Faces Places/Visages Villages (2017)

"I remember my pictures of him better than I remember him."

Major Credits:
>Director: JR, Agnès Varda
>Writer: JR, Agnès Varda
>Editor: Maxime Pozzi-Garcia, Agnès Varda
>Music: Matthieu Chedid
>Animation: Oerd Van Cuijlenborg

Background:

Agnès Varda began making films in the 1950s as a participant in the French New Wave along with the original *Cahiers du cinéma* critics-turned-filmmakers, François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, Alain Resnais, and Eric Rohmer. Her most celebrated features during this early period are *Cleo from 5 to 7* (1962) and *Le Bonheur* (1965). Perhaps her most enduring fiction film remains *Vagabond* (1985) starring Sandrine Bonnaire and dedicated to the French writer Nathalie Sarraute, who is cited in *Faces Places*. Also a photographer, Varda has directed many documentaries, including *Jacquot de Nantes*, about her dying husband, the filmmaker Jacques Demy (*The Umbrellas of Cherbourg*) and, more recently, *The Gleaners and I* (2000) and *The Beaches of Agnès* (2008). Perhaps influenced by her early association with the *auteur* theory promulgated by the New Wave, Varda refers to these works as "subjective documentaries." For her sustained excellence and the frequent feminist themes of her work, Varda has come to be treasured as "the godmother of the New Wave," although she whimsically points out that this label first attached to her when she was 30.

Fifty-five years younger than his collaborator, JR (his identity remains unknown) is certainly as famous as Varda in France and more widely known around the world (with nearly a million Instagram followers, according to Wikipedia). Beginning as a graffiti artist, JR quickly gained critical as well as popular acclaim, culminating in a TED Prize for 2011. He has always been concerned with bringing art to public spaces and celebrating the energy and beauty of the masses—a true artist of the proletariat.

Cinematic Aspects:
1. Animation: The film begins and ends with masterfully conceived animated credits seamlessly integrated with live footage. Animation, of course, hand-drawn from the imagination, represents the formalist opposite of documentary realism. The opening credits also pay tribute to the 646 volunteer subjects of the directors' cameras.
2. **Editing:** "Chance has always been my best assistant," Varda proclaims, but there is nothing improvisational about her and Maxime Possi-Garcia's editing, which provides narrative structure, psychological texture, and visual density to the film. Take, for example, the early montage sequence describing how the collaborators did *not* meet. By virtue of its subjective vision, constantly reminding the viewer of the artist's manipulation of images, its carefully composed establishing shots and deliberately posed portraits, and its reflective interludes about memory and mutability, the documentary style here is the very antithesis of *cinéma verité*.

Questions for Discussion:
1. Unlike most documentaries, *Faces Places* advances no clear agenda. "What is the subject?" Varda asks her collaborator at one point. Does the film have a "project'? Is there anything like a plot?
2. What particular sequence remains most vivid in memory? What idea does this moment express?
3. The ending is particularly poignant, the very definition of *bittersweet*. How does "the presence of absence" play out in the visit to Godard's home and the epilogue?