member of the New Wave. This begs the question of whether or not it may be sexist to disallow or critique a female director from filmmaking for art’s sake rather than for a certain sociopolitical agenda. Varda herself said in an interview that she had avoided making moral judgements about her characters in *Le Bonheur*, leaving things “in such a way as to leave the viewers free to make their own judgments” (Kline 40). Varda called herself a feminist throughout her career, but still, she was first and foremost an artist. What Bazin loved about her films, as quoted by Neupert, was that when viewing Varda’s movies, “we are in the presence of a work that obeys only the dreams and desires of its auteur with no other external obligations” (Neupert 60).

Gender aside, the other theme that plays a prominent role in *Le Bonheur* is that of the natural in opposition to the modern. It does not seem to be coincidental that in the film’s opening scene, the pastoral idyll in which Francois and his family bask is interrupted by the jarring noise

of a passing car filled with exuberant young people: the modern interferes with the natural. Metaphors to the natural world are used constantly, whether in Francois' description of his family as an apple orchard or his explanation of his dual loves to Emilie: "Thérèse is like a hardy plant. You're like an animal in the wild. And I love nature." Many critics have interpreted Francois' love for two women, his unabashed desire, as the natural, and the ethical and moral obligations placed upon him by civilized society as the modern. A reviewer for *The Sun* wonders, for instance, if Varda is "lamenting the often tragic consequences of the unnatural restraints organized society has imposed upon the full expression of man's natural instincts" (Gardner 1). However, it can also be argued that Varda's approach to nature in this film is similar to the approach in her short documentary on the French Riviera, *Du cote de la cote* (Agnes Varda, 1958). Though she establishes the locations she films to be a sort of Eden, she reveals the "alluring and deceptive beauty in nature" (Neupert 333). Taubin makes a similar point when discussing *Le Bonheur*, writing that "what the characters see as 'natural' Varda reveals as artifice" (Taubin). Therefore, just because Varda depicts Francois' desire as natural does not mean she is condoning it.

Varda's boldness of vision is clear in her film's stylistic choices, most prominently in her use of color. *Le Bonheur* was filmed in Eastmancolor and each frame is bursting with bright and vivid tones. She frequently uses colorful transitions from one scene to the next, fading to blue, red, purple, and every shade in between. Taubin describes the film as "color coordinated to the point of looking like a catalog photograph" (Taubin). She suggests that this deliberate use of color works to add a layer of artificiality to the film which encourages viewers to distance themselves from the movie's events and question what we watch unfold. Varda similarly said that "It was my first film in color, and we did research to bring out beauty, to evoke a Utopia. It's not realistic" (Dupont). Most critics compared Varda's visual style in this film to that of Jean Renoir's in *Picnic on the Grass* (Jean Renoir, 1959). This is likely intentional, as that film plays on a television in one scene during *Le Bonheur*, and Francois repeats one of its lines: "Happiness may be submitting to nature" (Weiler 54). Beyond Renoir's film, Varda seems influenced by impressionist art in general. In an interview, she describes thinking about "impressionist paintings, which emanate such melancholy, though they depict scenes of everyday happiness" when working on *Le Bonheur* ("Agnes Varda on *Le Bonheur*"). This pictorial style obviously aligns well with her background in photography, and is reminiscent of the sort of static, immaculately framed shots she used in *La Pointe Courte*.

Examining *Le Bonheur*, it is evident that Varda is the kind of visionary filmmaker with unique ideas and a strong sense of style that made the French New Wave one of the most notable and innovative film movements of all time. From the rapid conception of the film, to its ambiguous and often contradictory approaches to its themes, to its imaginative and deliberate use of color, *Le Bonheur* is emblematic of the vitality, complexity, and aesthetic significance of the New Wave. In the decades since the movie has come out, films like David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* (David Lynch, 1986) have clearly taken influence from Varda and her film, as they examine the rotten core of what, on its surface, appears to be sweet.

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