

A Cinema Guild Release

# The Beaches of Agnès

A film by AGNÈS VARDA

Running Time: 110 minutes / 2008 / France / French with English subtitles  
Not Rated / Stills available at: [www.cinemaguild.com/downloads](http://www.cinemaguild.com/downloads)

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## Synopsis

Returning to the beaches which have been part of her life, Varda invents a kind of self-portrait-documentary. Agnès stages herself among excerpts of her films, images and reportages. She shares with humor and emotion her beginnings as a stage photographer, then as early filmmaker of the French New Wave, her life with Jacques Demy, her feminism, her trips to Cuba, China and the USA, her life as independent producer and her family life.

## Bio & Filmography

French filmmaker born in 1928.

Greek father. French mother. Childhood in Belgium. Bombing in 1940. Exodus on the French roads. Sète then Paris. Short studies. Photographer (Festival d'Avignon, travels).

In 1954, she creates a film company Ciné-Tamaris for *La Pointe Courte* (also first feature of Philippe Noiret). It gave her the title of "Grand Mother of the French New Wave".

Wife of filmmaker Jacques Demy, who passed away in 1990. Two children.

During 50 years of filmmaking, she has alternated between short and feature films, fiction and documentary.

Among 33, the best known films of Agnès are:

- 1961 CLÉO DE 5 À 7 (Cleo from 5 to 7)
  - 1964 LE BONHEUR (Happiness)
  - 1985 SANS TOIT NI LOI (Vagabond)
  - 1990 JACQUOT DE NANTES (Jacquot)
  - 2000 LES GLANEURS ET LA GLANEUSE (The Gleaners and I)
  - Since 2003, video installations: PATATUTOPIA (Venise Art Biennale and Taipei Museum), LE TRIPTYQUE et LES VEUVES de NOIRMOUTIER
  - Member of the jury of the 2005 Cannes Film Festival
  - Big exhibition at the Fondation Cartier Paris in 2006: L'ILE ET ELLE.
  - THE BEACHES OF AGNES
- Premiere at the 2008 Venice Film Festival

## Notes

What an idea to film a self-portrait at nearly 80 years-old. The idea came to me one day, on a beach in Noirmoutier, when I realized how many other beaches had influenced my life. These beaches are the thread through which I chose to describe, to friends, family, and others, some of my work and the events of my life.

In old age, many feel the need to recount one's life. A few of old Montaigne's words (foreword of the Essais, 1595) encouraged me in this project:

*"I have vowed [my book] to the particular commodity of my kinsfolk and friends: to the end, that losing me (which they are likely to do ere long), they may therein find some lineaments of my conditions and humours, and by that reserve more whole, and more lively foster the knowledge they have had of me."*

My children and grandchildren agreed to come into the picture, and to help me create a family of dream-like images.

My friend Didier Rouget encouraged me to begin this project, by collaborating with me in the first sequence, that of my childhood, on a beach in Belgium. Once underway, I let the film nourish itself, with both recent scenes and what I created throughout the years.

The excerpts from my films were treated as if they had come from a databank of my life's work, with which I could take a scene of fiction or documentary, and use it out of context. I've also included some of my photography: for instance, some I did for Vilar at the Festival d'Avignon, my coverage of China in 1957, and the Cuban Revolution in 1962. It is the whole of my work as a filmmaker, as a photographer, and as a visual artist that tells my story better than my words alone.

And then there is my meeting with Jacques Demy, our life together, with its ups and downs, our children, our travels, and then his illness and death. This grand love venture, such a significant part of my life, weaved itself into my life as a filmmaker.

## The Sets

The sets (reconstructing the house's courtyard, the whale, the fake car and the installations on the beach in Sète etc...) were designed by Frankie Diago (who recently did Vers le Sud by Laurent Cantet and L'une Chante l'Autre pas, in 1976 with me).

## Costumes

I wore my own clothes, as this is a documentary. In my wardrobe, I even have a potato costume!

### **Shooting, when and where?**

The film was shot in two-and three-week sequences, between August 2006 and June 2008, in various locations:

- In Belgium: La Panne beach, at the end of Knokke-le-Zoute, and in Brussels
- In Sete: the port, the canals, the Pointe Courte neighborhood and La Corniche beach (as sung by Brassens)
- In Los Angeles: Venice Beach, Santa Monica Beach
- In Noirmoutier Island: La Guénière Beach
- In Paris, to justify the film's title, a "beach" created in the middle of the rue Daguerre, between my house and the editing room (following the 'Paris- Plage' project, where the city unloaded sand on the banks of the Seine ).
- Six truckloads of sand were unloaded onto the rue Daguerre asphalt.

### **Mirror, mirrors in Belgium**

The first sequence. I imagined a couple dozen large mirrors crisscrossing the beach with their reflections skittering off each other. A group of students from the Ecole de Cinéma in Louvain managed their transport, across the dunes, in full wind. These mirrors reflect the North Sea more than me, but the idea of this project as a self-portrait comes across clearly.

### **In Sète, les Joutes and boats**

Les Joutes, a sort of jousting competition on water, have been around for ages. Tournaments, celebrations and all-white festivals, I filmed them in 1954 and again in 2007.

I hung out with the fishermen as an adolescent, especially in the Pointe Courte neighborhood. I went back there to shoot.

I was daydreaming. I saw myself, navigating that ancient sail, on the canals in Sète, then on the Seine in Paris. One of the purposes of this film was to make these dreams real.

### **Los Angeles**

City of contrasts and contradictions. Such an intense pleasure to live there. Hard to live there without conflicts. Expansive beaches and a peer that throws itself into the Pacific at the tip of the tip of the rush towards the West. Hollywood: Jacques made a film with a studio. Far from the studios, I shot films in L.A. Documentaries. A very sad fiction. When I go back, the beach is where I meet my friends again.

### **Noirmoutier Island**

Long walks on the beaches. Shared love and the gift of space. A place of calm and work, facing the ocean. Time to reflect, on why and how to be a filmmaker in such a messed-up world.

The local life and the widows of the island, as well as the children's summer games, inspired films and installations. A film in 1966: failure! As a good gleaner and recycler, I salvaged the copies of the film. Christophe Vallaux designed a metal structure and we built a large hut. The walls are made of film. A movie-lovers hut!

### **The house in Paris**

Workplace, lifespace, and homebase, for the whole family.

The courtyard is its epicenter, with over 50 years of history to tell. To help tell it, the courtyard was rebuilt on a set, looking as it did in 1951, and after.

The film was mainly shot using a big video camera, a High Definition Panasonic AJ-HD X 400, by Helene Louvart (Director of Photography for Sandrine Veysset, Jacques Doillon, and Dominique Cabrera), by Alain Sakot in Belgium, and by Arlene Nelson in Los Angeles.

Other shots were filmed using a smaller high definition video camera, the Sony V1, by my assistant Julia Fabry, editor-in chief Jean-Baptiste Morin, and myself, as I have done for some time now.

### **Music**

A bit of original music. A nice theme song, *Sonate pour deux cœurs* (Sonata for two hearts) by Joanna Bruzdowicz, and excerpts from some of her other compositions from *Sans toit ni loi* (Vagabond) and *Jacquot de Nantes*.

Other compositions by Stéphane Vilar and by Paule Cornet. There is also some older music. Georges Delerue, excerpts from *L'Opéra-Mouffe*, *Du côté de la côte* and *Documenteur*.

Pierre Barbaud had composed some dodecaphonic music for *La Pointe Courte* in 1955 and *Les Créatures* in 1967, and it is with pleasure that I used it again for certain scenes. As with the images of previous films taken out of context, excerpts of music separated from the scenes they originally accompanied take on another meaning. It is another facet of the puzzle.

### **Editing and voice-over**

I beat my own record in editing time. Alternating between shooting and editing, beginning in March 2007, I wrote the narration and invented the film day by day. Excerpts from my previous films found their way in, then out again, interviews were put aside, I would improvise little “handmade” shots, I wrote new narration, I was going to shoot some paintings... we would edit... etc.

To this mix of images comes the sound of my narration, recorded in various locations with various tones of voice, not to mention the sound, altogether different, of the older films and interviews. The subject matter of the film itself is formed by these juxtapositions.

The idea of a puzzle structures the project, for at the end, a figure or a landscape takes shape. I've worked at length with two amazing young editors Jean-Baptiste Morin and Baptiste Filloux, with hard drives hard as hard-boiled eggs, we had so much material of shots and archives.

The final product fits in a little box, weighing about 5 pounds; we'll take it in a handbag to the festival in Venice. It'll be the world premiere, using a method I still find amazing (the projector can read a file).

I'm from the old school, I'll be happy when the film comes out in theatres in 6 reels the old-fashioned way (in France in December 2008).

### **Production**

Les Plages had support from Arte, Canal+, the Région Ile-de-France and the Région Languedoc, but the film is very expensive for the budget that investors give to the documentary category. The French Center of Cinema also helped us.

Ciné-Tamaris is a production company I created in 1954 and holds on. It's a family-business; it produces only my films, and distributes the films and DVDs of only those of Jacques Demy and myself. The Ciné-Tamaris team were wonderfully motivated throughout the entire production. They accepted to “act” out the production scene in bathing suits on our improvised beach.

I have had two right-hand women: Julia Fabry, from the first day of location scouting to the last night of mixing, coming along with me on the adventures of my imagination; and Rosalie Varda, my daughter, from the start of this project to its finish, listening to my ideas, reminding me of them at times, protecting me, with affection.

### **What's the current state of my films?**

I haven't done any fiction since *Jacquot de Nantes* in 1990, except a short film *Le Lion Volatil*. I've shot documentaries, other short films, videos, bonus features for DVDs and films to include as part of installations I've had the pleasure of doing since 2003 (*Patatutopia* on three screens with heart-shaped potatoes as the only stars).

In *The Gleaners and I*, I had already made brief appearances. This time I threw myself in, playing my own role. My musings, pretty close to the truth, are punctuated by sketches where I put on a bit of a show. Clowning around allowed me to take a step back.

### **Credits**

Written and Directed by	Agnès VARDA
Cinematography	Alain SAKOT, Hélène LOUVART, Julia FABRY, Jean-Baptiste MORIN et Agnès VARDA
Sound	Pierre MERTENS, Olivier SCHWOB, Frédéric MAURY, Emmanuel SOLAND et Olivier GOINARD
Set Design	Frankie DIAGO
Editing	Agnès VARDA avec deux chefs monteurs Jean-Baptiste MORIN et Baptiste FILLOUX
Original Music	Joanna BRUZDOWICZ, Stéphane VILAR, Paule CORNET

Co-produced with Arte France Cinéma, with the participation of Canal+  
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