

Some Viewing Notes for *Faces Places* (2017)
directed by Agnès Varda and JR; produced by Rosalie Varda

A note to sensitive viewers: about 35 minutes into the film is a short scene of a medical procedure of the eye (it appears right after the fish market scene)

The original name of the film in French is *Visages Villages*, and the play of near rhyme of both the French and English titles help us to see the theme of the connection between the identity of a place and the people who inhabit it.

Matthieu Chédid (also known for the soundtrack for *The Triplets of Bellville*) composed the music. Consider how parallels the film's tone and evolves with the "plot", moving from whimsical to more somber as the film moves on and she works to connect more specifically with her past. The soundtrack ends up mirroring the trajectory of the trip, as it starts out with no itinerary, a spontaneous art adventure, but evolves into a kind of pilgrimage for Agnès Varda.

Consider how the film establishes the playfulness of the initial period of Varda and JR getting to know one another, and how their relationship evolves over the course of the film. What specific scenes highlight for you how their relationship evolves?

As her friendship with JR grows, Varda finds herself referring back to past friendships and creative collaborations. In case you're not already familiar with the famous friends and colleagues referred to in the film:

"Jacques" and Jacques' death: Jacques Demy, French New Wave director (best known for *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg*) + Varda's spouse for almost 30 years

Jean-Luc Godard: good friend, French New Wave director (famous for *Breathless*)

Guy Bourdin: well-known French art and fashion photographer

Henri Cartier-Bresson: photographer who pioneered "street photography"

Martine Franck Cartier-Bresson: photographer, spouse of Henri

→ The only one of these friends still alive at the time of filming is Jean-Luc Godard—watch for his silent cameo toward the end of the movie.

Those not yet familiar with contemporary artist JR will learn about his large-scale installation photo work in this film, and may also be aware of his recent *TIME* magazine cover *The Gun in America*, a photo mural which now hangs in the National Portrait Gallery in DC. Learn more about that piece here: <http://time.com/longform/guns-america/>

The duo's focus for community art projects is on mostly working-class, forgotten spaces, or edifices in transition. Many of them are falling apart, under construction, or about to be demolished. What do such surfaces and places seem to symbolize? Why does Varda especially seem to want to focus on such places?

Varda claims of her 60-year film career, “Chance has been my best assistant.” That seems to be true in this film, as well.

On the film’s composition, consider critic Joan M. West’s astute observation: “The delight-provoking experience of viewing this movie resembles that of looking at an ornate crazy quilt. Both are works of art composed from segments of varying color, form, texture, and material joined in no set pattern. Both are distinctive in the amount of decorative embellishment overlaying not only the linkage between segments, but within each individual piece as well.” Consider the different “shapes” of pieces visually included here: still photos, time-lapse images, stop-action segments—all contributing to the “crazy quilt” effect.

Note, too, the film’s recurring motif of time passing: consider how we see it not just in the discussion of Varda’s aging, but also in the types of technology and work represented, the cultural changes and continuities they mark in their photos, and the effects of the ocean on one of their installations.

As a member of “The French New Wave,” Varda is known for her conscious employment of the “*caméra-stylo*” (camera pen) approach. At the time, this was a liberating theory of liberating image from a pre-arranged narrative in order to use visuals as a “language,” with the flexibility and creative possibility for meaning-making in the process itself—in the way a novelist uses written language. This approach also allows the subjects being filmed to shape the end result, rather than the director forcing the players into a specific role. This concept also promotes “auteur” directors who are shaping the visual artwork through participation in multiple parts of the filmmaking process: writing, directing, cinematography, editing. Consider how this film also uses that approach, too, because of its subject, how it functions much like written memoir might.

About the film’s ending: critic Wang Muyan says “A bit of regret gives the film more color.” What do you think?