

Document Citation

Title	Meaning in gleaning
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Source	<i>Los Angeles Times</i>
Date	2002 Dec 19
Type	review
Language	English
Pagination	E19
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Les glaneurs et la glaneuse... deux ans après (The gleaners and I: two years later), Varda, Agnès, 2002



GENARO MOLINA *Los Angeles Times*

STILL VIBRANT: Director Agnès Varda, 75, is often called "the Grandmother of the French New Wave." Her "Two Years Later" is a joyous film in which she embraces life warmly but unsentimentally.

MOVIES

Meaning in gleaning

Agnès Varda's documentary sequel is a journey of discovery for her and her subjects.

By KEVIN THOMAS
Times Staff Writer

ON a brief recent visit Agnès Varda arranged for a private screening at the American Cinematheque of "The Gleaners and I... Two Years Later," the 65-minute sequel to her 2000 landmark documentary.

"The Gleaners and I" is a beautiful, contemplative and remarkably resonant film in which Varda traveled over the French countryside to see if gleaning — the ancient custom of allowing the poor to comb the fields for leftover grains, fruits and vegetables after a harvest — still persisted. The journey would allow Varda, now 75 and often called "the Grandmother of the French New Wave," to try out one of the new small digital cameras and to confront her own journey into old age. (Never mind that the

short and sturdy Varda, with her Dutch bob, upturned nose and penetrating gaze, has changed little over the decades and with no discernible loss of passion and energy.) This surpassing film of self-discovery also enabled Varda to express her passion for art and to comment on waste in a prosperous consumer society.

Varda's starting point was Jean-Francois Millet's famous 1857 painting "The Gleaners," which depicts three women stooped over, gleaning a wheat field, and it became an extended metaphor for random forms of scavenging, mainly by the homeless. "The Gleaners and I" became a huge hit in France, was enthusiastically received the world over, won a shelf full of trophies, and best of all, recharged Varda, who had devoted most of her energies to preserving the films of her late husband, director Jacques Demy, who died in 1989. (Currently, she's overseeing the restoration of Demy's enchanting 1972 fairy tale "Donkey Skin.")

Introducing "Two Years Later" to an audience of friends and admirers in the Egyptian's Spielberg Theater, Varda said that what started out as a 15-minute "bonus" for the original film's DVD and VHS release turned out to be a full-fledged sequel. Although two small thea-

ters in Paris are set to show "Two Years Later," Varda and her American distributor Zeitgeist, who already have "The Gleaners and I" and "Two Years Later" in DVD and VHS release, have no plans for a theatrical release.

"Two Years Later" opens with Varda telling of the vast array of letters, many of them fanciful and touching, that "The Gleaners and I" brought her. She tracks down several of the original documentary's most memorable individuals, among the Claude, the unapologetic alcoholic of unshakable dignity who is now doing much better; Alain, the teacher of illiterates who subsists on garbage; and the distinguished vintner-psychiatrist who this time sees psychoanalysis as a form of gleaning. She triggers the retrieval from storage and restoration of Pierre-Edmond Hédouin's 1857's "The Gleaners," whose once-celebrated lyrical beauty looks false and dated alongside the enduring social realism of the originally reviled Millet masterpiece. "Two Years Later" is a joyous film in which Varda embraces life warmly but unsentimentally and in which she again finds in the same field a heart-shaped potato, the perfect symbol for an artist who has always had her feet on the ground but whose passionate curiosity and concern sprout out in all directions.

Los Angeles Times - Calendar Weekend E19 Thursday 12/19/02