

Faces Places

Monday, January 22, 7:30 pm

Reviewed by A. O. Scott / New York Times Rated PG 89 Mins.

At 89, Agnès Varda is an artist with nothing to prove and everything to discover. A small woman with a two-toned pageboy and an open, unsentimental manner, she is an ideal traveling companion: a wise and canny guide, an impetuous risk-taker, a trusted friend.

Her recent documentaries, while not exactly confessional, are unabashedly personal, infused with her voice, her eye, her wry and rueful on-camera presence. Each film is a map of her thinking, a record of her musings and insights as she explores parts of the modern world — especially but not exclusively France — that less attentive voyagers might overlook.

The latest of these adventures, “Faces Places,” finds Ms. Varda in the company of a younger comrade, the 34-year-old French photographer and environmental artist known as JR. Together they set out on a series of meandering road trips through agricultural and industrial towns, talking to people and taking their pictures. (The French title, “Visages Villages,” is more specific than the English version about the kinds of places that interest them.) JR’s van is equipped with a printer that produces portraits big enough to cover the sides of barns, houses and apartment buildings and even, magnificently, a towering stack of shipping containers.

The easygoing, episodic structure of their journey gives “Faces Places” a deceptively casual air. It superficially resembles one of those ubiquitous cable-television shows in which a semi-celebrity bounces around the globe tasting the food and philosophizing with the locals. Ms. Varda and JR, who is tall and stylish and never takes off his sunglasses, are a charming pair. Their subjects are happy to chat, and touched (if also sometimes a little embarrassed) to behold their likenesses turned into large-scale public art installations. The film works just fine as an anthology of amiable encounters and improvised collaborations.

But it’s a lot more than that. Despite its unassuming, conversational ethos — which is also to say by means of Ms. Varda’s staunchly democratic understanding of her job as a filmmaker — “Faces Places” reveals itself as a powerful, complex and radical work. Ms. Varda’s modesty is evidence of her mastery, just as her playful demeanor is the expression of a serious and demanding aesthetic commitment. Almost by stealth, but also with cheerful forthrightness, she communicates a rich and challenging array of feelings and ideas. As we contemplate those faces and places we are invited to reflect on the passage of time and the nature of memory, on the mutability of friendship and the durability of art, on the dignity of labor and the fate of the European working class.

Ms. Varda and JR visit a town in France’s northern coal-producing region where the mines have shut down. They call on a prosperous farmer, on factory workers and retirees, on a group of longshoremen and their wives. Without pressing a political agenda or bringing up matters of ideology or identity, they evoke a history of proud struggle and bitter defeat, a chronicle etched in the stones of the villages and the lines on the faces.

Beneath the jauntiness and good humor there is an unmistakably elegiac undertone to this film, an implicit acknowledgment of lateness and loss. The places will crumble and the faces will fade, and the commemorative power of the images that JR and Ms. Varda make will provide a small and partial compensation for this gloomy inevitability. The world and its inhabitants are protean and surprising, but also almost unbearably fragile, and you feel the pull of gravity even in the film’s most lighthearted passages.

Ms. Varda, steeped in the traditions of the avant-garde, is resistant to nostalgia — there’s always too much to notice here and now — but she finds herself drawn to retrospection. Her glance turns backward, to her own earlier work and to her relationships with colleagues and friends. She tells JR that he reminds her of Jean-Luc Godard, her erstwhile comrade in the heady, heroic days of the French new wave. Mr. Godard in his 30s favored dark glasses and an impish, enigmatic air, and he plays an intriguing off-camera role in “Faces Places.” He is muse and villain, a source of inspiration and exasperation, a secret sharer and a vengeful ghost.

He’s probably not so vain that he thinks this movie is about him. And Ms. Varda is too generous to make it all about her, even though no one else could have made it. “Faces Places” is unforgettable, not because of dramatic moments or arresting images, but because once you have seen it you want to keep it with you, like a talisman or a souvenir. Wherever you’re going, it will surely come in handy.



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Monday, February 12, 7:30 pm

Reviewed by Brian Tallerico / RogerEbert.com Rated PG 90 Mins.

Biographical documentaries of famous people are typically dull affairs, the kind of thing that falls into hagiography or the kind of talking-head, then-this-happened adoration more at home in the 60-minute television format on PBS than in a feature film. There are very few filmmakers who have defied this trend as completely as Brett Morgen, the director of “Kurt Cobain: Montage of Heck” and “The Kid Stays in the Picture” (about Robert Evans). He makes films that feel like extensions of his subject matters, channeling their creative spirit in the form of his filmmaking more than just detailing what happened in their lives. So it’s cinematic justice that over a hundred hours of footage of Jane Goodall crossed paths with Brett Morgen, as both are pioneers in their field, and only Morgen seems capable of shaping that footage in such a unique, captivating, inspiring way as in “Jane,” one of the best documentaries of the year so far.



“Jane” is that rare documentary that works in equal measure for those who know a great deal about Jane Goodall and those people who don’t know a thing. Most people probably think they know all they need to know about Jane Goodall. She watched chimps, right? Her research was essential to understanding not only the way we interact with the natural world but our place in it, but hers is not a name like Kurt Cobain that gets thrown around in conversations much in 2017. “Jane” fully elevates the scientific pedestal on which Jane Goodall should be placed but it does so in part by humanizing her, revealing the challenges she faced and discoveries she made as more than mere National Geographic footage you might see in a Science class.

Morgen structures his film relatively chronologically, allowing Goodall to tell her own story as we see footage of her in the wild. There’s a fascinating structural element of “Jane” in that the footage doesn’t contain interviews or dialogue, and so we’re watching Jane, the chimps, and the other humans who would come to Gambe, in a way that’s not dissimilar from the way Goodall observed her subjects. And there’s the added sense of disconnected observation that comes with time, and in the manner that Goodall herself is analyzing her own story in the way that someone might analyze the actions of a family of chimps. The parallel is clearly intentional,

especially as “Jane” becomes more and more about how the lessons that Goodall learned in the wild informed her entire life, including even teaching her lessons about motherhood.

That’s a theme of “Jane” as we’re introduced to Goodall’s supportive mother in the opening scenes, see how Jane observes the motherhood of the chimps she’s studying, and then see her maternal instincts on display with her own child. Morgen very subtly does this in his films—drawing thematic undercurrents that move through the work without overriding the informative chronology of it all. There’s a fluidity that can be breathtaking to watch, especially as that motion is accompanied by Philip Glass’ best film score in years. You should be warned that it’s “very Glass,” and I found it somewhat overwhelming at first, but I quickly couldn’t imagine the film working without it. It becomes an essential part of the film because of the aforementioned lack of an abundance of archival interviews, meaning that Goodall’s modern voice and Glass’ compositions become our primary sources for information and inspiration.

“Jane” is filled with fascinating anecdotes and insights, such as the fact that Goodall was never nervous about going to the wild to observe chimps because we didn’t really know about the aggression of the species when she chose to do so. She didn’t know to be scared (but would learn about the violence inherent in the chimp population). Goodall made headlines around the world when she filmed a chimp using a branch to obtain termites from a hole for nourishment. It may not seem like a big deal now, but it was once thought that humans were the only species to use tools, and the fact that a chimp used a branch as a tool shook the world, especially in the offices of religious leaders. The footage around the first time that Goodall really made contact with the chimps—when they trusted her enough to get close—is still breathtaking. It’s incredible to consider that footage this old of a chimp taking a banana from a woman for the first time ever would make for one of the most unforgettable scenes of 2017. A baby chimp learning how to walk is on that list of 2017 images I won’t forget as well.

Goodall herself is a forthcoming and fascinating interview subject—another testament to Morgen’s work as a narrator. “Jane” feels like a film that couldn’t have been made without the valuable insight gained through time. We see so many documentaries that want to be current and timely that they don’t realize the value of chronological distance from a subject. In a sense, we’re watching the impact of Goodall’s evolution from a young adventurer to a groundbreaking scientist to a wife and mother. And it’s through her self-analysis of that evolution that Morgen draws a line through fifty years of research and an entirely different species. As he has in his other films, he’s saying to us that it is through these pioneers that we can see the best in ourselves and the potential of the human intellect and desire to learn. But he never loses his filmmaker’s desire to entertain at the same time. It’s that balance of both—the genius of both the subject and the filmmaker—that make “Jane” such a rewarding experience.





Monday, February 26, 7:30 pm

By Bilge Ebiri / The Village Voice Rated R 142 Mins.

Ruben Östlund's *The Square*, which won the Palme d'Or at Cannes this past May, probably says more about the times we're living in than any other film you're likely to see this year. And yet the beauty of the movie is that everybody will have their own ideas about what, exactly, it is saying. It's not a vague film, however. Östlund is specific and exacting as a writer and director, and within *The Square*'s empty spaces, we're forced to confront our own values, and our own visions of ourselves.

That idea is, in fact, what *The Square* is literally about. In a contemporary art museum in Sweden, chief curator Christian (Claes Bang) prepares to host a conceptual art project called "The Square," which is described as "a sanctuary of trust and caring. Within it we all share equal rights and obligations." One could look at this square — it's an actual square, by the way, carved into the middle of the courtyard of a royal palace — and lament the fact that the world has gotten to a point where such values can only be practiced in a small, four-by-four meter space, and only as part of an art project. Or one can see in it an example of the kind of idealistic and utopian thinking that could potentially sink a society. (What the hell does "a sanctuary of trust and caring" even mean?)

The language describing the installation suggests that humanity's natural state tends toward equilibrium and fairness — or that these can at least be achieved by a kind of quiet, willing consensus. When such thinking meets the real world, of course, chaos ensues, and through its somewhat loosely connected, often hilarious vignettes, Östlund's film questions our understanding of honesty, trust, and fellowship. Be it through a bizarre argument in the wake of a sexual encounter about what to do with a used condom, a creatively calamitous plan to retrieve a stolen phone, or a craven approach to marketing "The Square" itself, the film's scenes suggest that our notions of integrity and community might be a lot more fragile than we think.

To add an extra layer of symbolism, "The Square" has been placed in the exact spot where once stood the statue of a monarch, further positing a debate between democratic values and those of a more hierarchical society. In the opening scenes, we see the old sculpture being removed by a crane, but a cock-up results in the statue coming loose and toppling awkwardly — as if it were one of those monuments to dictators that are periodically torn down on television by cheering, angry protesters. Who ultimately is responsible for order? And who measures equality?

Through a variety of episodes in Christian's life and work, we see the failure of the kind of utopian thinking "The Square" represents.

Is that what we're seeing, though? Or is it the fact that Christian, as the successful and powerful head of a major art museum, cannot himself handle anything that smacks of genuine equality? Early on, we watch him walking to work on the street, amid dozens of other people. A woman runs, screaming for help, toward a nearby man, a stranger. Christian gets pulled into helping the woman, as he and the other man block a random angry dude from attacking her. Afterward, Christian and the other protective man congratulate each other and delight in the adrenaline rush of a good deed of physical bravery; the woman, meanwhile, is nowhere to be seen. Would these two have been so keen to help if the woman hadn't prompted them to? Later scenes echoing this moment suggest that the answer might be no. And the fact that Christian realizes that his phone and wallet have gone missing immediately following the incident might mean that his supposed heroism was ultimately for naught.

Christian thinks of himself as a decent, fair-minded person. But his vision of himself is, as with all of us, selective. When he's feeling good, he gives money to beggars; when he's concerned and distracted, he ignores them. He's a nice, fair-minded progressive in theory, but when less powerful people that he's wronged confront him, he gets a "Why me?" look on his face. That Claes Bang manages to keep this man reasonably charming, even as the film interrogates his privilege and his very nature, is certainly some sort of achievement.



The Square is a film of set pieces, but perhaps the most impressive involves a museum gala dinner that is interrupted by a man pretending to be an ape (played by Terry Notary, the American stuntman and motion capture coordinator), whose antics at first seem entertaining and eventually become terrifying. The scene reiterates some of the key questions at the heart of *The Square*: When left to its own devices, does humanity find equilibrium or does it disintegrate into aggressors and subjects? And just what does it take for us to come to others' aid? Where do we draw the line between the individual and society? *The Square* has a remarkably clearheaded and streamlined way of asking these many questions, but the answers it provides are always tantalizingly unclear.

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Peter Travers, Rolling Stone

Monday, January 22 at 7:30 pm

Faces Places



"Jane is an exemplary work of documentation,
storytelling, and filmmaking."

Sarah Kenigsberg, Consequence of Sound

Monday, February 12 at 7:30 pm

"Sets out to make your jaw drop and it succeeds!"

The Guardian

Monday, February 26 at 7:30 pm

