

To some, happiness is as simple as indulging in a flaky croissant baked to perfection, but to Francois, the male protagonist of *Le Bonheur* (1965), happiness is growing ten extra arms of love for his mistress without taking away the ten that already exist to embrace his own wife. Though *Le Bonheur*, directed by the pioneering Belgian-born French director, Agnes Varda, saw its release in the midst of the experimental French New Wave movement, Varda's feminist influence remains pungent in the progressive modernity of the 21st century. With Varda's admirable sensory detailing and relatability in *Le Bonheur*, the film achieves a provocative examination of the female gaze.

Establishing a veracious account of the female experience, *Le Bonheur* utilizes subtle moments of sensory detailing to emphasize the intimacies of physical affection. In a scene right before the disturbing climax of the film, Francois sprints from work to see his post-office mistress named Emilie in her new studio apartment. Filmed in one trucking take, Francois is depicted running through the streets with an excited spirit accompanied by a joyful flute in the background. Immediately cutting to his arrival, Francois is shown softly running his finger down Emilie's exposed back as she walks into the frame wearing a halter dress. Tickled, but aroused, Emilie reciprocates the flirty humor with Francois while he pulls her in for a kiss against the wall (57:49). In allowing the camera to linger on this brief rendezvous in a singular uncut scene, it yields the spectator enough time to witness an inciting moment of lust for the pair's romance that would otherwise go unnoticed had it been filmed from a differing perspective. In essence, the camera sees what the passive viewer is meant to feel. Varda's focus on their body language in which Francois can easily swoon Emilie with one touch goes to show how delicate the space they share is together. Their interaction evokes pure feelings of comfortability and bliss, even as their dialogue focuses on each other having to make it back to work on time.

Similar to the film's respectable presentation of physical affection through a feminine lens, it frees the subject of sexual intercourse from the constraints of taboo and perversion. Succeeding the film's midpoint, a sequence of extreme close ups showcases fragments of Francois and Emilie nude in bed (48:16). The scene includes various claustrophobic shots of the pair's eyes, hands, breasts, and lips strategically positioned on one another. With frames reminiscent of editorial photography depicting a stillness in time, the scene appears to celebrate and cherish the vulnerable intimacy of sex over the conventionally pornographic scope of the male gaze. As Francois' cheek caresses Emilie's bottom and her hand wraps around the back of his neck, the film consciously embraces feminine energies of fulfilling interactions. Rather than showing sexual intercourse in its most explicit form of fetishization, Varda instead highlights a raw, humanistic view of the natural act and mitigates the traditional objectification of either gender. The photographic-like cinematography curates a subjective sensation where intuition, mind, feeling, and body come together to embody a viewing experience evocative of the detail-oriented female perspective.

Finally, through the use of sympathizable storytelling, *Le Bonheur* avoids feeding into the overused trope of female rivalry and conceptually underlines the flaws found in problematic men. Closing in on its first hour, one of the film's most popular scenes captures Francois dancing with both his wife and mistress at a town party. Using a tree in the center of the set as a means for invisible transitioning, Varda repeatedly pans the camera from one side to another in order to highlight Francois' constant rotation of lovers throughout the dance. In one instance on the right side of the tree, he is shown spinning his wife, Therese, on the floor. However as the camera pans back to the left, he swaps partners to be with Emilie until he trades again (46:58). Though the presence of Emilie and Therese at this gathering is unbeknownst to either of them, this scene

clearly exemplifies the disturbing ease in Francois's ability to replace these women in a matter of seconds. To Francois, his perception of this affair is that of one purely expansive of his love, but not the erasure of his pre-existing feelings for Therese. Yet, upon the climax when Therese dies after he confesses the truth to her, Francois eventually moves on to replace her with Emilie as a new motherly figure. Ultimately the most shocking element of the film, Francois' grief process inhabiting the sudden restoration of a mother for his kids conveys maternity as a social obligation beyond biological purpose. Beneath Varda's brilliant use of saturated colors and intricate set design in her compositional palette lies a morbid exploration of the lived female experience where women frequently suffer the consequences of unapologetic man-made mistakes, such as Francois's absurd attempt to justify his disloyalty.

While at first glance, *Le Bonheur* seems to paint a vibrant portrait of a happily domesticated family, up close reveals a revolting scenario of infidelity and sheer melodramatics. As Varda paves the way as one of the most influential female film directors, it is with this production that she offers an accurate and timeless morale detailing the universal female lens concerning sexual libido, human nature, and social constraints that remain crucial today as they were relevant then.