



# Talkhouse



**Kirsten Johnson (*Cameraperson*) Talks with Agnès Varda for *The Talkhouse Film Podcast***

AGNÈS VARDA: So what is the name of your site?

KIRSTEN JOHNSON: Talkhouse Film.

VARDA: Talk on film?

JOHNSON: Talkhouse Film. *Le maison de parole*.

VARDA: Talkhouse.

JOHNSON: Talkhouse Film.

VARDA: Talkhouse Film.

JOHNSON: Yeah.

VARDA: Better know in what house we are.

JOHNSON: Well, you're in the house of Agnès.

VARDA: Not really.

JOHNSON: No? It's a temporary house?

VARDA: Yes, you know, New York is so frightening for me.

JOHNSON: Why?

VARDA: Too big. High skyscrapers, so many people together very tight. I mean, I love what's happening here. The first day I arrived, we went to the Met and then we went to MoMA. I love the art that is offered here. But I wouldn't be able to live here. And I love a

lot of people, so I come to meet people and to see films and discuss cinema. And now, in the gallery, I mean, it's a treat for me, to be in a New York gallery and a big gallery.

JOHNSON: It's a big gallery.

VARDA: Yes.

JOHNSON: We're here at 66th, right off of Fifth Avenue. It's a big deal.

VARDA: Well, they have a huge gallery in Los Angeles. And that's the second, like the side gallery, because it's smaller here.

JOHNSON: But it's New York.

VARDA: And so, I was offered to be here, and it's very strange because it reminds me, the houses where we're living in Belgium, these narrow houses with the stairs like this, all the way through. And it touches me very much. And they gave me four rooms. Have you been around?

JOHNSON: Yes. I went to the beach.

VARDA: Yes.

JOHNSON: I mean, you have this amazing—

VARDA: The seaside.

JOHNSON: I wanted to take my shoes off. The image is incredible. You want to step into the water and you want to put your feet in the sand.

VARDA: Because I think it's a theme that touches everybody. People love (or not) beaches. But they know what is a seaside. They know that the seaside represents the whole world — the sky, the ocean, and the earth, the sand. And it's like expressing where is the world. And with that nonstop little noise, because this is not about tempest, this is not about sailing or swimming or doing any kind of sport. It's about a calm sea, a calm ocean, just a very, very discreet wave ending on the sand. And that's a landscape that touches me a lot. But I know that also people feel that, too.

JOHNSON: But usually, I would say I know what to do when I get to the beach, which is take off my shoes and walk to the edge, which is absolutely what that piece makes me want to do. I almost did it. [Laughs] You want to get into the video. But I'm really curious about what you just said about this house, this gallery, this building reminding you of — set in the past, because I feel like your work is always about time travel and the way that we relate to time.

VARDA: I have a nice relationship with time, because the past is here, you know? I've spent time, if I have something of my past, I'll just make it, nowadays, I make it now and here. So in my show, you know, like .. Did you see the thing about the terrace picture?

JOHNSON: Yes, yes.

VARDA: And you see that photo I took like a snapshot. And then, every snapshot is so much raising questions: Where are these people? Why did they come at that point, at that place, at that day? Did they know each other? Did they [go] there by chance? And it became a strange desire to imagine what could have happened before that snapshot. So I made it up. It's totally wrong, maybe.

JOHNSON: It is totally wrong, and yet totally right, right?

VARDA: It is, I don't know. I just ask some people to put, to wear clothes looking like in the photo. I found an old lady, a man, a baby. We took the elements, but then I wrote that little story, with family having a meeting – they meet, they kiss for hours, etc. But who knows? I made it up so that it became the photo. And then I love what is before and what is after. And then, the father - I hope it's the father – says, "I want to be in the picture." So there is a little continuation of the image that I stole that day. And I like very much the idea that we can reinvent an image. We can reinvent the past. We can make it that it makes sense for me today. And I have no nostalgia about what happened weeks ago, months ago and decades ago.

JOHNSON: Well, that's one of the things that I was really wanting to ask you. I mean, when I look at that piece, which is a still photograph against your moving, invented, performative version of it, those two things next to each other, what I think about is permission. Like, your willingness to give yourself permission to reinvent any photo, to do the *mise en scène* of something that happened. When did you start feeling such a sense of permission in the world, and does it keep expanding?

VARDA: Why should be forbidden of anything? I never ask for permission. I mean, I made my first film with fishermen. I ask them to be with me. I ask them to allow me to film them. I told them the story, which was fake, because I asked that man to pretend to be the husband of this one. I remade, in a way, the families with people, neighbors. But they played a game with me. So you know, recently, to go to now, I recently achieve a documentary that I co-directed with the artist JR.

JOHNSON: Yes.

VARDA: We did that. We met people and then they allowed us to be with them and they allowed us to put them into the game. And then, we ended up with huge images of them after I made them express themselves, speak. So it's a real documentary because we are careful about what they are, what they want to say. But also, we play our game, as being artists, making strange images or enjoying that people we meet becomes actors of our dreams. So the thing is that as I said, reinventing your reality doesn't kill reality. They

exist, people exist, they have their own life, their problems, but we play with that. And the same thing, I play with my past, I can take something out, bring it here, enjoy to remember it, and mostly, re-read it differently.

JOHNSON: Yeah, yeah.

VARDA: So we all do that all the time. But I made it as a shape of art, because like here, you know... You have seen the triptych, right?

JOHNSON: Yes.

VARDA: So it's a quiet scene, like a Flemish painting in the kitchen. They don't speak. They do things. But I always question myself, on a screen, in a theater: "Where do they go when they go off the screen?" You know, they pass the line of the screen, where do they go?

JOHNSON: Where? Yes.

VARDA: And when do they come back? And so, I wanted to open the screen and say, "OK, I'm curious. They go there. That's where they go."

JOHNSON: Yeah.

VARDA: But it's endless because what is after that?

JOHNSON: Yeah, and I love the moments where you've got the interior scene, where they're inside peeling apples, and then on each side is the beach and there's a woman walking along the beach. And then, suddenly, she just comes in through the door in the middle screen with a piece of kelp in her hand.

VARDA: Yeah. And then also, and I allow myself to speak about permission, to then suddenly to use the three screens to do the huge ocean.

JOHNSON: Yeah.

VARDA: So I play a game and then I cheat with the game. I allow myself to use frames differently, the screen differently, and then use them as little images. So I like to structure something like in the film. But then, inside the structure, I like to daydream and move and invent things, so that people are not getting bored, because I decided this and that. It allows people do have different feelings, different impressions, and that's what I do. It's a *metier* —

JOHNSON: It is a craft.

VARDA: A craft.

JOHNSON: It is a work.

VARDA: Of an artist, to propose things. It's a proposition, you know, to go with my own fantasy and my own desire. But I want them, the people who come, to exist, to have their own reaction. Maybe they don't like that. Maybe they like it, but because I changed the rules all the time, they may grab something better than I did.

JOHNSON: Well, that sense of playfulness, that willingness to sort of change the parameters, put frames around things, to have things ... switch people's — who's which member of the family ... Is there ever an edge of it, for you, that has the stakes of transgression? I think what's amazing to some of us when we look at, yeah, when we look at your career, and the way in which you, from the beginning, were innovating and making things that no one else had made before, and I would say don't get enough credit for having come up with certain ideas, certain inventive, playful ideas that then become what we know as the Nouvelle Vague. But that playfulness, I'm just really curious, are there places in it where you get afraid or where it feels like transgression to you, or where it was hard for you to go, because you do make it look easy?

VARDA: You know, I started to think we have to fight against something. And what I fight against is imbécillité. Does this exist?

JOHNSON: Not quite, but I love it, being an imbecile, or stupidity or idiocy, yeah.

VARDA: Against stupidity and being lazy. Those are two things I fought against because if you slow it down, you can say it's OK, you know, I have done this, people said it's OK, maybe I should rest, I could just enjoy going here and there. And then, there is something in me which says, don't stop thinking about what one can do and what I could still look for. I try not to repeat myself. And in the shapes of what I do, coming from the cinema, and you know, I use cinema, I use video, I use photos. I try to reconcile black and white and color, past and present, and video [and] cinema. You know, everything is always supposedly fighting each other, you know? And I say, in my own life, in my own way of doing art or cinema, can I put something together? Can they be together? And that's what I look for, being coherent.

JOHNSON: Yeah, coherent.

VARDA: Coherent?

JOHNSON: Coherent, yeah.

VARDA: *La cohérence, oui.*

JOHNSON: Yeah, yeah.

VARDA: Which allows also, to escape from it.

JOHNSON: And do you think that sort of the prolificness and the working and the making then frees you from fears around the sort of ... laziness or like, pushing back against something that's banal, right, trying to make something that's stronger or different or — ?

VARDA: No, it's not in that sense, I mean lazy, but there are so many artists doing good things, that we need to see, we need to appreciate, we need to swallow, to be fed with. If I stop looking at films or looking at painting or not looking at contemporary art, I am stupid, because then these people have made things for me to share with. I am proposing things I love people to share with me. They're emotional, they laugh, or they're surprised. So I do the same with other artists. I don't want to stop looking at other people, at what they do. I have a lot of enjoyment to see other artists' work.

JOHNSON: And so, like this collaboration with JR, for example, the way he relates to scale gives you a new place to play, on a certain level? Is it also in the collaboration with people, that you feel?

VARDA: No, yes, it's because he works mostly in big cities. And I say, "I'll take you to the country." And we went only in villages, and the French name is *Visages, Villages*, which is "Faces and Villages." Somebody said it should be called here, *People and Places*. Maybe it's nice.

JOHNSON: Yeah.

VARDA: Maybe it's a nice American title. But I took him to the country. He took me in his truck, and we started to meet people, make them big, make them beautiful, listen to them, making peace with people, because the world is such as chaos of hate and stupidity and war and drama. It's like escaping, in a way, but at least to something we can give the feeling that people can get along, people love to meet others, they love to express themselves, they love to be loved, you know? It's a very, very simple subject. I'm not telling the whole world what's happening. I cannot compete.

JOHNSON: Yeah. You know, I think also, once of the things that, for me, has been a part, a strong part of being nourished by your work is the way in which you're paying so much attention to how much it matters to people to be seen. And this feels like a deep — this is a deep need in me, that I think about when I film other people, how people want to be seen —

VARDA: They want to be heard. They want to express themselves. And it makes them feel good, that somebody takes — but that's why I chose a lot of people that are not supposed to be listened to. Like the widows, nobody listens to widows. They are boring, supposedly. I never saw a documentary about widows, and I made a big piece called *Les Veuves de Noirmoutier*. I listened to many of them. And I did a film about squatters, because people speak about the homeless, but typical situations of squatters are very difficult to find a place. They are pushed. And well, I did *The Gleaners* that you heard about.

JOHNSON: Oh yes. [Laughs] That I have seen many times. [Laughs]

VARDA: And you see *The Gleaners*, it's interesting because I tell the story very often, but when you see, notice there is somebody in the street and [he] opens the garbage and the other people turn [away], because they are afraid that that person would be ashamed of opening —

JOHNSON: That they don't want to be seen doing what they are doing.

VARDA: They don't want to be looking at the person — and I went to them, when they opened the garbages: “You are damn right.” Because there is a lot there that you can use. There is a lot that has been wasted. So it's contrary. Instead of saying, “This is a question of shame,” I say, “It's a question of good sense.” So that's how I could approach and see the situation totally differently, that they shouldn't be ashamed, they should be helped and they should have food. And so, they find it where it is. And then, I started to go in the fields and ... You've seen the film. And by the way, that's how I found these heart-shaped potatoes that became a theme of my later work or *Potatotopia*, I made a big piece about heart-shaped potatoes breathing. So I go to people, I learn something, and it brings me ideas, it brings me images, so it's a nonstop, what I would say, exchange with images, people and the time passing by and moving things. So I know *The Gleaners* has been seen and loved, and this is in 2000, 17 years ago.

JOHNSON: Yes.

VARDA: And now, the subject is even worse and people are much more aware of new ways of the food, trying to see that some people go and get what is left over and they eat what we throw away. So it's interesting, in my own life, learning from the others.

JOHNSON: Well, that's the discovery of one thing leading to the next is part of why we love this work, but I'm so curious that you used the word “shame.” And the idea of shame and being ashamed, because I think this is one of the fundamental struggles that I've had as an artist in a certain way, trying to relate to which things I've been ashamed to talk about or to show, and the way in which one searches to understand what is shaming to another person. And so, that I think that the sort of the zone of what that person who is trying to make is doing, and all of the shame that gets built up about one's incapacities to make something that one is truly proud of. And then, I think there's shame around the space of being filmed, and that sometimes, when one is filming another person, when you turn the camera away or keep filming, it's more about your own shame than the person's who is being filmed.

VARDA: The problem is, you want to do something with all these meetings, all these feelings you have, you want to make a film, you want to make art, you want to make a documentary or a fiction. If you wish to create something, you have to put yourself in a position that if you are ashamed to do it, don't do it. Stay home. And if you think that you have the right to try to get these images. And there is a limit to that, I know that. There

are things I don't want to film, and including in the situation, some things should not be filmed and some ways some women are treated, let's say, whore, you know, and the system of prostitution, it's a terrible subject because it's maybe moral, it's maybe social, it's maybe difficult, it's maybe religious. But at some point, I don't want to touch images that I don't even know how I can stand them.

JOHNSON: Yeah.

VARDA: So I limit my field of curiosity and understanding and filming. But I guess every filmmaker does it, but some filmmakers are perverse and they do pervert films and it's very interesting. It could be very interesting as a spectator, as a cinephile, you know? And the way they are, like Buñuel, I love the way Buñuel was perverse. But some other people are very much perverse. So we have to find our paths in what we want to see and what we want to do. And then, allow ourselves to be a little around. I don't want just to do whatever, you know?

JOHNSON: Right, right. And I think what's peculiar about the trajectory of my work is that I have worked filming on behalf of other people, so I have been in many different situations where the person who is directing the film wishes that I filmed something that I am not sure or not, whether I wish to film. And so, negotiating that territory —

VARDA: As a DP? You did as director of photography?

JOHNSON: That's right, that's right.

VARDA: You never directed, yourself, did you?

JOHNSON: I have directed myself, and this film that I made, *Cameraperson*, I made out of footage that came from films that I shot for other people.

VARDA: I have to see that.

JOHNSON: I would be thrilled if you saw it.

VARDA: And maybe we'll continue the conversation later because it's unfair, it's unfair —

JOHNSON: That would be remarkable. It's not unfair, it's a great joy.

VARDA: No, because you know a lot about—

JOHNSON: Yeah, but I have this—

VARDA: Let's keep it for another day.

JOHNSON: Yeah, but I have this feeling that you know how to find things out about people.

VARDA: If you've done something, I better say it.

JOHNSON: Fair enough.

VARDA: So we push it for another day. Thank you.

JOHNSON: Well, let's talk about color for one second. I do want to talk about color for one second – can we talk about color for a moment? Agnès, I'm here wearing all red. And I've got orange socks and gold shoes. And you're here wearing burgundy pants and a burgundy top and a big, beautiful necklace. And I just think that we have some things in common about color.

VARDA: We could be in the same show.

JOHNSON: Yes, I think we are in the same show.

VARDA: And do a *camaïeu*. But you know, I love colors. And I think colors feed me with energy. And when I saw your total red outfit, I said, "Hey, somebody who wears red is not totally bad."

JOHNSON: [Laughs] Well, I did wear this specifically for you, but this is also the way I usually dress, because I feel the same way about color, that it connects me to the part of myself that's about love, as opposed to fear. And it just opens all of that back up again. And you know, it happens on the street. Like, you just generate interactions with people, and my whole thing is, filming and photography, what it is is relationships. A photo is a relationship through time.

VARDA: Anyway, that's how we met, by looking at each other's outfits, color.

JOHNSON: That's right.

VARDA: Of color on the outfit.

JOHNSON: That's right.

VARDA: And then, you are supposed to come to speak to me about other things, so we will go to it.

JOHNSON: But we would rather stay in color. What's your favorite color?

VARDA: More or less purple.

JOHNSON: Purple.

VARDA: Purple and then pale burgundy and then, hmmm... Then old red.

JOHNSON: Old red?

VARDA: And then—well, I like red and being old, and then beige pink, and then that's it. I don't want to go into that, you know? Let's speak about cinema and art, please.

JOHNSON: I also want to speak about the past. When you were saying the past is here with you in this moment, is the past here? Do you feel people from your past with you in this show, in this gallery show here?

VARDA: What do you mean?

JOHNSON: The people, you know, when I look at that set of photos that's mounted that is the 1954 exhibit that you had mounted in your yard, when you walk into that room, does it evoke people who are in that space, in that time, in '54 for you?

VARDA: If I take the time to look at each, yes, yes. But in the same time, what I look at ... this is a typical New York noise.

[Sirens]

JOHNSON: We're making a movie.

VARDA: Ah...

JOHNSON: This is the challenge of making a movie in New York.

VARDA: In a way, I love it, because it's so strong, it surprises us when we come, you know? But I remember being here for the first time with Jacques Demy, and we were so afraid of the noise, you know? We were waiting for the next one to come.

JOHNSON: Really?

VARDA: Terrible. So about the past that you ask me, about ... The photos, they represent in the same time what I did, these people that I knew, and in a way, the joy that some other people will see them now.

JOHNSON: Yes.

VARDA: Because I put them in a drawer somewhere, in a box. I'd forgotten them. And now, when I took them out, I say, "Hey, they should be with other people. I should share."

JOHNSON: Yeah.

VARDA: But you see, at that time, I was already a photographer of the Théâtre [National Populaire]. And I was doing beautiful images of Gérard Philipe, Jean Vilar, [Philippe] Noiret, all these actors. And I had famous images being around as I photographed the Théâtre. But that was my personal work. I felt like I was working for the Théâtre as a job, even though I took beautiful images. And that was what I kept for myself. It was already the separation of what you're supposed, ordered to do, and be paid for, and what you do for yourself. That amuses me because at that time, I could have shown more so-called beautiful images of theater, and I didn't do it because I just showed what I felt like was mine, so it's interesting.

JOHNSON: So that leap from making something for yourself to being willing to show it to others – what's the step from that place to the public place?

VARDA: It's 55 years, 60 years, what it is.

JOHNSON: But it seems like —

VARDA: '54 to now. Where are we?

JOHNSON: Yeah, yeah. And you were able to do that in that moment, as well as doing it again in this moment?

VARDA: Somebody said, "Oh, that box that you opened, you should show it somewhere." I say, "Why not?" And then, it started. I showed it once, and then the gallery here, Blum & Poe, they heard about that, they asked to see it, and decided they wanted to show it. And then, they have the idea, which is interesting, that by showing three self-portraits, when I was 20, 40 and 80, they can cover that, they showed things that I made when I was 20, and this installation that I made after being 80. So it's just covering a life with just four little rooms, where something specific tells what I did over the years, and how I feel now about it. I think I'm glad that they offered me that because it's an interesting small show, very concentrated about what I did, what I do.

JOHNSON: And it's almost like being in this space in the moment with a siren going by and knowing that we're recording, it brings the past of being in New York with Jacques Demy back to you.

VARDA: Yes, but I'm here and I hear that noise.

JOHNSON: And it brings you back to him.

VARDA: Back now.

JOHNSON: Right.

VARDA: I remember listening to that noise, being afraid, but I know I hear it now, which means I'm still alive. It doesn't mean too much, because he's gone, you know, but I am alive and I have to do what I have to do.

JOHNSON: Right. But he's also here. When I was thinking of the people who are here, I often think about this with photos. The sort of the way in which photos, they keep the people connected to us, but somehow, the filmed image almost brings them back to life. And I feel like this in your moment with the movie that you made next to the photo that you made, you feel the aliveness in the filmed version, in a different way.

VARDA: I don't know. I know that I feel blessed that I've been invited. I feel blessed that at the last part of my life, nice things are happening to me, happened, and they make me feel good, to be an artist and not to be kicked out. It doesn't mean that it will sell, but at least they show and I can share with people.

JOHNSON: Yeah.

VARDA: Come on.

JOHNSON: You're like, "Cut already. We're done. We're done."

VARDA: I'm tired. I'm tired of speaking.

JOHNSON: Let's do it. Let's be done.

VARDA: Let's stop. I'm tired of speaking. Too much with speech.

JOHNSON: Let's go look.

VARDA: If you wish.