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#Born A Rebel Season

Born A Rebel (short film)

Faces Places (12a)

dir: **Agnès Varda, JR**

Starring: **Agnès Varda, JR**

Sponsor: **Helen Hancocks**

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Born A Rebel: Born a Rebel is a 15 minute short film made by Cinema For All together with the Yorkshire, North East and North West Film Archives. It marks 100 years since the start of women's suffrage in the UK, and shows women's lives from the suffragettes to the miners' strikes, and much more.

Faces Places: Nouvelle vague pioneer Agnès Varda teams up with Parisian photographer and muralist JR to travel in a photo truck through France, dropping in on villages, meeting and photographing local people and pasting blown up prints of these photographs on surfaces such as soon-to-be demolished houses, barns, train carriages and shipping containers. Along the way they discuss their ideas about beauty, friendship and time. Towards the end of their journey Varda, who often asks JR to take off his sunglasses, takes him to the home of another sunglasses-wearing artist, her old friend Jean-Luc Godard. They arrive to find him purposefully absent, and the cryptic message he leaves on his front door saddens Varda greatly.

Agnès Varda has always delighted in conversation and connection. The credits for her first feature, back in 1955, read, "A film by Agnès Varda and the inhabitants of La Pointe Courte." Later, together with the likes of Chris Marker and William Klein, she would be one of the contributors to the agitprop non-fiction work *Far from Vietnam* (1967).. Her social documentaries, among them *Daguerréotypes* (1975) and *The Gleaners and I* (2000), seem to be made with - as much as about - her subjects. They're puckish and associative, crinkle-eyed rather than clinical, both lyrical and convivial.

It's a little surprising, then that *Faces Places* is her first directorial collaboration. It's perhaps even more surprising that her partner is JR, the French street artist whose practice involves taking black and white photo portraits that he then prints in large format before fly-posting them on building exteriors. Many of his projects, such as *Women Are Heroes*, in which he posted the faces of local women on to the houses of a Rio favela, have been widely reproduced. Arresting though they are (and sometimes politically potent - a 2014 march in New York against police brutality was led by protesters carrying JR-designed banners featuring the eyes of Eric Garner, who was placed in a fatal chokehold by an arresting officer earlier that year), they can seem, at least in their pixelated travels across digital media, to be gravely one-dimensional, bereft of the layers and grace notes in Varda's films.

Characteristically, Varda herself is more generous. Her own interest in public art goes back at least as far as *Mur Murs* (1980), her wonderful exploration of the craft and symbolism of large murals in Los Angeles - many of them in Mexican neighbourhoods - which ranks alongside Manfred Kirchheimer's *Stations of the Elevated* (1981) as one of the most revealing documentaries about outside-the-white-cube American painting. When JR tells Varda how important her film was to him, she reels off a list of his projects - involving older women in Cuba, industrial complexes in France; the Pantheon, a resting place for the great and good in Paris, which he populated with images of the general public - that she loves.



Still, they make for an odd couple. He's in his 30s, she's half a century older. He's tall and jumpy, she's small and struggles to climb staircases. He never allows himself to be photographed without his shades, while she has eyes as beady, mysterious and wise as those of her cats. It's easy to imagine arts broadcasting commissioners bringing them together for an intergenerational powwow, an opposites-attract road movie. Winsome acoustic music and cute, Etsy-ish graphics at the start of the film suggests the worst.

Both participants, however, are shrewd about characterization: JR laughs at the idea of Varda as a "wise grandma"; she describes him as a "spirited young man". What unites them is their shared passion, expressed in different ways, for trying to represent the kind of people who tend, even in a visually saturated era, not to be represented. "My greatest desire," Varda tells JR, "is to meet new faces and photograph them so they don't fall down the holes in my memory."

The France they travel through seems at first sight to be nothing special. They drive to backwaters, to unremarkable factories, to villages that have seen better days. Early on they visit a row of miners' houses that have been slated for demolition and where only one tenant - Jeanine - still lives. Her refusal to budge is part of what attracts them to her, but also her stories that are rich in fond, vivid details; she recalls not only the butter-baguettes her father would eat down the pit, but how delighted she and her siblings would be whenever he returned home and offered them the soot-coated, half eaten leftovers.

in another section, JR and Varda meet a farmer who tells them that, where once 4 or 5 people worked the fields, now it's just him in charge of 2000 acres. "We've grown antisocial," he says. In the hands of documentarians such as Thom Anderson or Allan Sekula and Noël Burch, this would be the cue for a strident critique of anomie and alienation in modern agronomics; here, the farmer says he not only enjoys driving his hi-tech tractor but also likes operating in isolation.

Politics of the left-humanist and gently anarchist persuasion inform almost everything - there is a sketch of an erratically toothed old gent named Pony who creates art using discarded bottle tops and lives in an attractive tent home where he feels free; there's a profile of a woman dairy farmer who mourns the modern fashion to cut off goat horns - nominally this is done to protect them from fight wounds but really to make them "docile and obedient for the milk machines".

On they drive. Past hills and fields, flowers and hay. Through winds and seasons. Favourite motifs - potatoes, postcards, cats - crop up. Conversations trigger other conversations. Each memory opens a doorway to other memories. Varda and Maxine Pozzi Garcia's editing - full of space, visual echoes, ruminative drift - ensures that the film never feels like a compendium of encounters or site-specific dialogues; rather, it helps to deliver those qualities that Varda, speaking to journalists Andrea Meyer in 2009, hopes characterize her films: "A woman working with her intuition and trying to be intelligent. It's like a stream of feelings, intuition, and the joy of discovering things."

As much as it's a journey, *Faces Places* is also a documentation of JR's projects and interventions. It offers a series of thought experiments on

how to conceptualise walls and space more broadly. In *Mur Murs*, Varda describes murals as “living, breathing, seething walls...as talking, wailing, murmuring walls”. Here the walls are seen as facilitators of, rather than barriers to, communication. At one chloride facility the filmmakers visit, the staff reveal that they rarely get to be together because they work different shifts: JR and Varda’s response is to create and display a group poster in which - fleetingly and tantalisingly - they form a collective body.

Elsewhere, photographed fish are elevated to the side of a water tower; children tickle the paper toes of a waitress; Varda’s eyes and feet are stuck to railway carriages. There’s a whimsicality at play here, a palpable sense of JR and Varda as diviners - visionaries capable of animating hard, inert surfaces and drawing out the potential to be tactile and malleable sources of delight. For all that, JR’s work is itself vulnerable to time and weather. One of the most poignant sequences is shot on a beach, where Varda tries to recreate an image of her friend Guy Bourdin; artfully pasted on a fallen German bunker, it is washed away overnight by the tide.

There are other reasons to be wistful or even gloomy in this film. Foremost among them, of course, is Jean-Luc Godard, like JR an artist who prefers to hide behind dark glasses, but also a long-term friend of Varda and her deceased husband Jacques Demy. She cast him alongside Anna Karina in a silent comedy pastiche that appeared as an insert in *Cléo from 5 to 7* (1962) and trumpeted the importance of looking loved ones in the eye. Godard himself fails - or refuses - to do just that in *Faces Places*. The impact, especially in a film so warm and empathetic, is genuinely upsetting.

“You see blurry and you’re happy,” JR tells Varda at one stage. Failing eyesight, which necessitates wince-inducing injections, is one of the through lines. Yet what makes the pair’s collaboration so tart and pleasing is precisely its lack of blurriness. It’s alert to the fragility of social solidarity, but shows how paper, paste and the human imagination can create transient shrines to those virtues. It honours old friends such as Nathalie Sarraute and Henri Cartier-Bresson who have passed away, but also gleefully introduces us to eccentric postman and JR’s centenarian grandmother.

Faces Places is a wonderful exercise in memory and merriment, in instinct and improvisation. “The idea of you directing my toes delights me,” Varda tells JR as he photographs her feet. “I’ll play along.” No filmmaker alive today plays as delightfully as Varda does.

Credits

JR, Agnès Varda	Themselves
Director	JR, Agnès Varda
Written by	JR, Agnès Varda
Photography	Roberto de Angelis, Claire Duguet, Julia Fabry, et al
Editor	Agnès Varda, Martine Pozzi Garcia
Music	Matthieu Chedid
Sound	Matthieu Autin, Marcio Casanova, David Chaulier et al.

France/USA/Switzerland 2017.
93 mins

Another View

“I’m not a mystic. I’m down to earth,” says Agnès Varda. Such is the fullness of my heart after *Faces Places* that the temptation is to hack into the trusty hyperbole cabinet and fling out polysyllabic, high-falutin’ terms for the type of film this is. However, to truly take in her work (this specific one and the sum of a 50-plus year career) is to recognise that it takes more than one person to make something brimming with human goodness. To deify Varda is to fall into a trap that she herself has side-stepped. Better to follow her example, better to run with demystification.

Cinema has always been a medium that worships the top dog with only drops of recognition trickling down to the anonymous armies whose assists are integral. Directors are more often than not content to bask in their perceived roles as superhuman magicians. *Faces Places* is a subtly self-reflexive documentary that swims against this tide, inviting audiences to see that filmmaking is a process of having conversations with people, and enveloping each individual and their private creativity within the wider collaborative process. Art is a form of social work or, rather, it can be with the right people at the helm.

Those people are Varda and her unlikely kindred spirit, the French photographer and muralist JR. They make an endearing and striking duo – an odd couple forged before a word of dialogue has even been spoken. At the time of filming, she is 88, while he is 33. Varda is short and roundish,

with her trademark white bowl-cut fringed with amber. A lifelong lover of colour, her outfits are bright. JR is lanky, bald and styled like a blind jazz musician, all in black, complete with black hat and black shades. He is teased by Varda about the perma-present sunglasses, and this low key ribbing paves the way for as emotionally heavy a moment as this playful film has to deal. Eyes – what they see, who they see and how these visions land – are the lenses which connect to the filmmaker’s soul.

Faces Places, and its French title *Visages Villages*, aptly bears out Varda’s ‘down-to-earth’ mission. For these two elements make up the film’s core ingredient list: faces and places. A sprightly narrated overview delivered by the two filmmakers explains how they were both magnetically drawn to one another. They meet, bond, play and eat chocolate éclairs. Then they hit the road in a van equipped with a giant mobile poster printer. They search for people to photograph. Each subject is then blown up and printed out big enough to paste onto the nearest empty wall.

Every face-owner is given space to talk about the particulars of their life and pass comment on how it feels to see a giant image of themselves, or a loved one, looking out across their locale. In a village in Northern France, Jeannine, a woman who refuses to leave the row of miners’ cottages where her childhood memories live, begins to cry. A shy waitress in Bonnieux, Southern France is severely weirded out when her image goes viral. There is no narrative agenda to angle what is happening and how it is affecting people. It is just happening and it is being documented.

These social encounters are interspersed with conversations between the two leads, who travel into each other as they travel around the country. The intimacies that the bond between Varda and JR brings to the surface give a lightweight creative social project something twisting beneath, the breath of death on a warm summer’s day. To those familiar with the mighty Varda, this access to her inner world is precious. There is such tenderness in both the stark existentialism (she is looking forward to death because “that’s that”) and the giddy joys (miming the ringing of a bell as she sings along to the disco track, ‘Ring My Bell’). Watching feels like stealing up on a rare beast relaxing in their natural habitat.

Of course, the film is not so guileless as this. It is carefully scripted to transport one high into the land of others and below into an individual spirit. Varda’s strength as a documentarian is her connective thinking, previously most powerfully expressed in *The Gleaners and I*, in which she dignifies social outcasts by drawing parallels between their lives and the subjects of old paintings. In *Faces Places*, she turns this sideways understanding onto her own life, coaxed by JR. *The Beaches of Agnès* from 2008 is nominally Varda’s big autobiography, but this more streamlined work distills in a disarmingly breezy fashion the DNA of who she is as a human, as an artist, and as a humane artist.

Sophie Monks Kaufman: Little White Lies

Our next screening: Friday April 5th, 7.30pm Good Time (USA 2017, Cert 15)

Robert Pattinson became a teenage heartthrob between 2008 & 2012 in the *Twilight* films, since when he’s arguably been trying to shed himself of the image. In *Good Time*, he goes for broke, playing a petty crook whose plans for a successful bank robbery go just about as wrong as they could and leave him needing to raise bail cash after his brother is arrested. Shot on the grungy streets of New York and capturing some of the atmosphere of iconic films such as *Taxi Driver* and *The French Connection* (though with nothing like the violence), *Good Time* takes us on a wild, thrilling, breathless ride through the night-time city.