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AGNES VARDA SINGS

AN INTERVIEW WITH YING YING WU

Christophe Laurentin

A short, round, energetic Agnes Varda greets me in her ground-floor house/office behind Montparnasse. Over breakfast she talks about her latest film, *L'Une chante, l'autre pas,* which she produced herself because potential producers were turned off by the fact that men had only minor roles. "It's a film with songs which also makes producers run away," she says.

Becoming a producer as well as director, scriptwriter, editor and song-writer is the logical step in her long, remarkable career. For over two decades, she has been involved in a vigorous struggle to make films with "an entirely different viewpoint." If *L'Une chante, l'autre pas* succeeds in overcoming the label of *cinéma marginal*, it will be due entirely to her tireless efforts to promote the film almost single-handedly.

Varda's first feature film, *La Pointe courte* (1954), was a neo-realistic chronicle edited by Alain Resnais about a fishing village and a couple taking stock of their marriage. Several shorts later, she made *Cléo de 5 à 7,* two hours in the life of a singer who thinks she is dying of cancer. Varda's best-known film, *Le Bonheur* (1966), tells the story of a happily married couple with two children, in which the husband falls in love with another woman. The film's idyllic mood is barely marred by the wife's suicide, and the other woman soon takes her place in this beautiful but cruel story. Soon afterward came *Les Créatures* with Catherine Deneuve and Michel Piccoli in a pseudo-science fiction story about a couple who meet an architect who controls other people's behaviour through a chess game. The use of color filters creates different levels of reality.

From 1967 to 1969, Varda lived in Los Angeles making a short about her hippie-artist uncle, Jean Varda, who lived on a Sausalito houseboat, and another about the Black Panthers during the Free Huey Newton controversy. She also made *Lion's Love,* about the Hollywood scene, with Warhol superstar Viva. Two years later, she worked with Bertolucci on the script of *Last Tango in Paris.* In 1975, she made a color feature documentary, *Daguerréotypes,* about the shop-keepers who live and work next to her on the rue Daguerre. She captures both the ordinary and magic moments in their lives with a genuine sense of affection.

Ying Ying Wu is a freelance writer living in Paris.

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This fondness for her characters is reflected in her new film, *L'Une chante, l'autre pas,* which underwent several metamorphoses when Varda took an active interest in the women's movement in 1971 and began to travel with women's groups. The original idea, a woman's dream, turned into a musical entitled *Mon corps est à moi* (My Body Belongs to Me) about three women living in Nice who run a contraception center. During this period, Varda gave birth to a son, Mathieu. She and her husband, filmmaker Jacques Demy (*Umbrellas of Cherbourg, Lola*), also have a daughter, Rosalie. Both children appear in *L'Une chante, l'autre pas.*

This film offers a new outlook for women for whom freedom is both a blessing and a curse. Valérie Mairesse is the exuberant Pauline, who decides at the age of 17 to become a singer, changing her name to Pomme. She helps her friend Suzanne, who at 22 already has two children and is pregnant again by her married photographer lover, Jerome, to get an abortion. In France in 1962, this is no easy task. Their lives take different directions afterward, and they don't meet again until ten years later at a demonstration supporting feminist lawyer Gisèle Halimi's defense of a young girl whose mother obtains an abortion for her. By now, Pomme has joined Orchidée, a group of three women musicians, and has fallen in love with Darius, an Iranian economist. Unable to continue singing in Iran, she returns to France to have their baby and to resume her career. Darius finally returns to Iran with their son, but not before Pomme, in one of the film's most poignant moments, asks him to make her pregnant again so they can each keep a child.

Suzanne, played by Thérèse Liotard, has a more traditional outlook. After her abortion, she returns to her parents' house and tries to earn her living by becoming a medical secretary. She moves to the south of France and runs a family planning center. She falls in love with a married pediatrician but waits until he divorces his wife two years later before she can accept his love and marry him. At the film's end, the issues are presented again by Suzanne's teen-aged daughter Marie and the different set of problems her generation will face.

After the final version was written, the long search for a producer and the actors and musicians began. Varda's own production company, Ciné-Tamaris, was created as a result of her attempts to find outside financing. When asked if the present economic crisis had anything to do with her difficulties, she replies, "It's always affected me in the same way. The *cinéma d'auteurs* has always been hard to do, by men and women. It hasn't changed for me; I've been in a crisis for 20 years. I made all my films with difficulty. Maybe not *Le Bonheur;* that's the only one I made somewhat easily. Free cinema is difficult. It has nothing to do with crises or with women."

She adds, *"L'Une chante, l'autre pas* expresses the idea that women's destiny is not around having children. That's an important part of life and of the film, but the film's issues also concern women who don't have and don't want children. The musicians, Orchidée, sing about happy pregnancies, but their songs are realistic and not dreamy or romantic." One song (lyrics by Varda) explores the joy of being pregnant, the pleasure of feeling like a bubble or a balloon. Another expresses the desire to break away from female stereotypes: "Not a nanny nor a granny nor a fanny, I am woman, I am me."

Varda spent a year preparing the production. She found an equal number of men and women to work on the film which she describes as a "more normal working relationship. It was more cheerful and more difficult at the same time, but not competitive." This was obvious when I went last autumn to a house in a Paris suburb along the Seine for the shooting of the film's final moments. The crew worked in a spirit of cheerful cooperation while Varda herself controlled the filming with enthusiastic vigor and total concentration.

The film was shot on location in the Paris region, the south of France and in Amsterdam and Iran. She also made an amusing six-minute short, *Plaisirs d'Amour en Iran,* about Pomme's and Darius' love affair in Iran and about the architecture, as a complement to the feature film.

At another meeting, Varda displays more of the intense, nervous side of her personality. Sitting in the pleasant chaos of her office and speaking abruptly between the constantly ringing telephone and various intruders, she continues her comments on *L'Une chante, l'autre pas.*

The casting turned into a chain-reaction affair among her actors: "I found Thérèse (Suzanne) who found Valérie (Pomme). Suzanne even found her lover, Jerome. It's a good idea to give a certain amount of autonomy to actors within a direction. I said to Suzanne, 'find yourself a guy who you think could play Jerome well.' He wasn't her lover lover, it wasn't the buddy system. The idea that actors aren't puppets that you manipulate is import-

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ant. This may not be normal, but it's natural."

In *L'Une chante, l'autre pas,* Varda depicts those ordinary moments of a woman's life which are seldom seen on the screen, such as the periods of loneliness Suzanne experiences between her affairs. The film explores the strength of female friendship through Suzanne's and Pomme's relationship which spans 15 years and which is sometimes linked by the postcards they send each other from different parts of the world. Says Varda, "Male friendship is totally reinforced on the screen with the great male couples. In French films, Delon-Belmondo, Trintignant-Yanne. In the United States, Newman-Redford, Nicholson-Brando. Friendship between women must either be homosexual or silly. Actually it's a real feeling which is quite strong, deep, valuable and positive. People seem to think that men and women can't have stable feelings for each other without it being erotic. Pomme says to Suzanne about the baby she's having, 'I wanted it, I'm free, both of us wanted it and you who experienced maternity as a failure, it's also for you.' It's beautiful and generous and at the same time, they're not having it together. A very nasty journalist who interviewed me on the radio and couldn't understand this said, 'Isn't Suzanne the real father of the baby?' I said, 'Listen, if you know two women who can procreate together, tell me quick because that might interest some women I know.'"

Varda has strong views on bringing up children. "In the film there are several proposals which aren't just liberating for women but another way of educating children. Every family is a society in miniature. Relationships between men and women are established within the family and toward children. There is no women's liberation without children's liberation. Women and children have to be decolonized. Men set up the rules of the game and are caught in their own trap.

"I strongly believe in a paternal instinct as deep and as tender as maternal love. The idea that mothers are better than fathers is a lot of bunk. Sometimes I find that men who take care of their children do everything very well and their kids love it. That's what's in the film. I don't give advice or invent theories. Most of the proposals are initiated by Pomme who suggests another look at relationships with men and children—for example, the non-possessiveness of children which is a sacred notion. They're my kids and I'm going to keep them. But they aren't my kids, they're our kids and he can keep them as well. That's why the film opens up toward men. Just because they don't have the babies doesn't mean they're not allowed to take care of them."

The film also expresses the long overdue notion of the joy of being a woman, "le bonheur d'être femme," not only through Suzanne and Pomme but through the other women in the film who participate in a women's forum in Amsterdam, who come to the family planning center and who watch Orchidée perform. These ordinary women are transfixed and transformed by their exposure to positive, constructive self-images. Audience reaction has also been gratifying. Varda describes an incident outside a Paris cinema when a woman accosted her with tears in her eyes saying, "I'm in the same situation with my husband as in the film. I'm not a particularly good mother and can't work with the child so we decided that my husband should take it. Everyone I know has made me feel guilty for abandoning my child. Your film has given me the courage to face the situation."

Varda explains her feelings about the negative images of women in films today, even by women filmmakers: "It seems normal that when you start out, your first statement is a scream, a revolt, a complaint. It's the very principle of decolonization. In every colonized country, people started by singing their complaints and their suffering. Often when young women are in the process of expressing themselves, it's a way of beginning to say, 'Here's how I've suffered.' It's completely necessary in order to become liberated. Women haven't opened their mouths during fifty years of cinema, so let them scream. Being positive is a privilege and is also maturity. Happiness is much more acute when you know what happiness and anguish are."

When asked about women directors who make male-oriented action films, such as Lina Wertmüller, Varda is quick to reply, "I don't criticize other women directors because it's too easy. You can't divide women into they're good or they're not. For me, among filmmakers, there are good ones and bad ones, women as well. There are women who make men's films. I won't give any examples. That's their problem."

Varda has only one comment for young women filmmakers: "All I know is that you absolutely have to fight. You have to send scripts everywhere and leave them with every agent. The more you send out, the better your chances. You have to do it in numbers like a demonstration. That's all there is. It's a matter of conviction."