

AGNÈS

The Frida Zinema

# VARDA et DEMY

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# The Colorful Rejection of the Gender Binary in the World of Jacques Demy

By Brian Ly



In a film movement deeply defined by the way its films radically redefine the medium itself through self-contemplative techniques, overtly political thematic concerns, and non-linear storytelling, Jacques Demy ostensibly feels like a director operating in the traditional mode of Hollywood filmmaking, as someone who demonstrates a deep love for technicolor, the craft of the musical, and traditional genres such as noir and melodrama. Whereas his films may not seem inherently confrontational in isolation, a clearer picture of Demy's life is

painted when viewed as a larger tapestry that encompasses his entire oeuvre. What we see is a man quietly fighting his own battle of gender nonconformity, not in the rejection of his perceived identity as someone who fit heterosexual and cisgender norms, which belied the queer identity he largely kept private throughout his career and public persona, but as someone who was deeply aware of the fact that he was an anomaly in a heteronormative society defined by the marginalization of gender nonconforming individuals. He sought to present a world that celebrated this diversity, even if it existed as an otherworldly, heightened fantasy, a sort of reprieve from reality that found

itself to be a safe haven for queer individuals, where they felt seen and represented, even if not explicitly, in a world that made sense to them. His radicalism is not an aggressive nor abrasive one but rather one that gently rejects the status quo, remixing the traditional gender binary through his own version of queer coding, slightly more expressed yet not confrontational, adapting the cinematic language of the tradition of the film medium to modernity. Though his approach was very different, his filmmaking clearly manifests itself strongly alongside his contemporaries with a shared goal in advancing film as an art form.

maximizing his minimal use of sound with an impactful score that is more subtle in nature yet punctuates the emotional beats with a certain syncopation that matches the dynamism of the camerawork of the film, creating a film that absolutely looks and feels like a representative film of the French New Wave, yet its DNA is so clearly rooted in classic cinema, recontextualized for a new generation. Rather than the greater social and moral ambiguities that typically define film noir, Demy is more interested in human connections and their relationship dynamics within society, with the film more focused on longing, yearning, and loneliness between individuals rather than grander romantic gestures. We see in *Lola*, though not necessarily overtly confronting gender, a true protagonist unperturbed by the default construct of patriarchal norms occupying a more traditionally male role archetype in the way she moves through the film, not as a femme fatale who merely exists as a provocateur or plot device to advance the narrative but as a woman with her own agency and purpose.



Self-described as a "musical without music," *Lola* announces itself as a rather vibrant and rhythmic film, despite quite literally lacking in both color and proper musical numbers, save for a single theme song. While it certainly feels like a rather conventional French New Wave in terms of style and thematic concerns, we see the beginnings of Demy's auteurist tendencies. Not to allow itself to be defined by its limited budget or production quality as the debut work of a first-time feature filmmaker, it echoes the film noir tradition with its harsh contrast of dark and light as a form of defining its color, echoing the evocative worlds conjured up by the great directors of the silent era, while



Demy's career are his musicals, *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg* and *The Young Girls of Rochefort*, typically regarded as some of the crowning achievements of the musical genre as a whole. We see color introduced in *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg* while still largely concerned with the same thematic tendencies of longing and melancholy, trading the contrasting darks and lights for a very particular color language that defined every object and setting, from the bright optimism in the vibrant colors of the umbrellas in direct contrast with the bluer, more melancholic rainy backdrop. The film maintains and almost leans entirely into its heightened sensibility with a sung-through musical structure, with the words of the songs directly in consonance with the musical score, and the boundaries of diegesis are entirely evaporated as the characters entirely give way to their feelings and emotional expression. Forced to hide their true feelings, it mirrors the queer experience, and the form of the musical exists as the only conduit for free self-expression. Their chance encounter many years later only serves as a sore reminder of what could have been, a poetic representation of longing. It's this feeling of being arrested by your own personal circumstances and societal expectations and living inauthentically that gives this film such a strong, lasting impact on those who share in this reality of repression, loneliness, and self-denial.





In direct tonal contrast, *The Young Girls of Rochefort* is a much brighter and more exuberant film, defined by its visual opulence and vibrancy in colors, and it's become something of a camp classic with its ebullient energy, flamboyant visual quality, and heightened sensibility, yet the film itself is still deeply concerned with this societal expectation of heterosexual love in patriarchal society. The twins, while distinctly independent as personalities and with a strong sense of agency, demonstrate a certain duality and parallelism in their dress and movement, as well as their shared living situation, a seemingly perfect life absent of male involvement. The programming of patriarchy is still deeply embedded within them, however, and the girls are actually more concerned with their own aspirations in life than any fulfillment that a man would bring to them, so much as more of the conduit they would provide in the existing social structure, which proves to ultimately be inessential for the girls to follow their dreams. That isn't to say they might not find love along the way, but it's by no means the destination, and though they may have initially sought their one true love or provider in order to reach their goals, it's through the support of their community, the fellow musicians, dancers, and townspeople that have become part of their daily lives in Rochefort, that they are able to realize their dreams. Human relationships are presented

as a series of encounters and separations, people we meet along the way that each contribute to who we are and who we are destined to become. In its rejection of the traditional romantic resolution, the film defines the journey of life not as the fairytale ending that would define many heterosexual romantic stories, but rather really more about a sort of empowerment that comes with the pursuit of purpose, aspiration, and human connection that makes this film such an enduring classic in queer film culture, both in terms of its camp aesthetic and celebration of the chosen family.



Speaking of fairy tales, Jacques Demy adapts *Donkey Skin* to present a purely fantastical world where a princess evades a forced incestuous marriage with a king by disguising herself with a magical donkey skin, allowing her to shift identities both to escape her fate and to occupy different roles, and while not literally about changing genders, it certainly has shades of exploring the fluidity of identity, physical representation, and perception within society. As a pure visual product, the film itself is a complete psychedelic experience with its camp sensibilities on full display, from the experimental techniques for special effects and the saturated technicolor to make the storybook

aesthetic truly pop and present the world as a kinetic, animated living object in itself. While at its core the film is centered around a heterosexual romance, it echoes Demy's recurring preoccupations surrounding self-expression, agency, and identity, all of which encompass the personal experience rather than the imposition upon oneself by another. He seeks not necessarily to dismantle the patriarchy through systemic change but rather to highlight the normalization of the marginalization of individuals who deviate from a supposed standard behavior, where this rejection of diversity denies the reality that people are ultimately complex individuals that span a

spectrum and navigate through the world in unique ways and cannot be delineated into boxes, nor should they be, and instead should be embraced for who they truly are to live life however they so desire. The transformation is not a rejection of the self so much as it's a tacit acknowledgment of the multiplicity of identity, not defined purely by a single role or shifts in status from royal to fugitive and back, that we can occupy many different roles and no single one quite defines the entirety of our existence.

This very concept is perhaps tackled most overtly in a later work, *Lady Oscar*, based on the Japanese manga *The Rose of Versailles*, a bona fide queer classic with deep ties to the Takarazuka Revue, an all-female musical theater that's a seminal part of Japanese queer culture. It's directly in the narrative about a woman who was raised as a man to serve Queen Marie Antoinette, and though this was not necessarily by choice, it in itself isn't necessarily an invalid part of identity so much as it becomes a facet of her own gender expression based on how she naturally experiences the world. Even within the world of the fabulous French Revolution-era court life, patriarchy and heteronormativity very much dictate the social hierarchy, and *Lady Oscar* is very much an anomaly on the basis of her upbringing and presentation in society. She navigates her own personal sexuality and gender expression within a society that simultaneously respects and ridicules her, and it naturally creates a lived reality where she truly has to cautiously approach every personal relationship and find genuine connection, an ever-classical queer challenge in heteronormative society. Though she maintains a high role in society due to her proximity to the Queen, it's a tenuous position where she is valued for what she can offer rather than accepted for who she is. She finds her safe space between the Queen, as someone who is truly a close



friend and sees her for who she is as an individual, as well as her childhood friend Andre, who she initially has a falling out with due to his unrequited feelings for her but later accepts as someone who truly sees her for who she is, both for her masculine and feminine sides, rather than as a fetish object, as in the case for the nobleman Hans Axel Von Fersen, the lover of the Queen who is captivated by Oscar's masculinity yet sees her more as a challenge to be conquered, to tame her and draw out her femininity, so to speak, or as a target out of convenience when he faces resistance in his courtship with the Queen. While the film once again concerns heterosexual romance, it's perhaps the perfect encapsulation of Demy's continued preoccupation with viewing the world through the lens of gender nonconformity, always aware of and working within the confines of mainstream society while trying to carve out your spaces by which you live life on your own terms.

There becomes a fairly clear emphatic statement that Demy rejects the gender binary, not from the level of systemic opposition that drove the political philosophies of many of his contemporaries, but more from social normalization in recognizing that the lived realities of queer individuals are valid and should be celebrated. He views camp not as purely an aesthetic and drag and costume play not as just performance but rather as windows into the mind of an individual that bring out their playful side and creativity. It's in his films that he creates these magical, heightened realities that act as safe spaces for self-expression, characterized by vivid colors, the kinetic movement of the human body through dance, and decorative, dizzying costumes that aren't worn as masks to hide one's true self but rather as tools of empowerment that allow people to truly feel like themselves with all of their complicated layers in the multiplicity of identity for all of its diversity, fluidity, and complexity that define the human experience.







by den McLean | @jenni.flower

# Cinema, Counterculture, Love (...and Lies)

by Charlotte Brungardt (@dan.the.dancer)



Set in Hollywood in 1968 in the days surrounding the assassination of Robert Kennedy, Agnès Varda's 1969 film *Lions Love (...and Lies)* follows the day-to-day life of countercultural hippie icons, playing caricatured versions of themselves, Jerry Ragni, Jim Pado (actors and singers best known for co-writing the musical *Hair*) and Viva, a former Warhol "superstar." The three lounge around in a kitschy rental house, waiting for stardom to come to them, albeit making very little effort towards this task.

Joining this central trio is Shirley Clarke, the groundbreaking independent documentarian, who within the film has traveled from her home in New York to negotiate a contract with a major studio. While Clarke is likewise playing a version of herself, though far less of a caricature than the protagonists, the autofictional resonances with Varda's own life and career are unmistakable to anyone aware of her experiences living and working in California. Shirley's character thus becomes a dual figure, signifying both Varda and Clarke, combined into a figure of independent filmmaking (particularly a female figure), who is displaced and marginalized in the mainstream cinema industry.

Agnès Varda's time in Hollywood was troubled, and cut a stark contrast with the experience of her husband, fellow French filmmaker Jacques Demy. Perhaps some of this is due to the relative accessibility of Demy's films. Despite their offbeat treatment of subject matter and technical innovations, *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg* and *The Young Girls of Rochefort*, are both recognizably musicals, and further, in dialogue with the tradition of the Hollywood studio musical.

In 1967, Varda moved to California to join Demy, who had secured a contract with Columbia Pictures to distribute his 1969 film *Model Shop*. While Varda was also initially approached to head a Hollywood film at Columbia, the project, a film about hippies called *Peace and Love*, was ill-fated, as the studio refused to give her final cut. With a fraction of the budget that her husband worked with, and could have been hers, Varda returned to this subject matter, but combined it with these experiences to create a whimsical, experimental, yet distinctly acerbic record of countercultural malaise.

Of all the films Varda created during her time in California, such as *Mur Murs* (1981) and *Uncle*

*Yanco* (1968), *Lions Love* is perhaps the least critically acclaimed and the most alienating. The film's frequent use of intertextual references and self-reflexivity is not only a diverting cinematic technique, it functions as social critique. Even as Hollywood of the 1960s, in its attempts to target a younger demographic, embraced the aesthetics of counterculture, real structural change was non-existent, as evidenced by the continued exclusion and suppression of female directors. The unique experiences of Varda and Clarke, two of the few working women directors of the 1960s, both of whom were often relegated outside of the commercial film industry, even as other (male) stars of independent cinema movements moved onto bigger projects and budgets, are foregrounded within the film's assemblage of countercultural movements and ideas.

Even within her "native" countercultural movement, the French New Wave, Agnes Varda was marginalized. First, and likely foremost, Varda was the lone woman working within the Nouvelle Vague. Further, she was one of the few members of the movement who never worked for *Cahiers du Cinema*, the influential film journal in which many directors like Godard and Truffaut started as critics.



Additionally, Varda often expanded her explorations of the image-form beyond narrative cinema, and into her photography and documentary work, art forms often implicitly judged as "lesser."

Granted, these distinctions (other than gender), are not unique to Varda within the French New Wave. As a result, some film scholars do not even classify her as such, rather, associating her with Alain Resnais and Chris Marker as a member of the "Groupe Rive Gauche," which has been alternately classified as a submovement of the larger French New Wave, or a small group positioned in opposition to it.

It is this potential for opposition which is most interesting in the context of Varda's career, and *Lions Love*, in particular. The argument posits that while the *Cahiers* boys club focused largely on interpersonal angst among the French male middle class, the films of the Rive Gauche devoted deeper attention to transnational sociopolitical themes, particularly within the essay film practice they pioneered. The countercultural explosion of the 1960s was likewise divided, between those engaged in collective action, participating in protests and movement-building, and those engaged in aesthetics, who focused instead on individualist "enlightenment" and the consumption of art, fashion, and music. Hollywood's response and adoption of counterculture followed suit, largely conforming to its individualist narrative traditions. These films spoke to the spirit of the movement, but rarely engaged with its underlying ideologies.

This contradiction is embodied within the (in)action of the primary trio of *Lions Love*. The real action is taking place outside of their home. Despite their countercultural leanings, they are effectively insulated from tangible attempts at change, watching through the window of their television, whether these attempts at change are mainstream political campaigns, such as that of Robert Kennedy, or more militant movements such as the Black Panthers, who Varda herself would document during her time in California. This documentary, originally planned to be broadcast on French television, was eventually pulled from the lineup due to concerns over its radical politics.

The fictional and real world of *Lions Love* eventually collapses entirely in a fourth-wall rupturing monologue delivered by Clarke to Varda, and us. Its "legitimacy", whether

scripted or unplanned, is impossible to determine. Either way, the effect is the same, to remove the artifice of the cinema-viewing experience to reveal the frank discontentment of the women behind and in front of the camera. As the scene continues, Varda takes Clarke's place, wearing her clothes, and acts out the film's emotional climax, a suicide attempt.

The meaning underpinning this unfulfilled death is deliberately ambiguous, but it certainly speaks to a frustration with the (seemingly) insurmountable power of the status quo, and therefore, the potential that art, for all its beauty and power, is ultimately a futile effort. The French New Wave certainly changed cinema, that much is indisputable, but did it actually manage to change the world? And if it didn't, what hope is there for any art at all?





## The Lost English Dub of Rochefort

by: Kaylei Singer | @hey.kalei

Look, the great film *The Young Girls of Rochefort* needs no introduction. With powerhouse collaborators like Catherine Deneuve, Michel Legrand, Gene Kelly, and George Chakiris, the film has stood the test of time and cemented itself as one of the most important films ever made, with many filmmakers like Greta Gerwig and Damien Chazelle citing it as inspiration for their own work. The film even made it into the Criterion Collection, an ongoing series of films that have been carefully restored and curated. So, with a film as iconic as this one, you'd expect everything about it and its production to be known, right? Well, not exactly.

When the film was first brought over to the U.S., the original French-language version was not what was shown in theaters. Instead it was dubbed into English, a common practice for foreign-language films at the time. However what made this film particularly special among other dubbed films was that the musical numbers were remade shot-for-shot in English, no mismatched mouth-flaps needed. During that time period, having an English dub was often an obligation in order for films to be commercially viable in English-speaking countries. Because of this, Demy and Legrand actually made an effort to translate each musical number into English. Unfortunately, the dubbed release was a flop in the U.S., as was the television broadcast version in 1972, so there was no official home release.

Fast forward to last year: all that publicly remained of this English dub were short YouTube clips uploaded by the channel Rochefort Clips, both of which were from the television broadcast of the film. Naturally, the quality was terrible, but it was evidence enough that the English dub still existed. Then, seemingly all at once, fans of the film began to unearth more bits and pieces of this lost version. One fan managed to get their hands on a 47-minute reel, also in poor quality, like the YouTube clips. A different fan also learned that the New York Public Library had archived the television airing; however, due to copyright law, the film couldn't be digitized and shown.

Like the character Maxence searching for his dream girl, many fans of Rochefort still search for the complete English-dubbed version of the film. This search also proves just how important film preservation is in an increasingly digital age. While this particular edition may not be everyone's cup of tea, it is still an interesting piece of both Demy's history, cinema's history, and a testament to just how impactful Rochefort has become all these years later.





# Where to Begin with Agnes Varda: an Introductory Guide

by Haley Harmicar



## 1. *Cléo from 5 to 7* (1962)

Varda's most accessible film and an essential entry to the French New Wave movement. We follow a singer around Paris as she waits for the results of a potentially life-changing biopsy. Varda explores beauty and mortality with a feminist approach as Cléo goes from entrenched in her own image to liberated through human connection. This was my first Varda film and I remember being taken by the kind, sensitive nature of her storytelling.

## 2. *The Gleaners and I* (2000)

After *CLÉO FROM 5 TO 7* makes you fall in love with Agnes Varda the filmmaker, *THE GLEANERS AND I* will make you fall in love with Agnes Varda the human. It's a documentary about gleaning potatoes and turnips in the French countryside, capitalism and the excess waste it produces, aging, digital filmmaking, and whatever else the viewer may take (or should I say "glean") from it. Varda has an immense love for her subjects that makes every second of this film entrancing.

## 3. *One Sings, the Other Doesn't* (1977)

If you love the enchanting musical films of Jacques Demy, you must watch Varda's one and only musical— a vibrant, feminist exploration of a beautiful female friendship. Films like these set Varda apart from the rest— she had a fighting spirit and so much heart. It's a worth a watch just on the basis that she wrote the songs herself!



*Not only were Agnès Varda and Jacques Demy undeniable standouts among an emerging French New Wave film movement, they were a beloved cinematic power couple. Demy drew from fairy tales and classic Hollywood musicals to create a whimsical and romantic cinematic world, while Varda blended fiction and documentary to craft distinctively empathetic and beautifully personal films. The Frida Zinema is dedicating our twelfth issue to celebrating the combined bodies of work of these two legendary artists.*



*The Frida Cinema is a gathering place for movie lovers of all kinds. The lobby is a place of film discussion and friendly gathering, a venue of its own where perspectives from all backgrounds are welcomed and engaged with. We have started the Frida Zinema to replicate this experience in printed form. We welcome all who love film to submit their artwork, writings, and thoughts, and to connect to other artists in a space of creativity and understanding. We love films, and we love people who love films. Please, share your thoughts and artwork, and enjoy the ones within.*

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