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MOVIE REVIEW

'Gleaners' Combs Land for Stories of Resilience

Filmmaker Agnes Varda focuses on people who live on others' leftovers to make a statement about waste in a prosperous consumer society.

By KEVIN THOMAS, Times Staff Writer

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Agnes Varda would probably agree with Jean Renoir's remark that, in making a film, he discovered its meaning as he went along. For, more than anything else, her captivating new documentary "The Gleaners and I" is charged with the pleasure of discovery--of discovering the world around her from a fresh perspective and of rediscovering herself after devoting most of the past decade celebrating, restoring, preserving and reviving the legacy of her late husband, director Jacques Demy, who died of leukemia in 1990.

She wanted to make a film in which she could express her love of painting, and which would allow her to try out one of the new small digital cameras. She also wanted to comment on waste in a prosperous consumer society in which many struggle to find food to survive.

Her starting point is Paris' Orsay Museum, the home of Jean-Francois Millet's famous "Les Glaneuses" (1867), which depicts three women stooped over, gleaning a wheat field, a painting so popular that 12,000 postcard reproductions of it were sold in 1998 alone. This is the image that launches Varda on a journey that ranges widely over rural France to find out if gleaning still goes on, and how the ancient practice allowing the poor to comb the fields for leftover grains, fruits and vegetables after a harvest persists in different forms. She relates gleaning to the act of scavenging by the homeless and impoverished that goes on the world over.

She also considers the gleaning of knowledge, especially of self. Varda and her films have always been at once earthy and intellectual, and her love and respect for nature and her inquiring mind are in full evidence in this marvelous film. It is typically brisk, dryly witty and inventive, unsentimental yet caring; Varda's frequent composer, Joanna Bruzdowicz, has created an array of themes to reflect her film's ever-changing mood, locales and circumstances--and incorporates the music of others, including rap and hip-hop.

Right away, Varda discovers from a lovely and gracious farm woman that, thanks to the efficiency of modern machinery, gleaning for wheat is virtually a thing of the past. Potatoes are another matter. Such a relatively small portion of the harvest meets commercial size standards that many people scavenge the sites where they are dumped; sadly, when and where the harvesters are going to deposit their unwanted potatoes goes unannounced so that literally tons of them go to waste.

Facts, laws, customs--all of these interest Varda, but of course, once she has set her quest in motion, it's the people she meets who matter most. Among the most memorable are a long-haul truck driver, who failed a police Breathalyzer test and lost his job and soon his wife and children. Living with a Gypsy woman in a trailer, he feels his losses deeply but has not lost his dignity; with pride he says of himself and his fellow scavengers, "We are not afraid to get our hands dirty. We can always wash our hands."

In Burgundy she meets a delightful man who runs his family vineyard but is also a psychotherapist--and who laments that for the past three or four years gleaning in Burgundy vineyards has become forbidden. (In a different area Varda is pleased to meet the one vintner who does permit gleaning--and whose great-great-grandfather was Etienne-Jules Marey, an inventor whose studies of animal motion became key in the development of cinema.)

Back in Paris, Varda tells us she has saved the best for last: an encounter with a remarkable, well-educated young man who lives off a well-balanced diet of fruits and vegetables left behind when a street market closes down for the day--and who also picks up discarded day-old bread from bakeries.

He hawks newspapers to earn his living, yet he devotes much of his time at the hostelry where he lives to teaching his neighbors, largely recent immigrants from Africa, how to read and write French--and at no charge.

Then she takes us back to the Orsay, where she has persuaded museum officials to take out Jules Breton's superb, monumental "Le Retour des Glaneuses" (1859) out of storage so that she--and we--can see this glorious work out in the sunlight.

Varda talks to artists who incorporate found objects they have picked up off the streets, and throughout the film she visits museums to show us other paintings of gleaners. In Arras, she shows us Breton's "La Glaneuse" (1877) and then steps in front of her camera to assume the subject's pose, holding a shaft of wheat over her head. Thus begins her self-examination: She shows us the marks of aging on her hands and exposes the white roots of her dyed, dark reddish-brown hair. Varda, now 72, stares down her own mortality, accepting it with a let's-get-on-with-it shrug and hits the road again.

In the course of her journey she has been confronted with obscene wastes, hardship, some petty-mindedness toward scavengers, but she has also found in abundance an enduring generosity of spirit and individuals of remarkable resilience. Agnes Varda has found that people can make lives from the leftovers of others and that she is herself a gleaner, an artist who has more than enough spirit, passion and curiosity left over within herself after the loss of her husband to renew a career that ushered in the French New Wave and has now lasted for more than 45 years.

Calendar Live - 'Gleaners' Combs Land for Stories of Resilience

Unrated. Times guidelines: suitable for all ages.

'The Gleaners and I'

(Les Glaneurs et La Glaneuse)

A Zeitgeist Films release of a Cine Tamaris production in association with the Centre National de la Cinematographie, Procirep and Canal Plus. Director-narrator Agnes Varda. Cinematographers Stephane Krausz, Didier Rouget, Didier Doussin, Pascal Sautelet and Varda. Editors Varda and Laurent Pineau. Original score by Joanna Bruzdowicz. In French, with English subtitles. Running time: 1 hour, 22 minutes.

Exclusively at the Music Hall, 9036 Wilshire Blvd., Beverly Hills, (310) 274-6869.

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