

EDITORIAL

By Elisabeth O. Sjaastad

Masculine - Feminine

2010 will go down in film history on account of Kathryn Bigelow. She became the first woman to win the Academy Award for best director and best film.

Yet much to the dismay of many, the Cannes film festival didn't find a single film directed by a woman worthy of competing for the Palme d'Or this year. Regardless of whether those films simply weren't as good as the one's that did get selected, the situation does raise the issue of the small number of films directed by women globally.

Today women seem to have no trouble getting into highly competitive film schools, but after they graduate many of them struggle more to establish themselves than their male colleagues. Several countries are now trying to redress this gender imbalance.

During this year's Cannes festival one of the most innovative directors in European film, Agnès Varda, was awarded the "Carrosse d'or" by FERA member SRF.

FERA joins our French members in celebrating the exceptional work of Agnès Varda, the "grandmother" of the French New Wave.

The films of Agnès Varda are legally available on www.theauteurs.com.

Who's afraid of Agnès Varda?

In 1954 26 year old Agnès Varda decided to make a film. She had no film training or experience. The film *La Pointe Courte* proved to be a watershed in modern film history and the precursor to the French new wave.

Agnès Varda has made some of the most innovative and thought-provoking films in the last 50 years. She has effortlessly moved between fiction and documentary – with the same inventiveness and ability to see the world from a unique point of view.

Agnès Varda has never accepted being defined on the basis of gender. "I am not interested in seeing a film just because it is made by a woman – unless she is searching for new pictures" Varda says. "The question isn't men or women. The question is to fight for the innovative films, a genuinely filmatic language that aims to use pictures and sound in alternative ways. And it is exactly Varda's qualities as a visionary and innovative filmmaker that should secure her a much more prominent place in the history of film, alongside her already canonised male colleagues. And not

as a member of a narrowly defined film movement, but as a representative of the generation that regarded film as an art form equal to literature and fine arts.

Agnès Varda was born in Brussels in 1928. Her father was Greek and her mother French. Varda studied literature and psychology at the Sorbonne and art history at École du Louvre. She planned to become a museum curator, but an evening course in photography changed her plans. She soon established herself as a terrific stills photographer and was hired by the Avignon theatre festival and the Theatre National Populaire. But after a while she found photography too confining and “silent” and wanted to explore the construct of time in film. Varda was ready for the moving image. “I didn’t know anything, so I was not afraid. I had seen very few films, and that gave me the naivety and drove to do what I did... I never asked myself if it would be too difficult for me – as a woman – to make films. I did not start out with an inferiority complex.

La Pointe Courte (1954)

“You could say that I did *La Pointe Courte* ‘by hand’. My focus was never to be a part of the film industry. I was not concerned about finding a real producer or an assistant...”

Varda had recently inherited money from her father and with this, a loan from her mother and the bank she started her own production company Ciné Tamaris. The production was defined as a cooperative (that she would spend the next 12 years paying back). With a crew of seven friends, including two actors she new from the theatre, she headed south to the small fishing village La Pointe Courte, close to Sète where she had spent much of her childhood after the family fled Belgium during the war. Varda was inspired by the structure of William Faulkner’s short story *Wild Palms*. Two parallel stories that are never connected is told in every other chapter.

“I told myself, literature has really made progress the last 20 years, while film, which is brand new, has not developed as much. I had the feeling that cinema got lost in its own fiction and did not tackle the issues that literature dealt with, nor did it raise existential questions. Living, real things were not discussed. At the same time cinema was not free, especially in form, and that irritated me.”

In sequences of 10 minutes each Varda alternates between an unpolished documentary portrait of everyday life in La Pointe Courte and the highly stylised story of a young intellectual couple in crisis that wanders around in the same landscape discussing whether to separate or not. “They talk too much to be happy” as one of the village women comments.

Varda’ sculptural and original visual compositions must surely have inspired Bergman’s *Persona*, 12 years later.

When the shoot was completed, Varda returned to Paris with reels of film stock and no idea about how to edit it. She contacted an acquaintance, Alain Resnais, who was in the process of making a name for himself as a documentary filmmaker. He agreed to edit the film.

It was Resnais who introduced Varda to the circle around the film journal Cahiers du Cinéma, at that time led by the legendary André Bazin.

This is how Varda describes the meeting with the young up and coming film critics: “I didn’t get to know them until later, so I remember only vaguely the faces

from that evening. I think Chabrol, Truffaut, Rohmer, Brialy, Doniol-Valcroze and Godard were present. I had difficulties following the conversation. They quoted thousands of films and made all sorts of suggestions to Resnais, they all spoke incredibly fast. I was there by mistake, misplaced. I felt small, ignorant, the only girl among the boys from Cahiers”.

While not well versed in cinema, Varda had other artistic references. “I am not only inspired by art, I really feel alive through art. Paintings mostly. It gives me great joy and a desire to avoid mediocrity, normality”.

When the film was edited, Resnais showed it to Cahiers editor André Bazin. He was impressed. “A miraculous film! Free and pure”. Thanks to Bazin the film was shown in Cannes in May 1955. The screening did not create much buzz and the film could not get a distributor.

However, on January 4 1956 the rumour had spread, and a screening was organised at the influential film club Studio Parnasse in Paris. The intellectual elite was there. The film was debated for two hours – nobody could remain indifferent to what they had seen. And following that screening, the film played to a full house for a month.

5 years before Jean-Luc Godard’s *Breathless*, Varda had made a film with the same freedom and on the same aesthetic principles and production methods that would later define the new wave. “I undoubtedly opened a door to modern cinema. It introduced a form of production where one shot faster, cheaper, and in daylight. *La Pointe Courte* is characterised as a groundbreaking film because it represents a different approach, another vision, and thanks to this poor alternative film I was named the “grandmother” of the new wave.

Cléo de 5 à 7 (1962)

In 1962, Varda got her big breakthrough. *Cléo de 5 à 7* follows the pop singer Cléo in “real time” on June 21 1961 – the first day of summer. But Cléo is not rejoicing. She is anxiously waiting for a medical test result from the hospital. She thinks she might have cancer. Cléo wanders restlessly around Paris to kill time before the appointment with the doctor. In a park she is approached by a young soldier. She dismisses him at first, but Antoine speaks to her with such sincerity that she takes an interest in him. He accompanies her to the hospital. The doctor tells Cléo that she will get well. Antoine and Cléo exchange a look. She is then to see him off at the train station. This was his last day of leave from the Algerian war.

5 to 7 in the afternoon is ironically referring to the time of day when men would see their mistresses. Cléo is not a love story, as many critics assumed to Varda’s irritation: “The only thing we are ready to accept of a woman on film is her relation to love. Is she or is she not in love. Has she been in love, or will she fall in love. Even if she is alone, she has been in love or she should be - or she wishes she was – in love.

Cléo de 5 à 7 is a portrait of a woman over a documentary about Paris. A “subjective documentary” that explores time and the contradiction between objective time and subjectively experienced time.

Once again, Varda is a step ahead in the way she makes film. The film is almost entirely shot on location in Paris with synchronised sound. Not only was it shot chronologically, but during the same hours when the story unfolds. All the clocks seen in the city correspond to the correct time in the film. If one follows Cléo’s footsteps through Paris, one would use the same 90 minutes that the film lasts. Cléo is

the cliché of a woman, tall, beautiful, blond and curvaceous. “The dynamic of the film is to show this woman in the moment when she refused to be the cliché, the moment when no longer wants to be watched, but see for herself. From being an object of other peoples gaze, she becomes the subject who sees – and goes through a transformation.

“From defining herself according to others, she redefines herself”. In April 1962 *Cléo de 5 à 7* graces the cover of Cahiers du Cinéma. And the article “The Woman’s Triumph” is a panegyric praise of Varda. “A woman speaks to us - for the first time. What a sensation! Who, before Agnès Varda, has been able to show us with such clarity what a woman is?”

Cléo de 5 à 7 is invited to Cannes and then to more than 50 film festivals. The prominent film critic Jean-Louis Bory names Varda “the Virginia Woolf of modern cinema” and concludes that *Cléo de 5 à 7* is just as groundbreaking in its narrative technique as *Mrs. Dalloway* was in 1925.

Agnès Varda was not concerned with making feminist films until later in her career. But in retrospect she has described the intrinsic feminist perspective in *Cléo de 5 à 7*.

“A woman’s first feminist act is to see – and say – Okay, people might be looking at me, but I stare back”.

And it is not only her characters whose eyes Varda wants to open.

“In my films I have wanted to elicit the viewers desire to look closes, look deeper. I have fought to express something that starts with our emotions, and mould it in a way that only relates to film, and nothing else. I have learned to search for that which is my film language, not just a superficial style”.

During the course of a long life as an active filmmaker, Varda has made about 20 feature films and documentaries, and numerous shorts – a format she is particularly fond of. She won the Golden Lion in Venice in 1985 for the feature *Vagabond* and the documentary *The Gleaners and I* (2000) has travelled the globe.

Agnès Varda is uncompromising, untrendy, and impossible to peg down. Her collected film production demonstrates her artistic independence.

“To be an independent filmmaker, you have to have an independent mind. And that is really hard, because family, school, and religion all raise us to not be independent.

I was a pioneer and a pioneer is always someone who is looking for adventure. I’ve been on a lot of cinematic adventures. I have made some strange films, and I still see myself as a person with an inquisitive intellect”.

This May Angès Varda turned 82 years old.

“I was only 30 when I was labelled the grandmother of the New Wave. I said to myself: 30 years and grandmother? That’s fine. I can never be older than that”.

This article was first published in Norway in 2008