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# HAPPINESS TO HEARTBREAK

## Varga to May

*Bobbe*



"Le Bonheur"



Agnes Varda

by Cleve Canham

In *The Heartbreak Kid*, directed by Elaine May, Lenny is a young man who leaves his bride after five days to chase a blonde named Kelly. The film is a comedy, and some of the funniness stems from Lenny's struggle for Kelly with her inflexible father.

When her father admits he wants Kelly too, "Lenny realizes that he's won the battle," says the publicity handout. Just why this is so is never made clear in the movie, but then this isn't the only element that gives one pause over a film being advertised as "the best and most original comedy of 1972."

In *Le Bonheur*, directed by Agnes Varda a few years ago, a young man named Francois, on an outing with his wife, proposes that he, she and his mistress — all of them — live together. He has told his mistress that it isn't his fault he met her after he married his wife — which is exactly Lenny's sentiment.

Now Francois tells his wife that they — the two of them — are like an orchard, and his infidelity is simply reaching over the fence to another orchard for "more blossoms, more trees." But his wife panics and drowns, and Francois marries his mistress. When last we see them, they too are on an outing, with his children. Rather than being the predictably fetching fam-

ily scene with which the film began, it is something odious.

*Le Bonheur* is not a comedy, unless you have a taste for subtle black humor. It may be bizarrely amusing as well as disturbing to you because of Francois' maddening smile and his obsessive, confident harem pipe dream.

Francois is practically a one-dimensional character, a caricature of sorts which seems contrived to show us how such a man might be perceived by his victims: women.

Some see *Le Bonheur* as an inquiry into polygamous relationships. Ms. Varda does not appear as much interested in polygamy, though, as in the worm under the loving surface. I should quickly add that I felt neither propagandized nor intellectually patronized by any feminist argument. Francois is a model of equanimity and tolerance; the women are loving and lovable; and Ms. Varda's upsetting view of the triangle is cool-headed.

Lenny, on the other hand, is a caricature who is perplexing, I am afraid, at the expense of the film. He's a freak chameleon, a character not clearly fixed, it seems, in the minds of those behind the scenes.

I haven't read Bruce Jay Friedman's story on which the movie is based (my public library is short on Friedman's works and back issues of

*Esquire*, in which this originally appeared). Nor do I know what the screenplay contributions of Neil Simon are. But I remember the radio spots Ms. May and Mike Nichols used to do, and their parodying of nasal voices, commonplaces, idioms and so on which were very often used in an obliquely hip way.

So in one of the key scenes of *The Heartbreak Kid* (perhaps the key scene: the one in which Lenny drops his bombshell of an announcement that he is leaving to his bride of five days) something seems wrong, and the wrongness comes to rest with Ms. May, I think. If not by her design, then by her support, it would appear.

Lenny and his wife Lila are in the hotel dining room surrounded by the glare of others and the bustling of waiters. While Lila is gagging on shock at his news, Lenny is trying to placate her with promised pecan pie, of which there is no longer any left in the kitchen. An upsetting disaster for Lenny!

A Lenny we have been led to see is quick-witted is mentally taxed with banal solicitousness on his left — "Have some water...feel better?" — and is enjoined with the waiter on his right in a battle that is the bane of us all: the unworkable society. Suddenly we have Lenny's character being sunk into a parody of a schle-



Elaine May

"The Heartbreak Kid" (Jeannie Berlin as Lila; Charles Grodin as Lenny)

