ART APPRECIATION · THE TABLE AS ETHICAL SPACE

Agnès Varda’s The Gleaners and I

Gleaning, testimony and documentary voice



Agnès Varda and the film

01

The filmmaker

Varda worked across fiction and documentary. Her 2000 film follows gleaning in rural and urban France while including her own looking and collecting.

02

The distinction

Testimony is a person’s account of an experience. Documentary voice is the point of view made through a film’s arrangement of images and sounds.

Millet’s The Gleaners



The woman in the field

A remembered day's work

Listen for what she recalls about the work and the people around her.



The Gleaners and I · film 01:57

Work and company

01

Her neighbors

“But I used to glean before, together with my neighbors, for wheat and rice.”

02

The same day

“But we enjoyed it. At night we were exhausted.”

Who chooses the potatoes?

Look at what is left, then listen to the reasons different people give for choosing.



The Gleaners and I · film 08:46

Two rules for choosing

01

The commercial rule

“We dump anything larger.”

02

The gleaner’s rule

“We leave the damaged ones. And we take the bigger ones over the smaller ones.”

Varda’s hand

“With one hand I shakily filmed my other hand gleaning heart-shaped potatoes.”



Film still 10:50 · narration 10:55–11:01

Collecting and filming

01

A shared action

“this same modest gesture of gleaning”

The action connects people with different lives and motives.

02

The camera

“they’re not ends in themselves”

Small digital equipment helped Varda film alone and respond quickly.

The market and the evening class

Follow what you see, what you infer, and what the man tells Varda.



The Gleaners and I · film 1:14:42

The man’s accounts

01

Collecting food

“I don't earn much, but I still have to eat.”

02

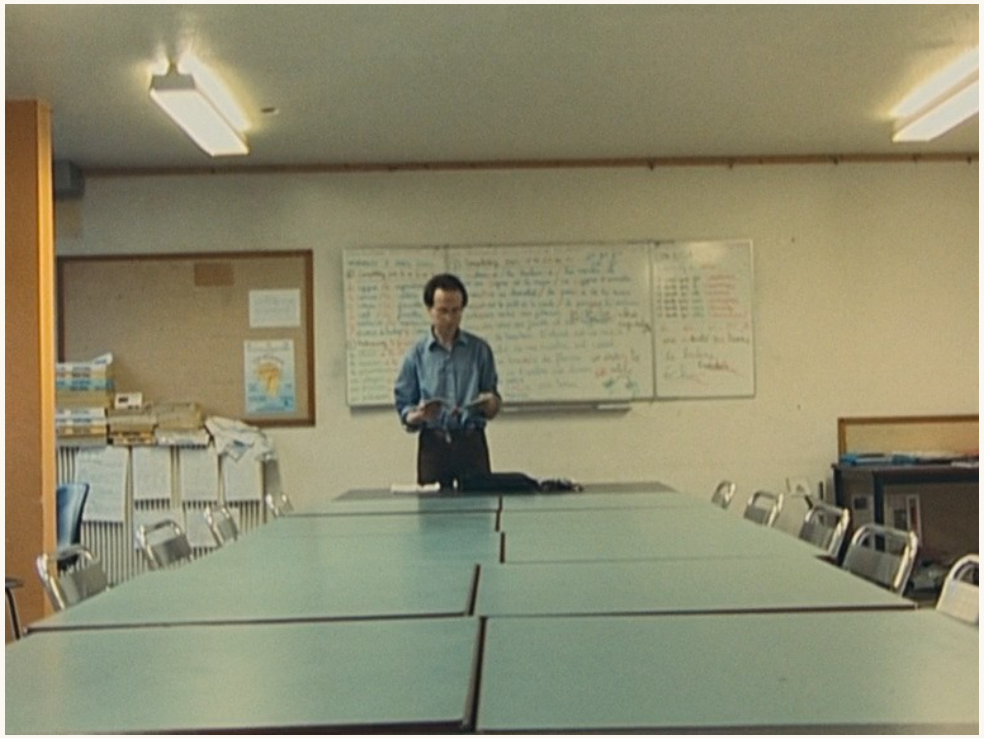
Teaching

“I'm not part of the school system. I don't get paid for it.”

The order of the encounter



The market comes first



The evening class comes later

“

“you’re at the service of the people you film”

Agnès Varda, interviewed by Chris Darke · Sight and Sound, January 2001

Testimony and documentary voice

A participant tells us about an experience.

The film creates a point of view through images, sounds and their arrangement.

Use one moment to explain how these contributions work together.

A photograph and its subject

01

Roy Stryker

“You can see anything you want to in her. She is immortal.”

02

Florence Thompson

“That’s my picture hanging all over the world, and I can’t get a penny out of it.”

Return to your question

Keep, qualify or revise one reading of a pictured worker. Support it with something you saw and something a speaker told you.

Reading: Chris Darke's interview with Varda; Bill Nichols, “The Voice of Documentary.”

Chris Darke · Varda interview · BFI

Bill Nichols · The Voice of Documentary