

“The Gleaners and I”

Filmmaker Agnès Varda explores the practice of gleaning in modern-day France.

By [David Bollier](#)



François Milet, *Les Graneuses*

After seeing a famous painting by François Milet, *Les Graneuses* (“The Gleaners”), of a group of women stooped over picking up leftover stalks of wheat, French documentary film maker Agnès Varda began to wonder about modern-day gleaners — the people who scavenge their food from the scraps that our modern industrial society discards as waste. She wondered about trash in our modern times: “Who finds a use for it? How? Can one live on the leftovers of others?”

The result, *The Gleaners and I*, is a moving depiction of the people who — after the harvest — pick through the dirt to find potatoes and tomatoes left behind, scour the beach for oysters washed up after storms, pick grapes and figs that farmers reject, and go “dumpster diving” to recover discarded loaves of bread, sandwiches and other food.

Gleaning has a long history among commoners. It’s what they do to put food on the table. Although gleaning often exists in the twilight zone between law and custom, the law in many instances formally recognizes gleaning as a right. In the film, a lawyer standing in a field reads the text of a 1554 French law that allows “the poor, the wretched, the deprived” to enter the fields once the harvest is over, and take what they wish. It may be the odd-shaped potato, the overripe fig, the damaged apple or the supermarket product whose “sell by” date has passed.

Varda’s film, released in 2000 but available on DVD, is essentially a road-trip to various places in France where gleaners prowl for leftover food. It must have required a lot of patience, resourcefulness and charm for Varda to identify so many different types of gleaners and then earn their trust.

It’s quite a cast of people we meet: rural drifters, homeless alcoholics, gypsy families living in trailers and alienated punks who live on the street. There are also families who cut grapes from an abandoned vineyard; a chef who gleans because he “likes to know where his food comes from”; and a former grad student who has lived off discarded food for the past ten years (and who serves as a volunteer teacher of English to immigrants). In urban settings, the gleaners don’t glean, they “salvage” discarded furniture and broken objects from the streets.

One of Varda’s goals in making her film was to “bring gleaners out of their anonymity.” That she does. While most of the gleaners face genuine hardships and precarious living arrangements, none comes off

as an object of pity. If anything, their gleaning reveals them to be resourceful, uncomplaining people. Many of them are quite amiable, in fact, and generous in sharing what they find. When Varda notes how many bags of grapes one gleaner has harvested, the man replies, “Oh, there will be people to share it with.”



Filmmaker Agnes Varda posing as a gleaner of wheat.

Many gleaners express amazement and disgust at the perfectly good food that farmers and supermarkets discard. One farmer estimates that, of 4,500 tons of potatoes that he harvests, 250 tons are simply dumped back into the field to rot. That many potatoes are considered too big or too small, too damaged or too misshapen to sell. Varda repeatedly finds heart-shaped potatoes nestled among the dirty gleanings, and say they are her favorites.

It is interesting to note how farmers regard the gleaners and their scavenging. One farmer is happy that gleaners can pick the apples he doesn't pick. He actually registers gleaners and allows each to take 400 pounds of produce apiece, for a total of about 10 tons.

Among the oyster beds on the French coast, gleaning is “tolerated but not really allowed — although it's not downright illegal,” according to one oysterman. No one seems to know exactly how much people can take, or how many yards away from the formal oyster beds gleaning can occur. Some people say 10 yards, others 25 yards.

The owner of a vineyard, however, deliberately destroys the grapes that he doesn't intend to use. Concerned about the reputation of the quality of his vineyard, his crews pick the grapes and let them rot on the ground. As the owner explains, the first harvest of grapes is used to make high-quality vintage wine while the “second harvest” of grapes, or “verjuice,” produces only cheap table wine. Allowing the second-generation grapes to be associated with his vineyard's name might harm its reputation. For this reason, gleaning from vineyards in Burgundy is prohibited.

It's amazing how many food crops are gleaned — wheat, potatoes, cabbages, olives, figs, grapes,

tomatoes, apples, oysters and more. To round out her film, Varda also visits with some artists who make paintings, wall fixtures and small towers out of found objects. A brickmason makes towers that bring to mind the famous Watts Towers.

Somehow Varda also locates men who recover discarded television sets from the streets in order to salvage the copper wire in them. “Res derelictae” is the legal doctrine that allows such deliberately abandoned, “ownerless” things to be taken without it being regarded as theft.

I had been unaware of this remarkable film until a student at Sarah Lawrence College contacted me to ask about the legality of gleaning excess food in the United States. A good question — one that I don’t know the answer to. If anyone know more, please get in touch!

The student had been inspired to investigate this question by Varda’s film, which was shown in her class on the commons taught by Professor Charles Zerner. Thanks to them both for alerting me to *The Gleaners and I*. The film reminded me how much of my life figuratively depends upon gleaning after harvests made by others. This was precisely the lesson that Agnès Varda learned — that she was gleaning the found emotions and experiences from other people’s lives to make her film.

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