

rection and falls obsessively in love with a beautiful, enigmatic and standoffish woman (who may or may not be a terrorist) makes for a sublime cinematic experience. Rutnam is one of India's most innovative filmmakers, blending the conventions of Bollywood's grand style with an operatic art-house aesthetic. His fluid command of *mise-en-scène* is breathtaking; his song-and-dance sequences have a surreal, seductive and uncanny visual style, punctuated by A.R. Rahman's hallucinatory score. Like his earlier *Bombay*, this is a devastating film about sexual and emotional desire colliding with communal, political and religious identities.

Rather than going the way of other international film industries under Hollywood's assault, Bollywood's alternative cinematic universe is as vibrant as ever. It's as bright, gaudy and brash as the posters that ubiquitously dot the Bombay landscape, as politically complicated and messy as the country it belongs to. Its siren call is often irresistible, as I discovered myself as a teen-age visitor to Bombay's Seth Studios. As the actors appeared on set and repeated takes, slowly and surely stardust descended on me. ■

Carl Bromley is editor of Cinema Nation: The Best Writing on Film from The Nation, 1913-2000.

The Poetry of Trash

By Pat Aufderheide

When Agnès Varda, who some call the "mother of the French New Wave," made *The Gleaners and I* at the age of 72, she received more letters, mail and mementos than for any of the other films she has made in her long, illustrious and stubbornly individual career. That makes sense. The film calls forth that kind of response, with its intimate tone, rich characters, and warm respect for people who respond to the ordinary cruelty of the world with small gestures of resistance.

The Gleaners and I is a meditative and wandering essay that begins with the subject of waste and the people who use it, and goes on to ask questions, large and small, about inequality, injustice and suffering. Why are perfectly good potatoes junked, just for being a tad too big? How do people harvest old refrigerators, and what do they do with them? How did I get so old?

Varda's journey across France to explore gleaning starts at a farmer's market, and moves on to farms (where industrial equipment eliminates gleaning for wheat but creates mountains of leftover potatoes), vineyards (where gleaning is sometimes banned because the crop is branded), urban dumpsters behind super-

markets (where owners prosecute homeless people), and orchards (where gleaners are cautiously welcome). She also goes to flea markets and art galleries, to fine restaurants and city streets.



Agnès Varda: *La glaneuse*.

We meet people who depend on gleaning to survive, people who have fallen to gleaning through hard times, and people who glean as an art form. One man lives entirely from gleaning ("100 percent!"), as a statement against a wasteful society. Another quietly survives from his gleaning, and spends the rest of his time teaching African immigrants to write and read

French in a dilapidated housing project. Some people make extraordinary art from it, including a set of abandoned refrigerators turned into playful sculptures. One opens up to a scene of shelves full of Playmobil figures, all members of a protest demonstration.

Varda has called her style "subjective documentary," and she is ubiquitous in this film without ever being self-absorbed. She is unafraid, it seems, of the viewer's judgment as she ponders the gray roots of her hair, the liver spots on her skin, even her failure to turn off the camera as she trudges through a field. She claims herself as a character in the story—a gleaner of images, stories, experiences.

This seemingly modest claim cloaks a grander life project, one in which she, as a socially engaged artist, has insistently experimented with film form. While a lifelong filmmaker, with internationally awarded works such as *Cleo from 5 to 7* (1962), *Lion's Love* (1968), *One Sings, the Other Doesn't* (1976), *Vagabond* (1985) and her tribute to husband Jacques Demy *Jacquot de Nantes* (1990), Varda resists

specialization as an essayist. Like the writer John Berger, she works in image, word, experience and argument, celebrating the richness of lived human experience. She was educated in a visual arts tradition, primarily painting, and came to film from photography. She has never lost sight of film as an experiment in visual expression. So you may be as likely to compare *The Gleaners and I* to a poem or to a painting as to a documentary.

The Gleaners and I has the signature elements of a Varda film. Iconic objects provide visual metaphors and echo themes of the film. In heart-shaped pota-

atoes—vegetables that fail to fit the agri-industrial mold—she evokes warm, loving relationships. There is Varda's lifelong fascination with the process of time and aging, which we see in objects (a clock without hands that the filmmaker gleans while foraging) and in her own body. There is a delighted connection with her artistic and cultural her-

itage, shown in references to famous paintings of gleaners, in Biblical references, in visits with artists and museum curators. There is the insistence on the homemade—and the handmade—aesthetic as a quiet act of resistance to industrial, formulaic filmmaking. And there is her uncritical empathy with the challenge of being ordinarily human, whether toward denizens of a trailer camp or an immigrant collage artist.

This is not a political film. It doesn't urge you to recycle, or stop persecuting gleaners and pickers, or improve conditions in the fields, or create better social services. That would all be nice and worthwhile, but Varda's film is not concerned with mobilization. Her work never is; that has been, at times, a source of criticism from the left. Varda understands herself as an artist in her artwork and in her life; she finds and commits ordinary beauty. She is interested in other people like her, stubbornly assertive individuals in situations that often threaten to smother them.

Enjoyment is supremely important to her, as the leisurely pace of the film

makes clear. She savors her interchanges. She delights in the competence and creativity of people who have little. She is filled with wonder at the odd coincidence that underlines meaning. (A painting of gleaners before a storm is taken out of storage into a courtyard, just as a gust of wind comes up.) And she is not above constructing the oddball scene, as when she puts a real judge with warm and crinkly eyes into the fields to read the law on gleanings.

Of course, the film has social and political implications, some highly topical. "We are all gleaners," she said at the Toronto Film Festival in 2000, where the film debuted in North America before a brief theatrical run. "We glean knowledge, information, we glean inspiration from the classics, we glean from overheard conversations."

Yes. In fact, this is a film that could kick off every congressional hearing, every court case, every copyright tribunal process dealing with intellectual "property," and who should control it. In those circles, gleanings is just lumped in with a

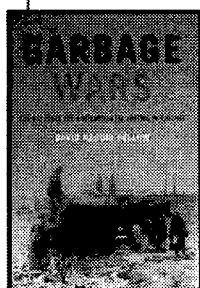
wide range of other information sampling habits and called "piracy."

The film premiered at Cannes and ran for eight months in French theaters. It capped a Varda retrospective at the Film Forum in New York. At Toronto, Varda was feted and thronged. She noted wryly, however, that although she has a track record going back to 1954, an entry in every film encyclopedia, and in France is a celebrity artist, "no one wanted to fund this film." So she made the film with her own funds, and is recouping the investment slowly.

It's good news, then, for us and for her that videocassette and DVD versions of *The Gleaners and I* are now available. For the DVD, in fact, she made a follow-up film celebrating the authors of that outpouring, and updating viewers on the characters of the first film. It's the kind of thoughtful gesture—a combination of thank-you note and update—that you would expect from the person you meet in *The Gleaners and I*. ■

Pat Aufderheide's latest book is *The Daily Planet: A Critic on the Capitalist Culture Beat* (University of Minnesota).

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For the Ages

By Gabe Klinger

Manoel de Oliveira, at 94 the world's only living and active director to have begun his career in the silent era, peoples his films with kings and peasants, virgins and whores, egotists and humanists. A Portuguese director only a generation or two from his own ancestral nobility, de Oliveira is preoccupied not only by his country's past, but by the generous expository traditions still prevalent in theater, literature and architecture—traditions that he and early spearheads like Orson Welles, Fritz Lang and John Ford attempted to preserve in their movies.

So what does it say about an entire country's film industry if their most well-known and successful director is also the most *recherché* in all the world? Manoel de Oliveira is the grandfather and inheritor of Portuguese cinema. Instead of being considered an impeding influence, an old dog that just won't die, the most up-to-date Portuguese filmmakers recognize that de Oliveira is just as much a part of a national "new wave" as they are, with fewer artistic and financial limitations than any time in the country's past 50 years.

Like Spain a fascist country until the '70s where one would have to travel to France to try and see films (and occasionally make them), Portugal is also one of the poorest nations in Europe. In the late '70s, however, came forward a cinephile with a checkbook and contacts to match his passion for film. The Lisbon-born, Paris-based Paolo Branco is famous for being de Oliveira's guardian angel (he's produced at least 15 of his films), but even more famous for turning Portuguese cinema to the attention of the international art house market. Whether he turns a profit is unclear, but his world sales (through Gemini Films in Paris and his video and distribution affiliates in Portugal), always guarantee that the

next film by the next young (or old) master gets made.

If de Oliveira owns the well of ideas, Branco is definitely the transporter, who showed others that there was an audience



There is an audience to be cultivated for *Oporto of My Childhood*, but will it include American moviegoers?

to cultivate (different from simply attracting an audience), and that Portugal needed an art cinema. The new Portuguese filmmakers are Pedro Costa, Teresa Vilaverde, João Canijo, Alberto Seixas Santos, João Pedro Rodrigues—some of them produced by Branco, some not—and experienced masters like João Cesar Monteiro and João Botelho. Unlike de Oliveira, none from this list have been theatrically distributed in the United States.

The reason for this might go deeper than mere content, their success as films or each individual director's ability to connect with an audience. Pedro Costa, who so far has made six films, is a small genius already receiving a retrospective at the Cinematheque Ontario later this year. João Cesar Monteiro is the reigning chronicler of moral perversion in Portuguese cinema; two of his films (and more are reportedly on the way) have appeared under our noses on DVD. A couple of venues in San Francisco and Brooklyn have featured series of "New Portuguese Cinema," where some films by Teresa

Vilaverde and João Botelho received their American premieres (but, alas, never resurfaced).

The problem is more simple than most of us imagine: Portugal is not represented, like Iran and Taiwan were a few years ago, as a country whose filmmakers are responding to national change. Individual works, like João Pedro Rodrigues' *O Fantasma* (2000) or João Canijo's *Get a Life* (2001), tend to show up obscured in the sidebars of festivals—of Latino or gay interest, for example—but not in the general context they deserve.

De Oliveira's *I'm Going Home* (2001), a film made in France with mostly French actors—not really atypical for the director—was picked-up for American distribution by Milestone Films (one of the most adventurous distributors in the country) and booked in plenty of smaller theaters all over the country, opening to great reviews. *I'm Going Home* may be one of de Oliveira's best, but in the same year he took festival audiences aback with his majestic portrait of his hometown, *Oporto*.

Too personal for an American release, *Oporto of My Childhood* doesn't speak volumes about the human condition and rejuvenation of age. But *Oporto* is a film with its own unique set of cultural and emotional values, made with the distinction of being a film that can't be replicated by anyone, anywhere else.

So what does that leave the foreign market? *Oporto of My Childhood*, a film with a limited repertoire that might be better suited hanging on the walls of the Portuguese *cinemateca*? Or *I'm Going Home*, a masterwork of amassed creative disillusionment, with many entry points and a straighter narrative? The sway of audiences may have always been self-evident, but the passivity of tastemakers has never aided in the creation of such works. ■

Gabe Klinger is co-editor of 24 FPS magazine (online at www.24fpsmagazine.com).