

# I

## CHAPTER



LEARNING THE LANGUAGE

# THE GLEANERS AND I

## The Beauty of Observing

Agnès Varda's *The Gleaners and I* explores the tradition of gleaning, both the legalized practice of searching for left-over food from fields after a harvest and the new urban gleaning which includes salvaging food and wares from city markets and trash dumpsters. This tradition is widely known through 19th century paintings of women gleaning, as in Jean François Millet's *Les Glaneurs* (1857) and Jules Breton's *La Glaneuse* (1877).

*People live off of our leftovers.  
People feed themselves with what  
we throw away. And I say 'we'  
because it's you, it's me  
— it's everybody.*

Agnès Varda

From France's rural fields to urban markets, Varda meets and documents the lives of gleaners of all sorts. Some glean out of necessity while others glean as a lifestyle choice or in rebellion against capitalism and waste. At first, these diverse people, their life conditions and their reasons for gleaning seem unrelated; but, over the course of the film, Varda encourages viewers to connect motives one might expect for gleaning, such as poverty and adversity, to more unexpected ones, such as resourcefulness, tradition, art and activism.



Stills from the movie  
*The Gleaners and I* (2000)



*The Gleaners and I* seeks to recast both gleaning and gleaners in a sympathetic light, humanizing groups of gleaners and redefining what, and most importantly who, is gleaning. Her compassion and cinematic techniques encourage viewers to listen to and join her conversation with the gleaners, rather than judge them from a safe distance. She gently encourages us to open our eyes and minds, to acknowledge and accept a class of people that society trains us to ignore.



*By questioning our ritualized ways of experiencing the world, Varda asks us to reconsider our position as citizens but, more importantly, as living, breathing and feeling human beings.*

Romain Chareyron

# REASSEMBLING

## Putting the Pieces Together

We also found that Trinh T. Minh-ha's first film, *Reassemblage* (1982), fully encompasses this understanding of overturning conventions traditionally employed in anthropological filmmaking. Rather than a work of ethnographic cinema, *Reassemblage* is better understood as anti-ethnography, a film that reflexively dismantles the objectification and exoticization of otherness.

"I do not intend to speak about, just speak nearby" - in this statement, from which we borrowed the title of our project, Minh-ha refers to her position as a visitor vis-à-vis the villagers she met, and discloses her position as an un-authoritative narrator.

**So, how can we turn reality into fiction, and  
how can we make it accurate and respectful?**

***When you decide to speak nearby,  
rather than speak about, the  
first thing you need to do is to  
acknowledge the possible gap  
between you and those who  
populate your film.***

Trinh T. Minh-ha

Society has constantly tried to organize humans into labeled boxes, depending on what our habits and customs are, and increasing this barrier between what is considered "nice" and "good", and what is "bad" and "strange". We want to eliminate these stereotypes and be able to understand how we can give voice to these so called marginalized groups and shed light on their invisibility.

We would like to take inspiration not only from Min-ha and Varda, as both gave new meanings to what a documentary film should

be, and how we should represent people overall, but also Chimamanda Adichie, who helped us greatly in the understanding of the effects that labels can have on how we perceive ourselves and others.

Most of us fall into the trap referred by Chimamanda Adichie as the *single story*. The *single story* is a phenomenon that occurs when we associate a certain group of people to only one preconceived idea of them, which is most of the time negative.

This happens the most when we talk about marginalized groups or minorities, because the media forces this detrimental and pitiful

***The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete.***

Chimamanda Adichie



narrative down our throats, hindering people into thinking that these groups of people cannot be more than that image we create. As we see in *The Gleaners and I*, stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories can be used to dispossess and to malign, but they can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity.

The problem with the *single story* is that it persists on emphasizing the most undignified characteristics of people. Even if those attributes are valid and sometimes true, it takes away the possibility of having so many other qualities to them. This constant individualization of people is what continuously highlights our differences instead of bringing together our similarities.



Still from the movie  
*Reassemblage* (1982)

# CHANGING THE NARRATIVE

## Waking Up the Senses

In an interview discussing *The Gleaners and I* with the film critic Chris Darke, Varda said:

*the DV camera and the Avid are tools I use to get closer to people more easily and to shoot on my own.*

The camera allows Varda to hide herself and discover more details about her subjects, without seeming intrusive or overwhelming. The small sized camera, compared with other big cameras and blinding lights, allows a different type of connection between the filmmaker and the subjects being filmed.

Varda achieves an unique way of storytelling whilst simultaneously depicting modern-day gleaning in France and filming herself - acknowledging her own vulnerability. We can evidently see that the director explores the narrative with the intention to “glean” memories and events through the use of the DV camera, not only creating a connection with the act of gleaning but also with the viewers.



*This idea of becoming the “Other” finds a visual translation within the documentary in the scenes where Varda, holding the DV camera with one hand, films her other hand.*

Romain Chareyron

This type of involvement as the main vehicle for perception perfectly describes what haptic vision encompasses. In this sense, haptic vision works as the “other side” of perception, delivering knowledge that is felt rather than thought. As Martine Beugnet discloses,

*(...) whereas optic images set discrete, self-standing elements of figuration in illusionistic spaces, haptic images dehierarchize perception, drawing attention back to the tactile details and the material surface where figure and ground start to fuse.*

Haptic vision grants the physical awareness of every spectator’s body while being sensually involved with(in) the fiction, calling for a radically new approach to images, as they no longer appear to convey a single, pre-determined meaning or truth, but rather invite the viewer to experience the images (and other senses involved) through what is called “sensuous memory”.

Still from the movie  
*The Gleaners and I* (2000)





Deriving from our motto, our project does not stem from stereotypes but instead from the stowing of visual, auditory and tactile elements that make up the day to day life and experiences of a person from a marginalized group whilst building her story and acknowledging her culture and what represents her. Throughout the room where the project is displayed, we allow the unearthing of these characteristics in a more intimate and personal way that is defined by these haptic and sensorial components that unfold deeper memories and meanings.

*Although cinema is an audiovisual medium, synesthesia, as well as haptic visuality, enables the viewer to experience cinema as multisensory.*

Laura U. Marks

Just like we see in *The Gleaners and I*, the viewer will not come into contact with the elements showcased using a set of external and pre-established concepts, but through their own memories and recollections, disrupting any attempt of fetishization and hostility. We want to emphasize the idea of roaming exploration that Varda depicts in the film and create a less linear path, not only allowing the viewers to take their time wandering but also allowing each person to come to their own conclusions about the identity of the person portrayed in our project.





*The use of haptic vision thus gives access to another dimension of perception, as it strives to create a continuum between the spectator and the images through a feeling of mutual recognition.*

Romain Chareyron

Still from the movie  
*The Gleaners and I* (2000)



