

Filming in the Feminine Plural: The Ethnochoranic Narratives of Agnès Varda

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ABSTRACT

Filming in the Feminine Plural: The Ethnochoranic Narratives of Agnès Varda

Lindsay Peters

The concept of the ethnochoranic narrative structure derives from Julia Kristeva's concept of the semiotic chora, in which the multifaceted aspects of identity converge to form a subjectivity made up of the self and the other, as represented through the maternal body. 'Ethno-' refers to the ethnographic motivation behind Agnès Varda's films, from her neorealist debut, *La Pointe Courte* (1954), to her consistent techniques of social observation throughout her documentary and narrative work. This study is an examination of how Agnès Varda uses a polyvocal, 'choranic' structure to produce ethnographic narratives of individuals and social causes.

The thesis works from a single image taken from *Cléo de 5 à 7* (1961) of a circular crack in a window in which a series of lines radiates from a single, centralized point. A crowd of men and women are reflected in the window. The superimposed web of cracks over the complex play of gazes is emblematic of Varda's modernist style and ironic treatment of gender issues. This project demonstrates the way in which Varda aestheticizes a pluralistic female experience, an approach which promotes the collective individuality of each woman. *Filming in the Feminine Plural* argues that the ethnochoranic narrative, as a cinematic activation of the fragmented, intricately woven female identity, responds to the feminist call for progressive aesthetic and sociocultural representations of female experience.

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INTRODUCTION

The Ethnochoranic Narratives of Agnès Varda

In the midst of the 2008 Toronto International Film Festival, I was fortunate enough to arrange a meeting with Agnès Varda, who was in attendance to present her latest film, *Les Plages d'Agnès* (2008). As the interview drew to a close, she suddenly remarked, in an off-hand manner, that it is “*bon humeur*” which drives her, as both individual and filmmaker: “which means even in the worst time, I’m trying to keep something which is, you know, the pleasure of being with people, being alive. [A] very simple pleasure in a way.”¹ This predilection for the pleasure of community reflects the narrative style of the Vardian film, which this thesis will define as a portrait of a female subject constructed through the multifaceted, peripheral perspectives of a collection of secondary characters.

Geneviève Sellier’s recently translated book, *Masculine Singular: French New Wave Cinema* (2008) provides a comparative basis for Varda’s cinematic approach and that of her male New Wave counterparts. *Masculine Singular* is a meticulous study of the critical reception and sociocultural impact of the French New Wave (1956-1962) in which Sellier deconstructs the cultural commentary on gender and sexual identity produced by these predominantly male filmmakers. According to Sellier, “the filmmakers of the new generation, propelled by youthful aspirations to a greater degree of personal liberty, began to ‘write’ in the first person singular in a new attempt to take account of lived experience at its most intimate, its most quotidian, and its most contemporary.”² In contrast to the first person singular perspective associated with the male filmmakers of the French New Wave, this project will position Agnès Varda as a filmmaker who “writes,” or “*cinécrit-es*,” to use the director’s own term, in the plural.³

For Sellier, the masculine singular perspective results in a recurring narrative structure involving a male directorial alter ego placed in opposition to a female character devoid of both interiority and narrative agency. This woman, “who needs others in order to exist,” more often than not becomes a threat to male autonomy.⁴ Her status as narrative threat results in her own death (in the case of François Truffaut’s *Jules et Jim* (1962), or Jean-Luc Godard’s *Le Mépris* (1963)), or a complicit role in the hero’s demise (in the case of Louis Malle’s *L’Ascenseur pour l’échafaud* (1957), or Godard’s *À bout de souffle* (1960)). The following pages will outline the way in which Varda’s multifaceted narrative portraits ironically aestheticize this New Wave tendency to posit female characters as dependent on others.

Sellier gives Varda her due as the sole female filmmaker working within the French New Wave; a position which becomes somewhat peripheral by association with the Left Bank faction. The Left Bank group, which was primarily composed of Varda, Alain Resnais, Chris Marker, and Georges Franju, became characterized by an aesthetic of formal experimentation combined with progressive socio-political content. The simultaneous emphasis placed on aesthetic innovation and political commentary often results in narrative structures which challenge the boundaries of linear narrative, in the case of Resnais’ *L’Année Dernière à Marienbad* (1961), and Marker’s *La Jetée* (1962). Varda consistently alters the confines of the conventional linear narrative in favour of a multifaceted structure to produce a cultural commentary on the female experience. Sellier, who notes the Left Bank group’s liberal approach to female emancipation, outlines an “ideological separation between Varda and the [New Wave] filmmakers. Instead of the claim, inherited from romanticism, of a tragic solitude that alone permits the construction of a self, Varda maintains that each person is constructed through the encounter with another.”⁵ In effect, Varda’s multifaceted

approach to narrative interrogates the self-perpetuating singular perspective of the male New Wave filmmakers.

Defining the Ethnochoranic

In a lecture at the Harvard Film Archive in March 2009, Varda articulated the central tenet of her modernist approach to narrative when she stated that “in the universe of my mind, there is the idea that we are made in pieces.”⁶ In contrast to the homogenizing, singular approach of the male New Wave filmmaker, Varda posits a heterogeneous, pluralistic approach to narrative and utilizes an aesthetic of modernist irony in the production of socio-political commentary. Alan Wilde terms late modernist irony “disjunctive irony,” in which the world “appears inherently disconnected and fragmented,” which, at its furthest point of development, “both recognizes the disconnections and seeks to control them.”⁷ By shaping the fragments into “an equal poise of opposites” disjunctive irony substitutes aesthetic wholeness for the lost harmony in life.⁸ This project will deconstruct the Varda’s ironic style through the theorizations of Julia Kristeva’s semiotic chora and Catherine Russell’s conception of experimental ethnography which I will combine to better understand that which I call an *ethnochoranic narrative structure*.

To summarize the concept of the ethnochoranic structure: ‘choranic,’ derives from Julia Kristeva’s concept of the semiotic chora, wherein the multifaceted aspects of identity converge to form a subjectivity derived from the self and the other, as represented through the maternal body. ‘Ethno-,’ refers to the ethnographic motivation behind Varda’s films, which originates from her neorealistic debut, *La Pointe Courte* (1954), and continues with her consistent preoccupation with social observation throughout her documentary and narrative work. From the collection of faces that populate *Cléo de 5 à 7* to the broad assortment of gleaners in *Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse*,

Varda's multifaceted, ethnographic approach to her subjects derives from a position of interrogative observation. What I am proposing with this study is an examination of how Varda uses a polyvocal, 'choranic' structure to produce ethnographic narratives of individuals and social causes. To be more specific, I intend to deconstruct how Agnès Varda articulates the female experience on a formal level through a method I will from hereon in refer to as the ethnochoranic.

Julia Kristeva's concept of the semiotic chora will serve as the basis of this project's methodological approach to Varda's narrative practices. According to Kristeva,

Discrete quantities of energy move through the body of the subject who is not yet constituted as such and, in the course of his [sic] development, they are arranged according to the various constraints imposed upon this body – always already involved in a semiotic process – by family and social structures. In this way the drives, which are 'energy' charges as well as 'psychical' marks, articulate what we call a *chora*: a nonexpressive totality formed by the drives and their stases in a motility that is as full of movement as it is regulated.⁹

The maternal force in the infant's life serves as the centralizing core of the chora. According to Kristeva, the figure of the mother orchestrates and organizes the diverse series of multifaceted drives and sensations which bombard the earliest stage of our psychosexual development, ultimately anticipating the concrete formation of our individualized identity. The semiotic chora, for Kristeva, constitutes a site wherein the multifaceted aspects of identity converge into "the place where the subject is both generated and negated, the place where his [sic] unity succumbs before the process of charges and stases that produce him."¹⁰ Kristeva borrows this term from Plato's *Timaeus*, in which the chora is defined as a receptacle which "provides a fixed space for all things that come to be."¹¹ The choran stage of psychoanalytic development ultimately leads to an integrated understanding of the self and, in turn, the other, by way of the connection with the maternal body.

The chora, with its centralizing, generative female force that hinges on the oscillating relationship between self and other, summarily defines the recurring narrative structure of Varda's films. Varda writes in her 1994 autobiography *Varda par Agnès* that the ability of cinema to simultaneously combine both words and images on a moving canvas inspired her to take up filmmaking in place of her previously chosen profession of photography. She voices a preoccupation with the choranic conception of the burgeoning differences between self and other as a motivating factor for her attraction to cinema: "un autre sujet me concernait: la non-correspondance du mode du pensée personnel au mode du pensée collectif. Le *je* et le *nous* ne s'entendait pas. Quand *je* devenait une autre, le *nous* restait massif et engagé."¹² Varda's body of work demonstrates a recurring desire to aestheticize the disconnection between the individual and the collective. Her films continually explore potential reconciliations of the conflict between self and other by way of choranic narrative practices.

Varda's films consistently activate the multifaceted choranic narrative in relation to the female cinematic perspective. Her second feature-length film, *Cléo de 5 à 7* (1962), includes multiple cinematic devices which visually convey Cleo's complex character. Near the start of the film, Cléo (played by Corinne Marchand) descends the staircase of a fortune teller's apartment, the question of impending death weighing heavily in her mind. The close-up of her face is divided into four rapid jump cuts; then cuts to a medium shot of Cléo gazing at herself in the mirror at the bottom of the staircase, the mise-en-abyme reflection creating a series of infinite Cléos. These introductory visual devices provide self-reflexive instances of Cléo's multifaceted construction which will organize the narrative in its entirety.



Fig. 1.

Fig. 2 provides the most effective visual image of the ethnochoranic narrative structure. The single image of the cracked window functions as a diagram for the narrative construction not only of *Cléo*, but of Varda's signature cinematic aesthetic. Cléo's direct gaze on the central point of the crack draws attention to this point as an allegory for her own centralized position within the narrative structure of the film. The lines which radiate inward to the centre represent the multiple secondary perspectives which construct Cléo's multifaceted, objectified representation. The surrounding figures substantiate the symbolic function of the cracked window; the objectifying gaze of the anonymous male figure in relation to Cléo perpetuates the classic cinematic position of the woman as object of desire.



Fig. 2.

This single frame, which provides an effective summary of the dialectical relationship between the multifaceted perspective and the centralized female figure, instantaneously conveys the influence of the ethnochoranic narrative on the levels of formal construction and thematic content which comprise each cinematic text under examination in this project.

Cléo, Varda's only feature-length film to be released during the New Wave era, centres on a single protagonist, much like the masculine New Wave film. The film, which premiered at the 1962 Cannes Film Festival, tells the story of Cléo, a pop music starlet awaiting the results of a cancer test. Her subsequent anxiety leads to a sudden escape from the objects and people which constitute her everyday life. Cléo gains self-awareness while wandering the streets of Paris, and revels in a renewed subjectivity through the observation of others. Cléo's progression from narcissistic preoccupation to subjective agency marks a development in interiority withheld from the female characters created by Varda's male counterparts.¹³

Sellier provides an excellent summary of the film's critical reception upon its release in France. Jacques Siclier of *Télérama*, muses that

what is disconcerting is that Agnès Varda does not identify with her heroine . . . [From the beginning], Cléo is presented objectively. . . We therefore cannot sympathize with Cléo as we would [with] a beautiful heroine in a novel threatened by an untimely death. By lending her own point of view, Agnès Varda detaches us from skin-level impressions and from vague yearnings in order to make us share the physical repulsion of a woman face to face with the idea of the disintegration of her body and with death.¹⁴

By presenting her protagonist objectively, Varda differentiates significantly from the male New Wave filmmakers who often construct alter egos in order to narrativize the creative process and assert a sense of heroic masculinity. The New Wave perpetuated the historical "tendency of elite male culture to distinguish itself from mass culture associated with an alienated femininity" which originated in French culture with the development of the middle class in a newly industrialized 19th century France.¹⁵ Cléo remains firmly rooted within mass culture throughout – she is a pop starlet often heard on the radio; we see her delight in a film-within-the-film, a silent slapstick comedy titled *Les Fiancés du Pont Macdonald*. Cléo's recognition of her place among the crowds on the streets of Paris further promotes the idea of the film as a celebration of the masses. Sellier writes that Cléo's

alienation appears in the end to be produced and maintained by the mass culture she embodies as a variety singer. The masking of gender oppression/alienation by sociocultural alienation indicates the contradictory attitude of Varda as filmmaker, who can only see relations of gender domination in the realm of mass culture, which she distances herself from resolutely through her innovative artistic project.¹⁶

The dominant role of mass culture becomes yet another indication of the polyvocal choranic narrative structure at work throughout *Cléo*. Sellier puts forth a highly astute reading of the film

when she orients Cléo within mass culture, and makes a very convincing argument with regards to the film's emphasis on cultural alienation over gender oppression. However, while Varda may not explicitly engage with the issue of female oppression within the narrative, the polyvocal structure of the film, when combined with a fully formed female protagonist, constructs a gendered response by way of formal contrast to the masculine first person New Wave film. With *Cléo*, Varda combines modernist aesthetics with sociocultural concerns in order to produce a portrait of the female experience alternative to the misogynistic New Wave view of women as alienated objects devoid of interiority.

The ethnochoranic is a means of theorizing Varda's particular approach to the representation of women. It is an idiosyncratic technique that involves both narrative structure and character construction. I argue that over the course of her career, certain motifs can be found that are at once ethnographic, in their scope of social observation, and "choranic" in their evocation of women's social identities. While there may be other filmmakers whose work also converges on the ethnochoranic structures developed in this thesis, space constraints permit further exploration of this possibility.

Agnès Varda: Experimental Ethnographer

In the context of the choranic narrative theory at the centre of Varda's cinematic aesthetic, this project also strives to situate Agnès Varda as an experimental ethnographer. Catherine Russell identifies experimental ethnography as "a methodological incursion of aesthetics on cultural representation, a collision of social theory and formal experimentation."¹⁷ Using Russell's

Experimental Ethnography as the primary point of theoretical reference for positing Varda's narrative practices as fundamentally ethnographic in form and content, this project endeavours to take a route which arises from *Experimental Ethnography*.

Ethnographic perspective is implicitly thematized throughout *Cléo de 5 à 7*. Cléo first struggles with objectification through the culture of celebrity and the psychoanalytic objectification of the woman under the male gaze. She ultimately succeeds in overcoming this state and assumes the role of ethnographic observer when the citizens of the streets of Paris are brought to the forefront as objects of her gaze. Cléo moves from ethnographic object to active ethnographic agent by way of the fragmentation of perspective which structures the film. Early on in *Experimental Ethnography*, Russell notes: "one direction that this book might have taken is the one leading from Italian neorealism to the many examples of dramatic narratives set in a culturally specific milieu, using professional and non-professional actors."¹⁸ Varda's first film, *La Pointe Courte* (1954), has often been cited for its neorealist qualities, and the practice of combining professional actors with non-professional subjects in her films is a central characteristic of each film.¹⁹

For André Bazin, the only true sign of neorealism in a director is "a consciousness disposed to see things as a whole."²⁰ With *La Pointe Courte*, Varda constructs a heterogeneous whole by interweaving a melodramatic fictional storyline involving the troubled marriage of a young couple with a multitude of events, both momentous and banal, taking place throughout the fishing community of Sète. The couple, who are referred to as "Elle" (Silvia Monfort) and "Lui" (Philippe Noiret), become malleable figures for Varda's aesthetic experiments.²¹ The actors deliver lines of poetic commentary on the state of their relationship with measured, toneless detachment. At the same time, everyday private dramas throughout the village are brought to the fore: a family comes

to terms with their teenage daughter coming of age; a fisherman is arrested for illegal fishing practices; an overworked single mother is faced with the death of one of her many young children. The film ultimately ends on an open, ambiguous note. While the fate of the couple remains in question, the departure of a family by boat for life in a new town marks the only true event of narrative progression.

La Pointe Courte, which anticipated the New Wave with its low budget, use of natural lighting, and rapid shooting schedule, corresponds to the all-encompassing scope of neorealism. The film, which was referred to as an example of “essai-cinéma” on the poster for its 1956 theatrical premiere at the Studio Parnasse in Paris, forms an ethnographic portrait of the fishing community. The dialectical structure of the film allows for the combination of aesthetic innovation and social concern which would come to characterize the Left Bank group.²² While Elle and Lui appear to receive narrative priority over the multitude of villagers, the effect of distancing achieved through detached performance and the use of pronouns in place of proper names, when combined with the excessively stylized framing, produces an ironic commentary on the narrative archetype of melodramatic love and loss, and heightens the realism of the individual dramas of the fishing community.



Fig. 3-6

A visual device akin to the cracked window of *Cléo de 5 à 7* becomes the focus of a sequence in *La Pointe Courte*. While on the beach, Elle comes across the detached bottom of a woven basket, through which the camera moves by way of a tracking shot. In a particularly significant shot, the basket base foregrounds the actors. Elle becomes intrigued by the object, shows it to Lui, and then tosses it into the tranquil water. The discarded base, which appears to have been constructed by interweaving a husk-like material, forms a circular set of spokes radiating inwards toward a central point, anticipating the cracked window of *Cléo*. The woven base symbolizes the interweaving narrative structure of the film by way of its foregrounding. When analyzed in conjunction with *Cléo's* cracked window, the woven base becomes a representative

object of narrative signification. Both the window and the basket base provide the basis for iconic images of the interweaving, multifaceted ethnochoranic structure.

La Pointe Courte summarizes the basic tenets of the ethnochoranic structure and cinematically activates the woven basket base. Varda produces an ethnochoranic narrative by interweaving principles of classical narrative film, exemplified through the melodramatic conflict between Elle and Lui, with a starkly realistic portrait of everyday Sèteian life. Varda has consistently and continuously situated herself as an experimental ethnographer throughout the entirety of her cinematic career through choranic narrative practices which shape each and every one of her films, be they fictional narratives or sociopolitical documentaries. The choranic narrative structure, in short, constitutes a mode of experimental ethnography in Varda's films.

In the last ten years, Varda has shifted her focus from narrative-based film to feature-length documentary (*Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse*, 2000) and gallery installations (the 2006 exhibit *L'Île et Elle*) as her central forms of cinematic expression; a transition which suggests that she is cohering to an increasingly conventional form of experimental ethnography. *Sans toit ni loi* (1985), one of Varda's final forays into feature-length narrative film, is explicit in its ethnographic characteristics and will be discussed further in chapter two. Varda combines professional and non-professional actors in an effort to explore the social problem of vagrancy in contemporary France, and the feminist implications of a lone woman choosing to subsist on the margins of society.

Réponse de femmes

The ethnochoranic narrative structures the mise-en-scène of Varda's 1975 short film, *Réponse de femmes*. The film, which takes the shape of a feminist manifesto, is Varda's contribution to a series of shorts aired on French television to mark UNESCO's Year of the Woman. Varda answers the question, "what does it mean to be a woman?" through an examination of the societal objectification of women. She approaches this question in 8 different ways in the 8-minute film, addressing topics such as the female body, the question of motherhood, the female brain, and the objectification of women by the media.

Varda presents multiple and contrasting perspectives on each of these issues; for example, she includes women who both agree and disagree with the idea that women are unfulfilled until they have experienced motherhood. *Réponse de femmes* concludes with the statement that women must be reinvented within the male, and in turn, societal gaze. Yet the film is fully aware that its own message is merely a starting point. Varda herself concludes the film in voiceover, with the open-ended phrase, "to be continued..."



Fig. 7

Varda emphasizes the multifaceted collectivity of the female experience with carefully arranged clusters of women who directly address the camera with declarations of individuality and react to an offscreen male voice espousing a series of misogynistic stereotypes. Fig. 7 centres on a centralized blonde woman surrounded by a circle of secondary women, and recalls the cracked window image from *Cléo*.²³ The blonde then declares, "I am unique, ok, but I represent all women." The combination of these words and the composition of this shot summarize Varda's multifaceted, inclusive cinematic approach to the female experience.



Fig. 8

Fig. 8 also corresponds to the choranic concept of unification by way of integrated multiplicity; each secondary female figure appears to simultaneously compose and radiate from the centralized blonde protagonist.

Teresa De Lauretis concludes her influential 1984 book, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* with a discussion of what precisely constitutes the often generalised concept of the female experience. De Lauretis directly relates female experience to subjectivity when she positions 'Experience' not in the "individualistic, idiosyncratic sense of something belonging to one and

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exclusively her own even though others might have 'similar' experiences; but rather in the general sense of a *process* by which, for all social beings, subjectivity is constructed."²⁴ De Lauretis summarizes the choranic structure of interconnective community when she explains that "the process is continuous, its achievement unending or daily renewed. For each person, therefore, subjectivity is an ongoing construction, not a fixed point of departure or arrival from which one then interacts with the world."²⁵ For De Lauretis, the interaction between one's subjective engagement in social and historical reality ultimately produces the female experience.

De Lauretis historicizes Lévi-Strauss's structuralist perception of women as functional objects of exchange and circulation among men. In confrontation with the perception of women as replaceable commodities, the ethnochoranic narrative strives to reconceptualise the historical approach to women by reconfiguring the concept of faceless multiplicity as a representative instance of female experience through a collective portrait of multiple female subjectivities. The relation between the ethnochoranic structure and De Lauretis' semiological template of experience becomes increasingly clear as De Lauretis defines the concept of female experience as "a complex of habits resulting from the semiotic interaction of 'outer world' and 'inner world,' the continuous engagement of a self or subject in social reality."²⁶ This project will ultimately posit the entirety of Varda's oeuvre as textual practices which have, from the very beginning of her 56-year career, consistently asserted a progressive understanding of the female experience; an approach De Lauretis claims to have been historically absent from feminist work at the time of the publication of *Alice Doesn't* in 1984.²⁷

With the declaration of, "I am unique, ok, but I represent all women," Varda succinctly addresses the inherent contradiction which is, according to De Lauretis, the inherent position of the

female subject of feminism. De Lauretis concludes *Alice Doesn't* with the central contradiction of the female experience: that women continue to become Woman.²⁸ In her 1987 examination of the social definitions of sexual difference, *Technologies of Gender*, De Lauretis begins with the notion that contemporary feminist thought centres on the conception of a female subject who coexists “across a multiplicity of discourses, positions, and meanings, which are often in conflict with one another and inherently (historically) contradictory.”²⁹

Varda upholds this notion of innate female contradiction when she references a recurring interest in constructing characters based on an internal sense of opposition: “I’m interested in contradiction – the inner contradiction – which makes everybody three persons at the same time.”³⁰ In *Varda par Agnès*, she also lists “d’accepter la contradiction” as one of three definitions of *bonheur*.³¹ Finally, as one woman of *Réponse de femmes* notes, “you live in contradiction when you are in a woman’s body”. This theme of multifaceted contradiction structures Varda’s approach to narrative and to character. The significance of contradiction in conjunction with the female experience will be revisited throughout this project as a definitive aspect of the ethnochoranic narrative.

Russell activates the choranic properties of a modernist experimental ethnographic cinema when she states that “experimental ethnography involves, above all, dismantling the universalist impulse of realist aesthetics into a clash of voices, cultures, bodies and languages.”³² The pervasive atmosphere of choranic community throughout Varda’s cinematic aesthetic can also be found in experimental ethnography: “the utopian project of experimental ethnography is to overcome the binary opposition of us and them, self and other.”³³ There has been a tendency to position the lack of psychological depth in Varda’s female characters as critical proof of Varda’s antifeminism. Claire

Johnston, for example, argues in her seminal essay, "Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema" that Varda's 1965 film *Le Bonheur* exemplifies a "rejection of culture and [placement] of woman outside history [which marks] a retrograde step in women's cinema."³⁴ The theoretical lens of experimental ethnography provides a response to these claims because Varda combines an ethnographic perspective with a tone of ironic passivity in the creation of her characters.

According to Russell, "ethnographic allegory [. . .] refers to the process by which individuals are abstracted into general social patterns; individual subjects become representative of cultural practices and even 'human' principles."³⁵ Varda ironically appropriates this conventional approach to ethnographic filmmaking with films such as *Réponse de Femmes*. The ultimate effect of modernist irony articulates the inherent contradiction of using a potentially homogenizing, ethnographic formal approach to the subject of the individualized female experience. The refrain of *Réponse de femmes*, "I am unique, ok, but I represent all women," summarizes the ethnographic position of Varda's women who are culturally representative yet simultaneously retain a distinctively individual and autonomous sense of identity.

This project will comprise two chapters. The first will examine how a temporal sensibility provides further insight into the ethnochoranic narrative through Varda's formal appropriation of the digital, the cinematic, and the photographic media. Chapter two will focus on the female protagonists of the Vardian narrative and the way in which Varda interrogates the New Wave trope of absent female interiority through an ironic depiction of the typical masculine perception of the female experience. In other words, each chapter will centre on an aspect of *Cléo's* cracked window which provides the visual diagram for this project. Chapter one will examine the radiating lines which comprise the ethnochoranic structure by way of temporality; the radiating lines form a

circular image akin to a clock, with the lines tracing the movement of clock hands. Chapter two, will, in contrast, focus on the central point of the crack; the vacant female figure a paradoxical point of narrative fixation.

Although many film scholars canonized Varda long ago for her contributions to the French New Wave, her body of work as a whole merits further critical analysis. Auteurist criticism on Varda's cinematic canon is now somewhat dated; many works were published in the 1980s in the immediate aftermath of *Sans toit ni loi*. In contrast to works such as Sandy Flitterman-Lewis's *To Desire Differently*, which examines Varda's feature-length films in comparison with French female directors of the early 20th century, I hope to reorient the films within a larger scope, reaching beyond the boundaries of national cinema and the medium of conventional narrative film. Through a comparative examination of Varda's work, including the influence of photography and digital technology on her approach to cinematic time, and the installation format which defines the current phase in her career, this project aims to recontextualize Varda's cinema within the perspective of what I am calling an ethnochoranic narrative form.

While this study aims to provide a comprehensive overview of Varda's body of work, in-depth analysis has been favoured over a mere cataloguing of titles. The works which comprise this study were chosen for their strength as representative examples of Varda's varied formal expressions of the ethnochoranic structure. Had this study been greater in scope, my analysis would certainly have included films such as *Daguerréotypes* (1976), *L'Une chante et l'autre pas* (1977), *Mur Murs* (1981), *Un petit amour* (aka *Kung Fu Master!*, 1988), *Jacquot de Nantes* (1991), *Cent et une nuits* (1995), and *L'Univers de Jacques Demy* (1995). While each of these films would surely

provide intriguingly nuanced contributions to my larger argument, the size of a master's thesis necessitates certain limitations.

From her first film, *La Pointe Courte*, Varda demonstrates a predilection for a multifaceted approach to narrative. In the films which followed, such as *Cléo de 5 à 7*, and *Réponse de femmes*, Varda aestheticizes a pluralistic female experience, an approach which promotes the collective individuality of each woman. The following pages will expand upon the notion that the ethnochoranic narrative, as a cinematic activation of the fragmented, intricately woven female identity, responds to the feminist call for progressive aesthetic and sociocultural representations of the female experience.

NOTES

¹ Agnès Varda, in conversation with the author, September 10 2008.

² Geneviève Sellier, *Masculine Singular: French New Wave Cinema*, trans. Kristin Ross (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008), 5.

³ Varda coined the term *cinécriture* to summarize an inclusive approach to filmmaking which places equal weight on the visual and the aural components of narrative construction: “*Cinécriture* is the total concept, the filmmaker’s imprint from the writing of the scenario to what occurs during the choice of décor, location scouting, the actual shooting and the editing process. I believe that the visual imagination involves much more than the writing of the scenario and the direction of the film. In *cinécriture*, there is no dichotomy between the scenarist and the director.” Agnès Varda, “Interview: A Personal Vision,” *Passion*, June-July 1986, 20.

⁴ Sellier, *Masculine Singular*, 98.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 219.

⁶ Varda, “Ciné-Varda” (lecture, Harvard Film Archive, Cambridge, MA, March 12, 2009).

⁷ Alan Wilde, *Horizons of Assent: Modernism, Postmodernism, and the Ironic Imagination*, (London and Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), 10.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Julia Kristeva, “Revolution in Poetic Language,” *The Kristeva Reader*, Ed. & Trans. Toril Moi, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987) 93.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 95.

¹¹ Plato, “Timaeus.” *Timaeus and Critias*, Trans. Desmond Lee, (London and New York: Penguin, 2008), 52 b-c.

¹² Varda, *Varda par Agnès*, (Paris: Cahiers du Cinéma, 1994), 39.

¹³ For more on Cleo’s progression from object to subject, see Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, *To Desire Differently: Feminism and French Cinema*, 268-284.

¹⁴ Jacques Siclier, review of *Cléo de 5 à 7*, *Télérama*, April 1962, quoted in Geneviève Sellier, *Masculine Singular*, 62.

¹⁵ Sellier, *Masculine Singular*, 69.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 220.

¹⁷ Catherine Russell, *Experimental Ethnography: The Work of Film in the Age of Video* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), xi.

¹⁸ Ibid., xii.

¹⁹ For more on *La Pointe courte* and neorealism, see Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, *To Desire Differently: Feminism and French Cinema*, 220-221; Alison Smith, *Agnès Varda*, 1-5.

²⁰ André Bazin, "In Defence of Rossellini", *What is Cinema?* Vol. 2., 1971, trans. and ed. Hugh Gray, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005), 97.

²¹ Sandy Flitterman-Lewis summarizes Varda's recurring approach to character development: "Varda has constructed all of her characters in terms of broad social outlines, thereby replacing psychological depth with social complexity." *To Desire Differently: Feminism and French Cinema*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 221.

²² to which Varda credits William Faulkner's 1939 modernist novel, *The Wild Palms*, for its alternating chapters between the marital trials of a young couple and the plight of two escaped convicts.

²³ Varda herself has noted the direct connection between *Cléo de 5 à 7* and *Réponse de femmes*: "Cléo is the cliché-woman: tall, beautiful, blond, voluptuous. The whole dynamic of the film lies in showing this woman at the moment when she refuses to be this cliché [. . .] and this is also why I maintain that there is no rupture between *Cléo* and *Réponse de femmes*, and even that there is an inviolable evolution." "Propos sur le cinéma," *Cinéma 75* 47-48.

²⁴ Teresa DeLauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 159.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., 182.

²⁷ Ibid., 186.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ De Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), x.

³⁰ Varda, "Interview with Barbara Quart," *Film Quarterly*, (June-July 1986): 9.

³¹ Varda, *Varda par Agnès*, 70.

³² Russell, *Experimental Ethnography*, 19.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Claire Johnston, "Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema," *Feminism and Film*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan, 32.

³⁵ Russell, *Experimental Ethnography*, 5.

CHAPTER ONE

The Emergence of Ethnochoranic Time

In “Caryatids of Time: Temporality in the Cinema of Agnès Varda,” Yvette Biro and Catherine Portuges situate Varda’s temporality as ethnographic in nature with the argument that in the Vardian film, “time is seen as a natural milieu of everyday life, with its gently pulsing rhythm” and conclude that “time itself is the main protagonist of Varda’s films.”¹ Varda’s temporal sensibility depicts the continual intersection between the banality of the everyday and the unique individuality of the self. The oscillating relationship between the individual and the collective appears throughout Varda’s work in a multifaceted narrative form which I am calling the ethnochoranic structure.

In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau analyzes the status of the individual amidst the systems of production which comprise culture. For de Certeau, “everyday life invents itself by poaching in countless ways on the property of others.”² The concept of the everyday as an ongoing process of interconnection between the individual and a collective culture allows for greater insight into Varda’s inherently pluralistic approach to the individual experience. de Certeau argues that “each individual is a locus in which an incoherent (and often contradictory) plurality of such relational determinations interact.”³ The organizational power of the various modes of operation (for example, television, urban development, or commerce) transforms the individual into the consumer.

At the same time, however, de Certeau bestows a certain amount of agency to the individual within the constraints of modern culture. de Certeau terms consumers

“unrecognized producers, poets of their own acts, silent discoverers of their own paths in the jungle of functionalist rationality,” who produce subjective trajectories within preconstructed systems such as media outlets and supermarkets.⁴ The consumer creates these trajectories in order to “trace out the ruses of other interests and desires that are neither determined nor captured by the systems in which they develop.”⁵ While de Certeau primarily focuses on the individual use of space within predetermined cultural modes, many fundamental systems depend on various forms of temporal constraint. The following pages will examine the ways in which individual persons and objects retain their own trajectories amidst the temporally constructed collective modes of modernity.

To return to the concept of the ethnochoranic, ‘choranic,’ derives from the concept of the semiotic chora, wherein the multifaceted aspects of identity converge to form a subjectivity derived from the self and the other, as represented through the maternal body. ‘Ethno-,’ derives from the ethnographic motivation behind Varda’s work, which contains neorealistic origins, and promotes social awareness throughout her documentary and narrative work. What I am proposing with this study is an examination of how Varda uses a multivocal, ‘choranic’ narrative structure to depict individuals and social causes. This chapter will argue that while the ethnochoranic narrative structure works to eradicate the problem of individual otherness, time becomes the intangible other which Varda’s protagonists struggle to overcome, and becomes the main antagonist of Varda’s films.

This chapter will begin with close readings of the short film *Ulysse* (1982) and *Cléo de 5 à 7* (1962), which provide examples of Varda's photographic and cinematic temporal sensibilities. Mary Ann Doane's *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, The Archive* will form the theoretical basis for a comparative approach to photography and film in relation to Varda's cinema, with particular focus on Siegfried Kracauer's theory of photography and cinema as an uncontrolled "blizzard of images."⁶ I will then conclude with an assessment of the impact of digital time on Varda's cinematic aesthetic through a detailed analysis of *Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse* (2000). Examined in conjunction with D.N. Rodowick's *The Virtual Life of Film*, the tangibility of Varda's digital cinema exemplifies an ethnographic conception of time. In short, this chapter will examine Varda's multifaceted temporal sensibility as an integral component of the ethnochoranic narrative form.

'24 photos per second': Reconciling Photographic Time and Cinematic Time

In the midst of her 2009 lecture at the Harvard Film Archive, Varda noted that she has long viewed cinema as a form comprised of "24 photos per second," while simultaneously interpreting photography as "one image torn from a virtual film."⁷ Varda, who began her career as a photographer for the Théâtre Nationale in France, retains a photographic sensibility throughout her cinematic aesthetic. Eventually, however, Varda expanded her creative vision to cinema: "photography seemed to me much too silent [. . .] the sharp sensation of time passing and the erosion of feelings

which inflict on us mould and rust, undigested humiliations and wounds which don't close. For the wounds of the soul, photography wasn't enough."⁸

In *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*, Mary Ann Doane examines the temporal relationship between photography and cinema. For Doane, early cinema can be understood as a medium centred on the restructuring of time in the face of capitalist modernity. The homogenization of time is a byproduct of the industrial age of the factory and the railroad, two institutions which were dependent on a standardized synchronization of time in order to maximize productivity and profitability.⁹

The work of Sigmund Freud and Étienne-Jules Marey exemplify Doane's examinations of how psychoanalysis and the medium of chronophotography address the inherent conflicts of effecting a visually-oriented conception of time. Marey is in fact the focus of a sequence in *Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse* when Varda visits the farmhouse where definitive sequential photographs of birds in flight were captured using Marey's chronophotographic gun. Varda refers to these images as early activations of image-capturing as a form of gleaning, establishing a dialogue between Marey and her own DV format. This dialogue becomes apparent through Varda's practice of freezing digital images earlier in the film. This technique allows for an examination of the images in their fragmented, pixellated state, and subsequently produces an effect similar to that of Marey's stilled, sequential images of movement. Varda and Marey depict motion in its fragmented, static state to analyze not only movement but the technological capabilities of their respective mediums.

Marey viewed time as an infinitely divisible continuum, yet in striving to render an accurate depiction of "all time," he became confronted with the ultimately insurmountable obstacle of visual illegibility. In order to render movement analyzable to the naked human eye, Marey found it necessary to evade realism in the form of a blurred image for the sake of legibility.¹⁰ While Marey did make fleeting attempts at experimentation with cinematic images, he ultimately rejected the form, arguing that "cinema produces only what the eye can see in any case. It adds nothing to the power of our sight, nor does it remove its illusions."¹¹ Cinema, through its ability to capture events in real time, conceals "the division between frames, [acknowledging] the loss of time on which it is based."¹²

Doane cites the ethnographic qualities found throughout the films of the Lumière brothers. In the making of films such as *Sortie des Usines Lumières à Lyon* (1895), Auguste and Louis Lumière established an overarching objective to capture the everyday. It is through narrative that cinema attempts to make time legible, producing time as an effect despite early cinema's original impetus to serve as an agent of temporal representation.¹³ In *Theory of Film*, Kracauer notes that Auguste Lumière chose an aesthetic based around a photographic realism as opposed to narrative, because he "realized that story telling was none of his business [. . .] the bulk of his films recorded the world about us for no other purpose than to present it."¹⁴ The Lumières' earliest films centred on the theme of public places, "with throngs of people moving in diverse directions [. . .] it was life at its least controllable and most unconscious moments, a jumble of transient, forever dissolving patterns accessible only to the

camera."¹⁵ Varda fuses the ethnographic representation linked to early cinematic practices with a multifaceted narrative approach. The disorder of everyday life depicted throughout the Lumières' work recurs in Varda's work on a formal level. As a result, the ethnochoranic narrative structures the disorder of modernity.

The elements of narrative self-reflexivity which populate Varda's films can be examined through the Freudian notion of time as discontinuous and contingent. Freud perceived of time as incompatible with memory. Time is discontinuous through its orientation within the consciousness; whereas memory is assigned wholeness, embodying representation itself.¹⁶ Doane writes that for Freud, "it is the discontinuous functioning of the system perception-consciousness that produces those gaps and in this way produces the notion of time."¹⁷

Through practices of cinematic self-awareness, Varda directly references the gaps which Marey evaded and Freud identified as definitive of time. By exposing these gaps, Varda establishes a meditation on the effects of cinematic time throughout her body of work. In *Jacquot de Nantes* (1991) and *Les Demoiselles ont eu 25 ans* (1993), Varda creates further, self-referential gaps between the frames when she inserts clips from films belonging to her late husband Jacques Demy. In *Jacquot*, each clip begins and ends with a fleeting chalkboard image of a hand pointing an index figure. In *Demoiselles*, inserts of the word "extrait," also on chalkboard, parenthesize clips from Demy's 1967 film *Les Demoiselles de Rochefort* to place further emphasis on the documentary's temporal discontinuity and artificial construction.

According to Doane, both Marey and Freud's resistance to cinema anticipates Siegfried Kracauer's ambivalence surrounding photography and film. For Marey and Freud, cinema "strove for the status of total record, strove to confirm the senses and their potential apprehension of anything and everything, it constituted itself as a failure of representation."¹⁸ In the 1927 essay "Photography," Kracauer comments that the excess of images found throughout newspapers of the era "record the spatial impressions of people, conditions, and events from every possible perspective," disseminating information without context through "nothing but a collection of photographs."¹⁹ For Kracauer, "the flood of photos sweeps away the dams of memory. The assault of this mass of images is so powerful that it threatens to destroy the potentially existing awareness of crucial traits."²⁰ While an "authentic film" uses photographic technology as a medium through which to establish meaning or a coherent narrative, "the blizzard of photographs betrays an indifference toward what the things mean."²¹

Varda's filmic approach resolves the crisis of the blizzard of images, or what Doane terms cinema's "difficult task of endowing the singular with significance, of manufacturing an event in a medium designed to record, without predilection, all moments" not simply by submitting to a linear narrative structure in order to make cinematic time legible.²² Instead, Varda's films retain a photographic sensibility because they retain the effect of the singular amidst a narrative form which multiplies itself so that linearity is no longer homogenizing but inclusive in its heterogeneity. Singularity is

multiplied without falling victim to the reducibility of the unrelenting continuum of cinematic narrative time.

Ulysse: 'Only The Image'

Ulysse (1982) is a cinematic meditation on the potency of the photographic image and speaks to Varda's heterogeneous conception of time. The film centres on a photograph, taken by Varda in 1954, of a naked child on a beach looking towards the prone corpse of a goat while a nude man faces away from the camera, looking out into the ocean. *Ulysse*, which won a 1984 César for Best Documentary Short, was re-released in 2004 as part of the triptych *Cinévardaphoto*, accompanied by *Salut les cubains* (1962-63) and *Ydessa, les ours et etc...* (2004).

The narrative of the film exemplifies Kracauer's argument that "once a photograph ages, the immediate reference to the original is no longer possible."²³ Through the narrative construct of the film, Varda questions the scope of memory in relation to the aged photograph as concrete document. According to Varda's 2007 introduction to the film, *Ulysse* becomes "an investigation, a look back to a time past. I gathered together my own imperfect memories and some precise information and other people's memories and I intertwined them."²⁴ *Ulysse* explores the construct of memory and the inherently subjective nature of the act of remembrance in relation to the historical document that is the photograph.



Fig. 9

The film opens and closes with a lengthy static shot of the photograph, then cuts to Varda's subjective meditations on the day the photograph took place, complete with a visual of her own perspective through a plate camera at the precise time of the shoot. Varda contextualizes the static image in voice-over, her subjective ruminations on the photograph interweaving with documentary-style interview footage of the photographic subjects. "Compared to photography," Kracauer writes, "memory's records are full of gaps."²⁵ While the interviewed subjects of *Ulysse* act out the fragmentary nature of individual memory, the film ultimately corresponds to Kracauer's notion that "the photograph does not preserve the transparent aspects of an object but instead captures it as a spatial continuum from any one of a number of positions."²⁶

Interestingly, the titular Ulysse claims to have no recollection of either the photograph, the events which led to the staging of the scene, or his painting which constitutes his own artistic interpretation of the photograph when interviewed as an adult. In reaction to Ulysse's uncooperative memory, Varda notes that the photograph is

now an object of fiction for him. She remarks that the image “is real but not for you. You must imagine your childhood.” Ulysse responds with the argument that even the absence of personal memory constitutes a subjective contribution to the meaning behind the image: “to each his own story, after all – even if it’s strange, between reality and fiction.”

In an effort to assign the image a point of view contemporary to what Ulysse’s would have been that day, Varda presents the photograph and the painting to a group of present-day children. The collective, intersecting responses of the children exemplify the multiple perspectives which comprise an ethnochoranic narrative. The film then reconciles the children’s temporal distance through the historical context of newsreel footage of the official historical events which took place on May 9, 1954 - the day the photograph was taken. Despite the ironic tone of the sequence, the inclusion of historical events in relation to the photograph confirms Kracauer’s argument that the photograph “must be essentially associated with the moment in time at which it came into existence.”²⁷

At the forefront of events is a commemoration for the French lives lost in the battle of Dien Bien Phu during the First Indochina War, proving a metaphoric linkage to the image of the perturbed boy gazing on the body of the dead goat through themes of mourning and sacrifice. Varda, in voice-over, provides further historical context for her image, referencing the Geneva Convention, and the new popularity of singer Yves Montand over the declining Edith Piaf. The film moves from the collective to the individual when Varda orients herself within the time and place of the photograph. She

recounts all that she could have done instead on the day she took the photo, and includes a montage of her photographs which followed *Ulysse*, then briefly mentions that she would soon begin filming *La Pointe Courte*. Through this historical and individual contextualization, the photograph becomes a centralized facet of a multiperspectival ethnochoranic aesthetic.

By constructing the film through multiple perspectives, be they individual or historical, Varda positions her photograph as one experiential record of a particular day in history. Kracauer, like Varda, recognizes the multifaceted nature of both photography and memory. In the photograph, for Kracauer, “memory images appear to be fragments – but only because photography does not encompass the meaning to which they refer and in relation to which they cease to be fragments. Similarly, from the perspective of memory, photography appears as a jumble that consists partly of garbage.”²⁸ At the same time, however, *Ulysse* refutes Kracauer’s notion that photography fails to encompass the meaning behind memory. The film embraces the fragmentary nature of memory for the express purpose of demonstrating the way in which photography and memory work in tandem to produce meaning. With *Ulysse*, Varda constructs an ethnochoranic narrative by amassing the jumbled fragments of individual and historical memory of the photograph.

Varda quotes two historically contrasting poets, 8th century Chinese poet Li-po, (“Like time, water never stops running”) and 19th century French poet Alphonse de Lamartine (“O Time, suspend your flight”), whose words summarize Varda’s ongoing preoccupation with the relentless passing of time. The notion of an image as

representative of a single moment in time coexists with the sustainable materiality of the photograph as timeless object. At the end of the film, Varda brings her efforts to orient the image within a particular temporal setting to an abrupt halt, claiming, "I could have taken it last Sunday or yesterday...I or someone else. There is only the image. You see anything you want in it."

Varda's conception of photographic temporality in *Ulysse* recognizes the futility of an attempt to capture time. Whether it be the frozen time of a photograph or the fast forward of digital video, the driving motivation of the Vardian narrative is the ability to subsist outside the antagonistic forces of time. Kracauer argues that "if photography is a *function of the flow of time*, then its substantive meaning will change depending upon whether it belongs to the domain of the present or to some phase of the past."²⁹ For Varda, however, the flow of time becomes a function of photography as organized through the ethnochoranic narrative. If there is "only the image," the photograph becomes the material object at the centre of a narrative based on multiple perspectives located throughout the spatial and temporal continuums.

***Cléo de 5 à 7*: The Temporal Weight of Modernity**

Cléo de 5 à 7, Varda's most widely recognized film, clearly places the theme of temporality at the forefront. The film, which premiered at the 1962 Cannes Film Festival, tells the story of Cléo, a pop music starlet awaiting the impending results of a cancer test and takes place over the course of two hours on June 21, otherwise known as the longest day of the year. Her subsequent anxiety leads to a sudden escape from

the objects and people which constitute her everyday life. Cléo gains self-awareness while wandering the streets of Paris, and revels in a renewed subjectivity through the observation of others. The division of the film into thirteen separate chapters, prefaced with an opening scene at a fortune teller's apartment, constructs a multifaceted narrative in which Cléo's centralized point of view becomes interwoven with the perspectives of her friends and colleagues.³⁰

The formal device of approximating screen time with narrative duration, and the question of looming death for the film's young protagonist work in tandem with each other to produce a highly sophisticated meditation on the effects of time. A character's name prefaces each of the film's thirteen chapters, along with a sub-heading of a start and end time outlining the exact duration of the chapter.³¹ The image of the cracked window, which serves as the basis for this project, also recalls the clock form. The opening scene of the film outlines the story in its entirety when the fortune teller accurately predicts the narrative events to come. Roger Tailleux observes that "*Cléo* begins with an overture [. . .] in which everything is said, gathered together, summarized with a main theme and secondary themes."³² In doing so, Varda orchestrates an explicit meditation on time. The opening scene emphasizes the fact that the entire story could be told within a matter of seconds; however Varda chooses to expand and prolong the events over the film's 89-minute runtime.

In his analysis of *Numéro zéro* by Jean Eustache, a filmmaker occasionally associated with Varda through the Left Bank faction of the French New Wave movement, D.N. Rodowick writes that the "conceit or folly of wanting to film

uninterrupted duration is a way of showing that (real) time is neither homogeneous nor continuous.”³³ Rodowick could just as easily be addressing Varda’s own aestheticization of real time on film. By way of narrative construction and an emphasis on the uninterrupted present tense, *Cléo de 5 à 7* posits the inherent heterogeneity of time through the ethnochoranic structure.

In the opening pages of *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*, Doane elaborates on the relationship between time and modernity. For Doane, “the emerging cinema participated in a more general cultural imperative, the structuring of time and contingency in capitalist modernity.”³⁴ By the turn of the twentieth century, the concept of modernity was firmly rooted within rationalized temporality. Doane writes,

The wide diffusion of the pocket watch, the worldwide standardization of time to facilitate railroad schedules and communication by telegraph, as well as Taylorism’s precise measurement of the time of labour and its extension in Gilbreth’s cyclographs all testify to the intensity of the rationalization of time in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Time becomes uniform, homogeneous, irreversible, and divisible into verifiable units.³⁵

In effect, Doane offers a Marxist reading of time when she comments that “a commodity has value because it has the objectification of abstract human labour, a labour that has been deparicularized, lost all specificity [. . .] qualityless, the labour can only be measured by its duration.”³⁶ In keeping with Doane’s observations, I would like to posit a reading of *Cléo de 5 à 7* as a narrative centred on the rationalized temporality of modernity.

Throughout the first half of the film, Cléo is explicitly and continuously oriented within commodity culture, and is ultimately objectified through rationalized, homogeneous time. Benedict Anderson expands upon Walter Benjamin’s

“homogeneous, empty time,” in which “simultaneity is, as it were, transverse, cross-time, marked not by prefiguring and fulfillment, but by temporal coincidence, and measured by clock and calendar.”³⁷ The opening scene of the film concludes with a close-up on the hands of Cléo as she discreetly passes a handful of folded bills into the fortune teller’s waiting hand. Upon receipt of the money, the fortune teller assumes a blank expression, indicating the conclusion of their time together. Cléo then exits onto the street, where a wide tracking shot immediately aligns Cleo with racks of dresses, price tags hanging prominently at their waists, drawing attention to her own fashionable polka-dot dress. The salesmen in front of the store visibly stare at Cléo, then call out to her, attracted to both her physique and her wallet.

Soon afterwards, Cléo enters a hatshop with Angèle, her secretary. Cléo then chooses and purchases a hat – a winter hat trimmed with fur, making the purchase an entirely frivolous one. The treatment of time within this scene is quite complex. Cléo wanders around the store leisurely trying on hats and intermittently posing as though Angèle were a fashion photographer. The rapid speed of the passing automobiles and streetcars reflected in the storefront window conveys the disparity between Cléo’s temporal sensibility and that of reality. Varda succinctly describes the desired effect of temporal dislocation in the scene’s directions: “Passersby perceive, across the large showcase windows, a dream-like creature [Cléo] who glides as if in an aquarium.”³⁸ Through the formal organization of the scene, Cléo becomes akin to a mannequin modelling goods for sale. The explicit use of the storefront window places Cleo in an ideal position of maximal visibility for the passing customer.



Fig. 10, Cléo in the hatshop

For Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, the scene is “a visual tour de force, [in which] Varda captures Cléo’s image in a maze of reflecting mirrors, sinuous circular camera movements, and plate-glass shop windows that pick up reflections and details from the street outside.”³⁹ Cléo shares the screen with the bustling street action on the opposite side of the window yet retains her state of self-centred oblivion. The significance of the hat shop scene becomes all the more apparent when contrasted with the second half of the film. The chapters which follow her emotional outburst depict a newly self-aware Cléo who becomes highly attuned to the presence of the passing strangers she encounters while wandering the streets of Paris. As a result, Cléo is now a direct participant in the action from which she was previously removed and experiences, in effect, life on the other side of the window.

Flitterman-Lewis goes on to argue that the hat shop scene is “a literalization of the woman-as-image caught up as the pivot within the cinematic apparatus.”⁴⁰ The inherent sociality which comprises the core of Varda’s ethnochoranic cinema ultimately reorients Cléo’s pivotal, centralized position to one of productive, intersubjective vision.

The circular movement of the camera recurs throughout the film, effectively mimicking the circular, intersubjective construction of the narrative itself which is readily identified through the image of the cracked window.

Roger Tailleur refers directly to the circular imagery of the film when he observes that, “what lies at the heart of *Cléo* is less the obsession with death than the possibility of breaking the circle, not so much of death, but change [. . .] Almost as much as in *L’Opéra Mouffe*, where faces had a haunting presence, *Cléo* has a constellation of human faces.”⁴¹ In her direction for the pivotal musical scene which precedes Cléo’s emotional outburst, Varda refers to this sequence in her screenplay as “the hinge of the story,” and emphasizes that “the circular movement which isolates Cléo is like a huge wave carrying her off.”⁴² Varda makes repetitive and consistent use of camerawork throughout the film to establish a visual commentary on Cléo’s position as focal point; a stance which begins as narcissistic objectification and ends with intersubjective externalization.

The first half of the film positions Cléo solely in relation to those who signify money, and it becomes clear that the majority of the people in her life view her as little more than a valued object. The early scenes of the film centre on interactions between Cleo and the fortune teller; the manager at the café; the hat shop clerk; and the cab driver. These brief associations accompany Cleo’s ongoing relationships with central figures such as Angèle, who serves as a paid companion; her duo of songwriters; and her middle-aged lover who is the financial means for Cléo’s apartment and career. For Doane, the abstraction of time which characterizes capitalist modernity ultimately

effects a depersonalization of the subject. Throughout the first half of the film, the recurring presence of money and transactional relationships emphasizes Cléo's own absence of subjectivity and depersonalization, and works in tandem with Varda's overarching intention to narrativize temporal dependency.

Cléo's emotional breakdown, which leads to the narrative turn in subjectivity, can be understood through Doane's exploration of the structured temporality of modernity:

what is at stake is the representability of time for a subject whose identity is more and more tightly sutured to abstract structures of temporality. The theory of rationalization does not allow for the vicissitudes of the affective, for the subjective play of desire, anxiety, pleasure, trauma, apprehension. Pure rationalization excludes the subject, whose collusion is crucial to the sustenance of a capitalist system.⁴³

Cléo's torrid dissemination of angry emotion towards her financially dependent friends at the climactic turning point in the narrative marks an explicit rejection of the theory of rationalization, effectively awakening a newly independent subjectivity which ultimately marks an evasion of the capitalist system.

By the second half of the film, Cléo has shed herself of both her financially dependent friends and her inherent materiality. The scene immediately following Cléo's transformation directly references this perception of Cléo as a commodity. While at Le Dôme, Cléo inserts coins into the jukebox to play her own song, effectively purchasing herself and disseminating her own voice throughout the bustling café. Later in the film, Cléo laughs off her subsequent failure to make any sort of significant impact on the café patrons, an act which throws her appeal as a commodity into question.

Cléo also makes the significant gesture of giving her newly purchased hat to her friend Dorothée. Dorothée contrasts directly with Cléo through her ability to distance herself from her physical impact on others. Her self-assured declaration foreshadows the feminist imperative behind *Réponse de femmes*: “My body makes me happy, not proud. They’re looking at more than just me - a shape, an idea.” Dorothée’s multi-panel patterned dress (Fig. 11) is yet another visual indicator of the film’s multifaceted narrative. The character of Dorothée corresponds with that of the overarching narrative through her self-awareness and ability to relate to a sense of perspective beyond that of her own self, a talent Cléo is still grappling with.



Fig. 11



Fig. 12

Mosaic motifs recur throughout the film and work in tandem with the ethnochoranic narrative structure. Among them are the previously discussed cracked window, the modernist collage paintings on the walls of Le Dôme, and the mirrored column (Fig. 12); the inclusion of which, “with its multifaceted mirror surface – independent presence and representation of the whole – is an especially brilliant

conception, since it encapsulates in one stunning visual image the story of the film and its entire narrative process."⁴⁴ Interestingly, a duo of mirrored columns, identical to the one featured in *Cléo*, figure prominently throughout *Lions Love*, Varda's 1969 ode to a hippie-era polyamorous relationship.



Fig. 13, Lions Love

Like the mirrored column, Dorothee's multi-panelled costuming serves as an aestheticization of her narrative significance. Dorothee readily embodies the omniscient perspective Cléo strives for as she attempts to maintain an intersubjective position. Dorothee's austere reaction to Cléo's shattered compact mirror is once again indicative of her ability to see the whole when Cléo can only see broken fragments; she then rationalizes Cléo's superstitious reaction with reassurances that the broken mirror was not meant for Cléo, but the dead man at the scene of the cracked window.

The second half of the film illustrates the concept of contingency in place of the previously depicted rationalized time of capitalist modernity. For Doane, contingent time marks a "resistance to system, to structure, to meaning. Contingency proffers to the subject the appearance of absolute freedom, immediacy, directness. Time becomes heterogeneous and unpredictable and harbours the possibility of perpetual newness,

difference, the marks of modernity itself. Accident and chance become productive.”⁴⁵

While Cléo remains dependent on time to the extent that she waits for the scheduled hour to meet with her doctor, she assumes control of the direction of events in the meantime. The film concludes with an activation of contingent time through a chance encounter with Antoine, a young soldier. Antoine becomes a source of perspective for Cléo. The public space of Parc Montsouris marks the setting of their encounter, which becomes the first relationship in the film that is free of commodification or transactional concerns.

Cléo de 5 à 7 establishes a response to Kracauer’s anxiety-ridden blizzard of images through the organizing principles of the ethnochoranic narrative. Cléo functions as the singular throughout the narrative, yet it is the effect of multiplicity which the narrative achieves, signifying Cléo’s perspectival redemption. In spite of its occurrence midway through the film, Cléo’s emotional outburst becomes the narrative climax because it marks the end of Cléo’s paralyzing self-absorption. Such unconventional narrative organization becomes clear when the final scene ultimately becomes anticlimactic. Cléo finally receives her test results from her doctor, only to discover that the result is neither entirely negative nor positive. She is indeed ill with cancer, yet her disease is fully treatable and she is expected to make a full recovery.

The central positioning of the decisive, climactic moment mimics the circular design of the cracked window which serves as the visual indicator for the film’s narrative organization. The cracked window is itself an activation of the “mythical mapping of time onto space,” which Jill Forbes describes as the anthropological impetus of *Cléo*.⁴⁶

The window becomes a map of the film's narrative through its centripetal structure; the radiating lines converging into a singular point. Each secondary character who is assigned a chapter to their name becomes a radiating line of narrative subjectivity, each of which serves to broaden the viewer's perspective of Cléo. Varda comments in her introduction to the screenplay that the secondary characters "colour the narrative, or rather the angles through which the portrait of Cléo is painted."⁴⁷ It is through the aestheticization of these multiple angles that *Cléo de 5 à 7* asserts temporal heterogeneity in the face of the homogenizing temporal depersonalization associated with capitalist modernity. Varda renegotiates Kracauer's conception of cinema as unstructured through the ethnochoranic narrative, a structure which is made explicit through the centralization of cinematic time.

'To Film One Hand with the Other': Pixelizing Ethnochoranic Time

Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse premiered on French television during the summer of 2000. In spite of this alternative form of release, the documentary garnered strong support on the international film festival circuit, eventually receiving a large theatrical release around the world. Recently, the film has experienced a resurgence in popularity due to its inclusion on multiple critics' lists devoted to the best films of the past decade. The film recalls the political and sociological awareness found throughout Varda's oeuvre, which includes issues such as civil rights (*Black Panthers* (1968)), abortion rights (*L'Une chante, l'autre pas* (1977)), and vagrancy (*Sans toit ni loi* (1985)). Varda organizes

the narrative trajectory of *Les Glaneurs* according to political and sociological concerns which coexist with an aesthetic preoccupation of an autobiographical nature.

Les Glaneurs begins with the discovery of a painted image of a group of women in the act of gleaning, and an exploration of the meaning behind the verb, “to glean.” The narrative continues with interview footage of various gleaners, in both urban and pastoral settings. From vagrants, to chefs, to artists, to tax-paying citizens who glean not for economic reasons but for pleasure or environmental concern, Varda captures the various motivations for a gleaning lifestyle through her newly acquired mini-DV camera, which subsequently becomes the subject of a series of digressive meditations on the digital format and her aging self.

Ben Tyrer acknowledges the inherent risk of idealizing the gleaners through an excessively ethnographic approach, and cites a central image of the film, Jules Breton’s 1877 painting *La Glaneuse*, as a potential example of such a danger with its portrayal of the proud gleaner. “This aestheticisation of the gleaner occludes the reality of her social exclusion,” Tyrer writes, “and it is an image which Varda is quick to undermine; she poses next to the painting with her own wheat sheaf, which she drops with a grin and picks up her camera.”⁴⁸ An oscillating relationship between ethnographic investigation and individual creativity forms the narrative foundation of the film. Tyrer observes that “Varda’s concern for her own body connects with the needs of the gleaners whose struggle for food and shelter are of course bodily concerns.”⁴⁹ The inclusive presence of the multitude of gleaning voices throughout society, organized by Varda’s digitally

enhanced hand, establishes an ethnochoranic structure that ultimately conveys a cogent message of the irrevocable intersection between the personal and the political.

In her article, "Matter, Time and the Digital: Varda's *The Gleaners and I*", Hoday King examines how Varda's use of digital technology becomes a meditative commentary on the tangibility of time. According to King, the film "insists on matter, body, and duration, despite being made in a medium that is the logical outgrowth of the desire to overcome these things."⁵⁰ In the making of *Les Glaneurs*, Varda establishes a digital materialist cinema, one that is in conflict with the conventional conceptions of digital technology. For further insight on the arguably problematic concept of a digital materialist cinema, D. N. Rodowick's *The Virtual Life of Film*, cited in King's article, will serve as a theoretical referent for Varda's approach to the digital. Rodowick examines the ethics of time in relation to film in conjunction with an ontological exploration of digital cinema. *Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse* correlates with Rodowick's interrogation of digital time because Varda's digressions on the manipulation of digital technology posit a self-referential thematization of temporality.

Rodowick makes note of the article, "The New New Hollywood: Cinema Beyond Distance and Proximity," in which Thomas Elsaesser likens digital cinema to the medium of painting. For Elsaesser, "the manual application of craft and skill" aligned with painting marks the return of the artist's direct participation in the manipulation of surfaces, be they digital images or blank canvases, rendering digital cinema "an expressive, rather than reproductive medium."⁵¹ Varda's digital lens consistently lingers on images of various paintings throughout the film; two paintings on the subject of

gleaning, Jean-François Millet's *Les glaneuses* (1857) and Pierre Édmond Hédouin's *Gleaners fleeing before the storm* (1852), ultimately bookend the narrative.

Rodowick opposes digital temporality to that of film-based cinema. He argues that the digital image is "the expression of change in the present as opposed to the present witnessing of past durations."⁵² Early on in *Les Glaneurs*, Varda acknowledges the intrinsic present tense of the digital form by referencing, in voice-over, the use of her digital camera. Filming her own image repeatedly in slow motion, Varda generates a fragmented, impressionistic self-portrait, distilling the present moment into a series of divided, stilted movements. In contrast, the 2002 sequel to the film, *Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse...Deux Ans Après*, begins with an "aide-mémoire," wherein the entirety of the original film replays at fast forward, pausing at intervals to emphasize significant images and figures. Such a device assigns a sense of present tense materiality to a series of events from the historical past and conveys a sense of instantaneous retrievability, a feat articulated through the use of digital technology.

For Rodowick, the orientation of the digital within the present corresponds to its inherent immateriality. In contrast to the materiality of photography, digital images "do not exist in material form, even a negative one, until generated in hard copy. The digital could thus in many ways be said to realize the dream of a disembodied, timeless, and transcendent form of representation."⁵³ Throughout *Les Glaneurs*, Varda exhibits a recurring fixation on material objects. One sequence in particular provides evidence of this when she films various souvenirs from a trip to Japan. The scene concludes when she muses, "for forgetful me, it's what I have gleaned that tells where I've been".

Varda's continual preoccupation with the act of filming "with one hand my other hand," suggests an existential preoccupation with her own physicality in addition to foregrounding the manual creativity of digital cinema. For Varda, the contradiction between the immaterial, digital mode of filming and the societal fixation with material objects and excessive consumption is the central, organizing principle of *Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse*. The present tense of the digital form directly contrasts with the historical past attached to the objects, and Varda suggests, through the use of her digital camera, that objects, like time, are too much with us.

The film's interrogation of objects continues when Varda films a handless clock salvaged from a gutter in the street (Fig. 14), musing, in voice-over narration, that "a clock without hands is my kind of thing. You don't see time passing." Varda's camera lingers on the handless clock, suggesting a desire for a personal freedom from temporality and its structuring effects. The film's thematic preoccupation with the sustainability of elements beyond their predetermined expiry date corresponds to this sense of idealized timelessness.

This underlying theme is brought to the forefront throughout multiple scenes with gleaners who protest against the societal dependence on the expiry dates of food products. Instead, the gleaners resolve to subsist outside the time frames determined by faceless figures of capitalist authority. By engaging with objects like the handless clock and acts of protest against the expiry date, Varda posits an ethnographic analysis of time. The film's ethnographic approach to the subject of gleaning positions time as a

material object, and the experimental expression of Varda's reflections on aging demonstrates a conflicting desire for temporal freedom.

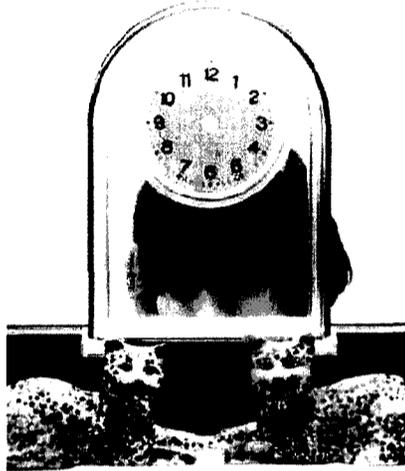


Fig.14

Rodowick's theory of digital temporality and the argument that a digital image is "not 'one'" corresponds to the ethnochoranic narrative through the inherently discontinuous and fragmented nature of the digital image. The electronic image is "in a constant state of reconstruction through a process of scanning, [yet] is never wholly present in either space or time [. . .] it is never identical with itself in a given moment in time."⁵⁴ Varda devotes a significant portion of *Les Glaneurs* to the explication and execution of *faire la bife* ("loading up"), the act of rescuing unwanted objects and pieces of furniture discarded on sidewalks and in alleys. Hervé, the self-described "painter and retriever," exemplifies the practice of reconstructive art, which for him involves the accumulation of a multitude of objects through nocturnal *bif*-ing to create multifaceted, mixed media artworks. For Varda, the very act of gleaning and amassing discarded fragments neatly corresponds to the multiplied, pixellated fragments which comprise

the digital image, and simultaneously serves as a continuation of her modernist collage aesthetic.⁵⁵

Varda's *La Cabane de l'Échec* installation, a part of her 2006 *L'Île et Elle* exhibit, provides a further, literal example of the retrievable image. Varda repurposes celluloid strips from the reels of her self-perceived failure of a film, *Les Créatures* (1966), to serve as the walls and roof of a cabin-like structure.⁵⁶ For exhibition purposes, the cabin is positioned in an open, windowed space so a maximum amount of natural light illuminates each frame. An editing table accompanies the cabin, projecting the film in reverse on a continuous loop.



Fig. 15, Interior of *La Cabane de l'Échec*

Martin Herbert describes the exhibit and its overall effect in *Art Review* magazine: "Catherine Deneuve unwrites a letter; Michel Piccoli strolls backward along the beach. Amid madcap formal contusions and simple, heartfelt gestures towards incommunicability, this embodied wish for time to rewind itself outpaced all else for uncomplicated eloquence."⁵⁷ The act of restructuring stilled images into an alternative, utilitarian form, when combined with screening the film in reverse, summarily defines

Varda's overarching desire to salvage objects and moments from the passing of time, and ultimately effects a reorganization of time itself. Varda translates the reconstructive focus of her digital cinema onto the direct, tactile experience of the gallery setting with *La Cabane de l'Échec*. The subjective reordering of images, whether in the gallery or in the digital realm, becomes a mode through which to circumvent the otherness of time.

Conclusion: '...All the time in the world'

While the prospect of imminent death justifies the temporal anxiety of the protagonist of *Cléo de 5 à 7*, Cléo's concluding realization that "we have all the time in the world," is consistent with the idealization of atemporality which runs throughout the Vardian narrative. The struggle with the antagonistic otherness of time, whether it be in digital, photographic, or cinematic form, ends only with the realization that the oppressed subject, whether it be Cléo, or Varda herself, recognizes their ability to produce a subjective reordering of time. Material objects, in the case of the titular photograph of *Ulysse* or the handless clock of *Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse*, or an assertive subjectivity, in the case of Cléo, demonstrate a capacity to remain within the present tense. For Varda, the paradoxical desire to achieve a sense of materiality in relation to time, accompanied by the recognition of our inherent inability to retain any sort of control over this material time, colours the narrative construction of each film discussed in this chapter.

On the subject of the ever-increasing proliferation of digital technology into modern daily life, Rodowick writes, "the powers of digital capture and diffusion have

transformed not our sense of the past, but our relationship to the history of the present and what it means to occupy *present* time.”⁵⁸ These observations on the digital form apply to Varda’s entire body of work. Throughout the entirety of her 56-year career, Varda moulds each format, whether it be photographic, cinematic, or digital, to fit a heterogeneous conception of time. For Rodowick, then, the digital image functions

as an incessantly proliferating mapping of our present whose dimensions and scales are powerfully expansive. It is as if every individual on the globe capable of purchasing a capture device were participating collectively in a project of visually documenting our immediate present. We are immersed in this present as part of a global, serialized community in which the individual ‘photographer’ is now one among many inputs contributing to a larger collective process of the spatial and temporal mapping of everyday life.⁵⁹

While it must be acknowledged that here Rodowick is concerned with the ubiquity of digital photography in contemporary culture, his arguments apply to each film discussed in this chapter and the manner in which they activate the ethnochoranic form. In place of the individual photographers under discussion in Rodowick’s work, Varda positions individual subjectivities as contributing agents to her collective portraits which map the spatial and temporal narratives of the everyday.

NOTES

¹ Yvette Biro and Catherine Portuges, "Caryatids of Time: Temporality in the Cinema of Agnès Varda," *Performing Arts Journal* 19, no. 3 (September 1997): 1.

² Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Trans. Steven Rendall, (London and Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), xii.

³ *Ibid.*, xi.

⁴ *Ibid.*, xviii.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Siegfried Kracauer, "Photography," *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, trans. and ed. Thomas Y. Levin, (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1995), 58.

⁷ Varda, "Ciné-Varda".

⁸ Agnès Varda, *Varda par Agnès* (Paris: Cahiers du Cinéma, 1994), 38-39.

⁹ Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, The Archive* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 7-8.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 60.

¹¹ Marta Braun, *Picturing Time: the work of Etienne-Jules Marey (1830-1904)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), quoted in Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*, 61.

¹² Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*, 62.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 67.

¹⁴ Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The redemption of physical reality* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1960), 31.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*, 45.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 61.

¹⁸ Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*, 68.

¹⁹ Kracauer, "Photography," 58.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*, 67. Doane then proceeds to argue that “despite the fascination with the camera’s relation to ‘real time’ and movement, narrative very quickly becomes [the] dominant method of structuring time” in early cinema.

²³ Kracauer, “Photography,” 54.

²⁴ Agnès Varda, introduction to *Ulysse*, Disc 1, *Varda Tous Courts*, DVD, directed by Agnès Varda (Paris, France: Cine-Tamaris, 2007).

²⁵ Kracauer, “Photography,” 50.

²⁶ Ibid., 53.

²⁷ Ibid., 54.

²⁸ Ibid., 50-51.

²⁹ Ibid., 54.

³⁰ Upon the release of *Cléo* in 1962, Roger Tailleur wrote in his review of the film in *Positif* that “Agnès Varda is the harmony of her opposites, and perhaps the most complete of our filmmakers [. . .] *Cléo* is thus both the freest of films and the film that is the greater prisoner of constraints, the most natural and the most formal, the most realistic and the most precious, the most moving to see and the most pleasant to watch.” *Cléo: From Here to Eternity* (Agnès Varda).” *Positif 50 Years: Selections from the Film Journal*. 1962, Ed. Michel Ciment and Laurence Kardish. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2002, 73.

³¹ This device also indicates which character’s perspective will organize the chapter’s events.

³² Tailleur, “*Cléo: From Here to Eternity*,” 77-78.

³³ Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 82.

³⁴ Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*, 3.

³⁵ Ibid., 6.

³⁶ Ibid., 7.

³⁷ Benedict Anderson *Imagined Communities*, (London: Verso, 1991), 37.

³⁸ Agnès Varda, *Cléo de 5 à 7*, Paris: Gallimard, 1962, 21.

³⁹ Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, *To Desire Differently: Feminism and the French Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 278.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

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- ⁴¹ Tailleur, "Cléo: From Here to Eternity," 78.
- ⁴² Varda, *Cléo de 5 à 7*, 21.
- ⁴³ Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*, 11.
- ⁴⁴ Janice Mouton, "From Feminine Masquerade to Flâneuse: Agnès Varda's Cléo In the City." *Cinema Journal* 40, no. 2, Winter 2001. 11.
- ⁴⁵ Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*, 11.
- ⁴⁶ Jill Forbes, "Gender and Space in *Cléo de 5 à 7*," *Studies in French Cinema* 2, issue 2, 2002. 84.
- ⁴⁷ Varda, *Cléo de 5 à 7*, 8.
- ⁴⁸ Ben Tyrer, "Digression and return: Aesthetics and Politics in Agnès Varda's *Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse* (2000)," *Studies in French Cinema* 9, no. 2 (2009): 169.
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 173.
- ⁵⁰ King, Homy. "Matter, Time and the Digital: Varda's *The Gleaners and I*," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 24, (2007): 422.
- ⁵¹ Elsaesser, Thomas. "The New New Hollywood: Cinema Beyond Distance and Proximity," *Moving Images, Culture, and the Mind*. Ed. Ib Bondebjerg, (Luton: University of Luton Press, 2000), 192-193.
- ⁵² D. N. Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film*, 136.
- ⁵³ Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film*, 39.
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 137-138.
- ⁵⁵ During her 2009 lecture at the Harvard Film Archive, Varda directly referenced the cumulative pixels of the digital image, and proceeded to freeze frame her own digital portrait in an effort to forge a direct comparison between the mosaic effect of pixellation and the modernist style of Cubism. Agnès Varda, "Ciné-Varda" (lecture, Harvard Film Archive, Cambridge, MA, March 12, 2009).
- ⁵⁶ *La Cabane de l'Échec*, from *L'Île et Elle*, Agnès Varda, Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain, June 18 – October 8 2006.
- ⁵⁷ Martin Herbert, "Agnès Varda: L'Île et elle," *Art Review* 3 (2006): 138.
- ⁵⁸ Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film*, 146.
- ⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 147.

CHAPTER TWO

'Sometimes a plastic woman wanders in': Recentring the Vacant Female Figure¹

In "The Semiotic and the Symbolic," Julia Kristeva argues that a social structure forms the basis of the semiotic chora: "social organization, always already symbolic, imprints its constraint in a mediated form that organizes the chora not according to a law (a term we reserve for the symbolic) but through an ordering."² Subsequently, "the mother's body is therefore what mediates the symbolic law organizing social relations and becomes the ordering principle of the semiotic chora, which is on the path of destruction, aggressivity, and death."³ The central, organizing presence of the maternal figure is prevalent throughout many films by Agnès Varda, in addition to the structuring principle of social organization. Varda's 1958 short film *L'Opéra-Mouffe* exemplifies the organizing maternal perspective. Varda's offscreen yet centralized perspective as a pregnant woman captures the diverse faces and experiences of a busy market street. The self-reflexive presence of her self as both filmmaker and pregnant woman organize the social narrative of the film, which is subtitled "Diary of a Pregnant Woman".

The sixteen-minute film includes shots of pumpkins and gourds sliced open with a knife. The series of images are metaphors for Varda's own pregnant belly, and conclude with shots of a chick struggling to extricate itself from an egg in an effort to convey Varda's impending anxiety over giving birth. The film approaches pregnancy with as much anxiety as that which can be read on the faces of the wandering, decrepit street people throughout the film. The

multiple shots of struggling newborn animals work in tandem with expressive shots of the lonely aged inhabitants of the rue Mouffetard. The final scenes of the film include a lengthy sequence of a middle-aged woman struggling to carry groceries while walking along a wall which incidentally includes multiple graffiti-d calls for peace in Algeria. For Varda, motherhood is rarely if ever an idyllic experience but one accompanied by unrelenting conflict, indecision, and self-denial.⁴ The onscreen absence of Varda, the protagonist of this diary film, anticipates the elusive yet centralized female figures which recur throughout Varda's body of work.

Varda's maternal figures correspond closely with the mother at the centre of the semiotic chora. According to Kristeva, pregnancy involves a "splitting of the body, the division and coexistence of self and other – this fundamental challenge to identity is accompanied by a fantasy of wholeness of narcissistic self-containment."⁵ Kristeva goes on to argue that maternity is a truly creative act: "the arrival of the child guides the mother through a labyrinth of a rare experience – the love for another person, as opposed to love for herself, for a mirror image, or especially for another person with which the 'I' becomes merged – becoming self-effacing."⁶ This process entails a multifaceted experience in conjunction with the maintenance of self-denial, effectively summarizing the maternal position within the Kristevan chora. Varda perpetuates the Kristevan notion of motherhood by constructing mothers as depersonalized figures. These maternal figures interrogate, in turn, a societal tendency to view women in relation to generalized roles in place of individual identities.

The following pages will examine the detrimental effects of the ethnochoranic structure upon the centralized female figures as depicted throughout Varda's narratives. This chapter will elaborate on how the female figures of *Les Créatures* (1966), *Le Bonheur* (1965), *Jane B. par*

Agnès V. (1987) and, in particular, *Sans toit ni loi* (aka *Vagabond*, 1985) become objects of multiple perspectives. The ethnochoranic structure generates a depersonalizing effect in relation to each centralized female figure throughout each film. To return to the image from *Cléo de 5 à 7* which provides the basis for this project, this chapter will focus on the point at the centre of the cracked window.



Fig. 16

As discussed in chapter one, Varda continually locates her female figures at the centre of the radiating, multiperspectival lines which comprise the ethnochoranic structure. This chapter will expand upon the way in which the ethnochoranic narrative structures these female figures, and how this process produces a cultural commentary on the female experience.

The films examined in chapter one centre on themes of awareness, whether it be of the self (*Cléo de 5 à 7*), the past (*Ulysse*), or social concern (*Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse*). This chapter will explore the detrimental effects of societal objectification upon the female figures at the centre of the ethnochoranic structure, using *Les Créatures*, *Le Bonheur*, *Sans toit ni loi*

and *Jane B. par Agnès V.* as examples. With each film, Varda uses the ethnochoranic form to produce an absence of interiority in a centralized female figure. Such a narrative structure could be interpreted as a perpetuation of an antifeminist objectification of women associated with the French New Wave.⁷ In the case of Varda's films, however, self-referential gestures such as the inclusion of Varda herself as a figure of authorial presence expose the multiperspectival construction of alienated female figures. In short, these ironically constructed portraits aestheticize the societal tendency to view women as isolated Other. These devoid yet centralized female characters will, from hereon in, be referred to as vacant female figures to denote an absence of interiority.

Les Créatures

Catherine Deneuve's character in Varda's 1966 film *Les Créatures* is a rudimentary version of Varda's vacant female figure. Deneuve plays Mylène, who has been rendered mute as the result of a car accident and soon becomes pregnant by her writer husband Edgar (Michel Piccoli) while sequestered in their newly acquired home. Mylène's isolation from the community renders her an anomalous figure in relation to the multiperspectival ethnochoranic form, however she merits attention here due to her status as a centralized yet vacant feminine form throughout the film. Mylène is an isolated fragment in relation to the minor characters who populate the village and collectively distrust the secretive Edgar who conceals his wife's existence for the bulk of the narrative. Upon learning of her pregnancy through a combination of gesture and written word, Edgar emphasizes her voided status when he marvels, "quelle bonne idée tu es!" Edgar ultimately views his beautiful, silent wife as a concept instead of an

individual person; a stance perpetuated throughout the film by way of Deneuve's narrative inactivity.



Fig. 17, Mylène (Deneuve) partially obscured by Edgar (Piccoli).

Whether Mylène can be interpreted as a feminist figure or an ironic depiction of the experience of a subordinate woman is unclear. The narrative becomes somewhat convoluted when paranormal elements such as talking animals and mind-controlling disks are introduced into the story as the film alternates between the realm of reality, which Mylène inhabits, and that of the fiction which constitutes the fantastical narrative running through Edgar's mind as he composes his novel. As a result, Varda's intentions and the depth of her individual characters become lost amidst the science fiction narrative which marks a significant generic departure for Varda, one that was never to be repeated.⁸

Julia Kristeva equates the maternal figure at the centre of the semiotic chora with muteness as a necessary consequence of the child/subject's assertion of independence from the maternal enclosure. The mother herself must replace the child/subject's previously centralized presence, and as a result must regress to a state of pre-linguistic capability. In

“Place Names,” Kristeva emphasizes the relationship between motherhood and muteness with the notion that “to reach the threshold of repression by means of the identification with motherhood” is “no longer [to] hear words or meanings; not even sounds.”⁹ The mother becomes a depersonalized generative site or “genetrix,” according to Kristeva.

This development leads to the paradoxical impossibility that the mother cannot simultaneously structure and inhabit the chora. In response, Kristeva positions the artist as a stand-in who will speak for the muted mother: “At the intersection of sign and rhythm, of representation and light, of the symbolic and the semiotic, the artist speaks from a place where [the mother] is not. . . the artist lodges into language, and through his identification with the mother. . . [traverses] with both sign and object.”¹⁰ Kristeva explicitly orients the artist figure as male, a significant detail for Kaja Silverman, who argues that “for Kristeva, to speak is thus necessarily to occupy a ‘male’ position; even the maternal voice can be heard only through the male voice.”¹¹ *Les Créatures* fulfills this hierarchical relationship between male artist and muted mother-to-be, and corresponds in turn to the heterogeneous chora by endowing Edgar with creative control over a multiperspectival narrative in the form of a fantastical chess game.

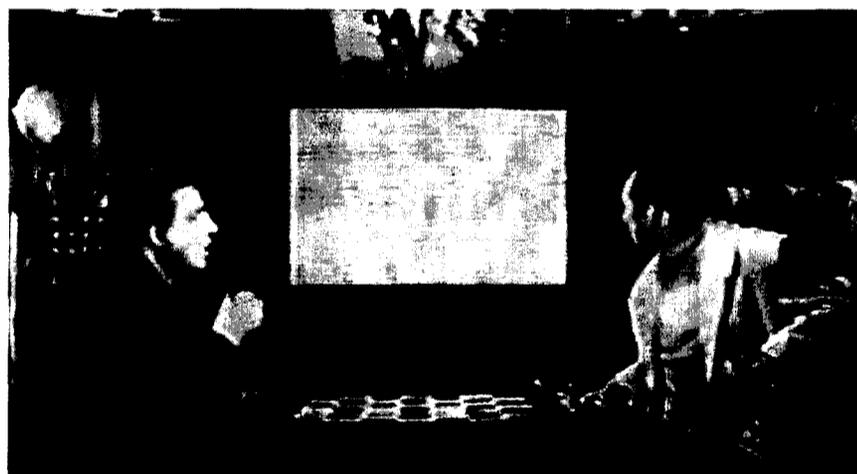


Fig. 18, The chess game in play

The chess game, which leads to the climax of Edgar's novel, constitutes the most intriguing aspect of the film. In Edgar's fictionalized narrative, he is challenged to a match by an evil engineer who has been manipulating the actions of the villagers by way of the game. Miniaturized, mobile versions of the villagers function as chess pieces and become pawns under the control of the engineer. If a villager-pawn is taken, we become privy to the villager's individual narrative strand through the cinematic screen attached to the board. The players then decide the positive or negative outcome of the villager's fate with the press of a button. The engineer forces Edgar to play the game in order to spare Mylène from his manipulative hand, an act which aligns Mylène with the heterogeneous collection of villagers who comprise the ethnochoranic narrative of the chess game.

The chess game not only generates an ethnochoranic structure but also interrogates the notion of authorial control. Both Edgar and the nefarious engineer compete to determine the fate of each villager and effectively control the outcome of each individual narrative. The engineer derives a sadistic pleasure by instilling narrative conflict amongst the villagers. Subsequently, Edgar wins the game and kills the engineer in a fight to the death, signifying the completion of his novel. Edgar's fictional narrative stream concludes as Mylène goes into labour. Just as Edgar cedes his authorial voice with the conclusion of his novel, Mylène magically regains hers as their son takes his first breath. The equation between the production of a novel with that of a new life positions both Edgar and Mylène as creators. However, the convoluted nature of Edgar's fantastical story and, in turn, the overall film, devalues the significance of the production of human life in comparison, and ultimately deflates the potential creative agency behind Deneuve's character.

The opacity of Deneuve's Mylène corresponds to Geneviève Sellier's interpretation of the masculine perspective of the French New Wave. Sellier provides a highly detailed investigation of the French New Wave period (1956-1962) and the depiction of iconic actresses such as Brigitte Bardot, Anna Karina, and Jeanne Moreau as alienated objects of analysis in *Masculine Singular: French New Wave Cinema*. While Sellier positions Varda and the Left Bank filmmakers as explicitly distinct from the misogynist New Wave, *Les Créatures* does little to differentiate itself from the films of Varda's New Wave colleagues. Sellier could be describing the narrative of *Les Créatures* with the argument that the typical New Wave film centres on the "figure of the romantic hero [who is] the creator (of himself or of a work of art) who aspires to total autonomy, in contrast with the woman who needs others in order to exist and who threatens to draw him in to her contingency."¹² Edgar's role as novelist results in a position of unrelenting narrative control, rendering the film's narrative-within-a-narrative a story of narcissistic heroism. In contrast, Mylène remains confined to the realm of the mute and is defined solely through her role as wife, and, by the end of the film, mother.

The concluding scene wherein Mylène regains her voice through the act of childbirth presents the problematic notion that women can only truly express themselves through a maternal role. While rendering Mylène physically incapable of speech could be interpreted as a satirical commentary on the New Wave treatment of women onscreen, Varda fails in turn to provide any sort of narrative agency for her heroine and ends up producing the same effect of female objectification as her male counterparts. Despite these apparent antifeminist shortcomings, however, *Les Créatures* provides a preliminary model of the vacant female figure which recurs, as an ironic illustration of female alienation, throughout Varda's later films.

Le Bonheur

Varda's widely controversial 1965 film *Le Bonheur* actively interrogates the vacant female figure. The film centres on the story of François (Jean-Claude Drouot), who, despite being already married to Thérèse (Claire Drouot, the actor's own wife) with two children (also played by their own children), begins an affair with Emilie (Marie-France Boyer) while believing both relationships can not only simultaneously exist but flourish. A bright palette of Impressionistic spring-like colour, when accompanied by the lilting strains of Mozart, establishes a consistent tone of innocent bliss. These devices ultimately produce an unsettling, dissonant atmosphere when Thérèse wanders off from the family picnic upon learning of François' affair, and is later found drowned in the river. The film's previously carefree tone becomes further problematized when the narrative concludes with the seamless integration of Emilie into the family unit, as she effortlessly fulfills Thérèse's role as wife and mother.



Fig. 19, François and dance partner, framed by tree

Claire Johnston famously criticized the film as reactionary in her seminal essay "Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema," and referenced *Le Bonheur* as evidence that with

Varda's "rejection of culture and her placement of woman outside history her films mark a retrograde step in women's cinema."¹³ I intend to argue instead that *Le Bonheur* is an ironic depiction of the female experience through the device of the vacant female form. Self-reflexive tools of distancing such as the continuously mobile camera emphasize the subtle irony at work throughout the film. The scene of the town square dance (Fig. 19) is a particularly interesting example of the ironic tone of the film as expressed through camera movement. The camera remains mobile throughout this scene, and assumes a voyeuristic persona through its positioning behind a large tree which presides over the narrative action while François, Thérèse, and Emilie rotate amongst dance partners.

The narrative content of the film may be construed as complicit with a patriarchal structure by way of its faithful emulation of an archetypal story of a woman sacrificing herself for the sake of the male ego. However, the true critical perspective of the film lies within its excessive mise-en-scene and the ever increasing discordance between the narrative action and the independent movement of the camera. *Le Bonheur* is best interpreted through the type of pastiche Richard Dyer analyzes in conjunction with Gustav Flaubert's 1856 novel *Madame Bovary*: "*Madame Bovary* suggests not just that pastiche can be used to be critical, but that it is precisely by drawing close to what it critiques that it is able to convey most forcefully why that needs to be critiqued, namely, because it works."¹⁴ In effect, *Le Bonheur* is a pastiche of the "bourgeois myths of women" which it allegedly celebrates, according to Johnston, due to the fact that it realistically depicts then ultimately distances itself from the characters and their actions.¹⁵

While Thérèse appears to be a character without interiority, the film begins with a series of shots focusing on her role as wife and mother. During a lazy Sunday in the country, Thérèse performs various chores – extinguishing the fire, and checking on her sleeping children, before curling up next to her unmoving, sleeping husband. This focus suggests a narrative ostensibly allied with Thérèse. The sequence concludes with an over-the-shoulder shot from Thérèse’s perspective of a passing truck full of boisterous teenagers, an interruption which rouses François. This shot becomes the closest the camera ever comes to conveying a character’s direct point of view; voyeuristic, deliberately distanced framing comprises the remainder of the film. The absence of interiority throughout the rest of the film subsequently becomes an interrogative commentary on Thérèse’s ultimate lack of agency within the narrative.

The pin-up images of idealized, famous blonde bombshells tacked on to the cupboard in François’ workshop and Emilie’s apartment reflect the film’s ongoing depiction of female objectification in place of feminine perspective. The recurrent pop culture imagery of the female form is symbolic of the elitist, male-centric French New Wave which distinguishes itself from a mass culture associated with alienated femininity.¹⁶ The pin-up girls function as objects of consumption within the masculine arena of the workshop that is filled with sawdust and sports talk; a fact that is made clear when a worker opens the cupboard to help himself to a piece of chewing gum from a box. The numerous pin-up images reflect François’ belief that “happiness is by addition,” a remark he makes when justifying his ability to love both Emilie and Thérèse equally and simultaneously. While Emilie claims to embrace an independent lifestyle,

the presence of pin-up images on her own walls suggests that she aspires to a superficial emulation of other attractive blondes like Thérèse.



Fig. 20, The workshop collage

The continual depiction of women as mass-produced, disposable objects of consumption is brought to the forefront when Thérèse talks of a trip to the cinema to see a film starring Brigitte Bardot and Jeanne Moreau.¹⁷ Thérèse then asks her husband: “which woman do you prefer?” To which he answers, “you.” Significantly, this exchange occurs immediately after François’ first meeting with Emilie in the post office. Thérèse lends a visual aid to the scene’s implicit interrogation of the interchangeable nature of women when she moves to the corner of the kitchen to examine her reflection in the three-sided mirror hanging in the kitchen, momentarily reflecting a doubled, *mise-en-abyme* self-portrait back to the viewer.

Varda’s preoccupation with the vacant female form recurs in the form of the dressmaker’s dummy which metonymically represents Thérèse’s profession as dressmaker. Over the course of the narrative, Thérèse uses the mannequin to create a wedding dress for a young client, a garment which signifies the production of yet another blonde wife. The

continual alignment between the mannequin and Thérèse recalls Dorothée's profession as a nude model in *Cléo de 5 à 7*, wherein she is surrounded by plaster replicas of her own outline, and anticipates Varda's 1984 short film *Les dites Cariatides* which captures the ubiquitous presence of nude female statues on Parisian building facades. The female outline thus becomes a vehicle for the depersonalized interchangeability of women throughout Varda's body of work. The aestheticization of the vacant female figure indicates the societal tendency to homogenize women who are, in reality, fully formed individuals.



Fig. 21, Thérèse's mannequin



Fig. 22, Dorothée in *Cléo de 5 à 7*

In the article, "Unhappily Ever After: visual irony and feminist strategy in Agnes Varda's *Le Bonheur*," Rebecca J. Deroo contextualizes the film in relation to imagery found in advertisements in the pages of women's magazines of the era, in addition to the widely disseminated theories of second-wave feminism of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) and Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949).¹⁸ The motif of physical depersonalization continues with Deroo's emphasis on the "serving hand imagery" found throughout the film. Deroo analyzes a montage sequence early in the film wherein a series of medium close-ups of Thérèse's hands at work performing tasks such as ironing, rolling out dough, and putting the children to bed summarize her daily routine.

According to Deroo, Varda critiques the images of female domesticity found throughout the pages of popular magazines such as *Elle* and *Marie Claire* through the visual irony of the film.¹⁹ "Although often appearing in subservient roles," Deroo writes of the original magazine advertisements, "these women's hands - and by implication, their owners - were intended to represent the fulfillment available to women in domestic life."²⁰ For Deroo, the image of the serving hand becomes the integral component of Varda's visual counter-narrative.

The serving hand sequence recurs again at the end of the film, this time with Emilie's hands at work in place of the now-deceased Thérèse. Deroo notes that "here, Varda draws attention to the strangeness of using a pair disembodied hands to represent a whole woman," and the act of repetition conveys the criticism that "the importance of a woman in a family is tied to her role, rather than her individuality."²¹ Through this metonymic device, Varda presents a visual criticism of the depersonalizing effects of viewing women according to societal role as opposed to individual identity. The Kristevan concept of the construction of the self through

others thematically recurs throughout Varda's oeuvre. *Le Bonheur* suggests that this compulsory relationship with others becomes one of necessary dependence and often mutates into one of subservience, as evidenced through the recurrent image of the serving hand.

Sans toit ni loi

With *Sans toit ni loi* (1985), the vacant female figure persists in the character of Mona (Sandrine Bonnaire), a young woman who has chosen a life of isolation and transience on the open roads of Languedoc-Roussillon. The opening shots of the film establish Mona as a pre-formed vacant figure. Mona is introduced into the narrative in the form of an anonymous frozen corpse when a vineyard worker discovers her body in a ditch. The police are then called to the scene and begin questioning the vineyard workers, instigating the discourse of investigation which structures the film in its entirety. The narrative then moves backward in time to trace Mona's fatal path by way of an elaborate, multifaceted flashback. A collection of local workers and professionals provide verbal and visual accounts of their encounters with Mona; a device which evokes a faux-documentary quality and structures the film as a social commentary on the French cultural approach to poverty.

Varda creates an "impossible portrait" of Mona through an assemblage of remembrances from those who encounter Mona over the course of her final winter. As a result, the viewer never gains access to Mona's point of view. According to Varda, "*Vagabond* [the English-language title of *Sans toit ni loi*] is really constructed about different people looking at Mona – like building together an impossible portrait of Mona."²² The external perspectives

which constitute the narrativized Mona centre on an inability to establish a concrete connection with her character. In her quest for independence, Mona fails to establish any sort of lasting connection with any secondary character, who from hereon in will be referred to as 'witnesses' due to the testimonial nature of their direct address asides to the camera. Mona is at once omnipresent in her status as object of interest and omniabsent in her lack of subjective interiority throughout the narrative.

The opening credits of the film conclude with a dedication to French novelist Nathalie Sarraute, a writer who originated the *Nouveau Roman* movement which flourished in France throughout the late 1950s and early 1960s. Sarraute, whose first novel is titled *Portrait d'un Inconnu* (1948), is associated with a form of narrative experimentation which consists of portraying characters through multiple perspectives. Varda and Sarraute both create elusive, contradictory characters at the centre of their multifaceted narratives. In a 1986 conversation with Sarraute broadcast on the France Culture radio network, Varda notes that the working title of *Sans toit ni loi* was "À saisir," or, "to grasp," because "the film itself was elusive. I wasn't sure I grasped the film I was making."²³ The following pages will examine in detail Varda's self-effacing authorial presence in relation to the portrayal of a protagonist who, in Varda's words, "refuses her own character".

Sans toit ni loi provides an archetypal example of the vacant female form through a simultaneous acknowledgement and effacement of Varda's authorial presence. This acknowledgement is introduced into the film in the form of Varda's voiceover, which immediately precedes the narrative flashback:

She had died a natural death without leaving a trace. I wonder, do those who knew her as a child still think about her? But people she had met recently remembered her. She left her mark on them. They spoke of her, not knowing she had died. I didn't tell them. Nor that her name was Mona Bergeron. I know little about her myself, but it seems to me she came from the sea.

The language used here is deliberate in word choice. Varda inscribes her ongoing presence throughout the film through the voiceover which tells us that each witness statement is directed at Varda herself, not the police or an anonymous, obscured offscreen presence. While Varda professes a slightly superior amount of knowledge in comparison to the witnesses, the uncertain tone of her language ("I wonder," "I know little about her myself,") effectively defuses her otherwise assumed authorial control over the narrative.

The true identity of the speaker of this narrative aside is a widely-debated issue. Sandy Flitterman-Lewis firmly believes that the voice belongs to Varda, a device which establishes a commentary on the narrative construct of the film.²⁴ David Bordwell acknowledges the conflicting arguments in relation to the narrator's identity when he argues that:

the backstory begins with an oscillation between objective presentation and a frank gesture of authorial imagination. Perhaps everything that follows, even the firm texture created by regional customs and dialects and nonactors, is to be understood as subordinate to the creative energies of authorial vision (not an implied author, or a 'cinematic narrator,' but the person who made this movie for us).²⁵

I would, however, argue that the film cannot truly be subordinate to Varda's authorial vision. Instead, Varda's self-effacing, uncertain language indicates an attempt to place both the film and Varda's authorial presence on an equal plane. By including a voiceover riddled with

tentative language, Varda cedes authorial ownership of Mona, and subsequently allows the witnesses to become co-authors in the construction of the impossible portrait.

Alison Smith takes the position that the narrator cannot be Varda, but “‘the Film-maker,’ a persona adopted by Varda who will not further intrude into the diegetic space,” and goes on to posit that the brief voiceover is “her only intervention in the film, and the temporal logic of the flashback sequences eliminates her even from sequences which present themselves visually as filmed interviews.”²⁶ Smith fails to outline precisely how this Film-maker is temporally eliminated from the remainder of the film. The speaker orients herself within the same tense as that of the witnesses, a fact which clearly indicates temporal immediacy. The voiceover clarifies that the flashback sequences occur in the form of remembrances by the witnesses while being interviewed by the speaker. While Varda’s voiceover introduces a deliberately limited amount of authorial direction in relation to the construct of the film, her participatory presence throughout the film is not to be overlooked. Each witness’ account becomes endowed with as much significance as Varda’s own cinematic perspective. In short, Varda’s voiceover becomes a democratizing device which emphasizes the multi-faceted narrative construct of the film.

Smith abruptly abandons the persona of the Film-maker and instead suggests that the character of Mme. Landier may in fact be the narrator.²⁷ However, this is further problematized through the inarguable fact that it is Varda’s own voice performing the task of the voiceover. Had Varda intended Mme. Landier to act as a surreptitious narrator, why would she not have actress Macha Méril perform the voiceover? Or another, anonymous voice to play the Film-maker? Varda’s performance of this narrative task implicitly acknowledges her own authorial

role for the express purpose of aligning her own voice with that of her witnesses, and allows the film to retain its faux-documentary quality.

Mme. Landier has often been correlated with Varda herself; her encounter with Mona reflects Varda's own experiences with the young homeless woman who served as the initial inspiration for the film.²⁸ Mme. Landier encounters Mona on the side of the road and spends a seemingly significant amount of time engaging in conversation with Mona and providing food and drink. The relationship ends somewhat abruptly when Mme. Landier drops Mona off in a field, then guiltily rushes after her departing figure to help with her bag and press money into her hand.

Later on, a near-death experience by way of electrocution causes a series of images of Mona to pass before her eyes. She then implores Jean-Pierre to search for Mona in order to ensure her safety and well-being and assuage Mme Landier's feelings of guilt over her wilful neglect. Mme. Landier is the sole character in the film who does not provide a direct address testimony. This noticeable absence supports the notion that Mme. Landier is a narrative embodiment of Varda; it suggests the impossibility of Varda interviewing a version of herself. By closely relating her personal perspective to a witness within the narrative, Varda explicitly reorients her narrative status to coexist with that of the characters within the film.

The scene wherein Mme Landier washes herself in the tub while describing Mona's own filth and stench over the phone suggests that "she is washing off any contamination by Mona, any invasion of her personality by this alien one."²⁹ For Smith, Mme Landier constructs versions of Mona as alternatively mysterious and freakish, and is the only character in possession of a

sufficient amount of detachment and “the only one who seems aware that it is her reaction to Mona which is important to understand and not Mona herself,” yet this places her in contrast to Varda’s self-effacing authorial persona.³⁰

Smith argues that Mme. Landier should be correlated with Varda by way of a social resemblance, in addition to the aforementioned biographical similarities. She goes on to suggest that Mme Landier constructs Mona “as a sort of freak, something suitable for exhibition,” and references the scene wherein she encourages her assistant Jean-Pierre to make his way over to her car to view Mona behind the glass window of her car. This assessment of Mme Landier’s view of Mona rings true, however it ultimately supports the notion that Mme Landier may in fact be intended as a satiric interrogation of Varda’s own brief relationship with a real-life Mona.

As evidenced through her voiceover, Varda does not want to present Mona as a self-creation. With Mona, Varda problematizes the notion of the auteur as the sole arbiter of truth and meaning:

for this film, I invented a character who rejects me. It’s someone who is very different from me, that attracts and repels me at the same time; someone I cannot completely understand. I placed myself in a very peculiar ‘auteur’ situation since I don’t know much more than the witnesses who saw her pass through. Sometimes I am very close to her, sometimes very far.³¹

Varda interrogates her own need to make this film through the character of Mme. Landier, and structures a narrative based on an insurmountable sense of distance between author and subject. The creation of a character who not only contrasts with Varda herself, but goes so far

as to reject the auteur, constitutes a direct response to the self-perpetuating tendencies of the male New Wave.

For Geneviève Sellier, this defining characteristic emerges in the form of “the construction of an empathetic relation between the spectator and the auteur, by way of a male character conceived of as the latter’s alter ego.”³² As a result, “the dominant register of the New Wave lies in the inheritance of romanticism, which legitimates the new claim of cinema as an individual artistic creation, associated with the construction of an ever-tragic male identity.”³³ With *Sans toit ni loi*, Varda chooses not to interrogate an individual crisis of identity, but the multifaceted social problem of vagrancy and poverty in France. Whereas the male New Wave filmmakers were predominantly preoccupied with narratives centred on their respective alter egos, Varda draws attention to her auteur position for the express purpose of rejection at the hands of her protagonist. As a result, Varda and Mona become voluntary figures of effacement within an intricately constructed narrative of distance.

By aligning her own voice with that of the many narrative witnesses, Varda cedes ownership of her protagonist, once again drawing attention to Mona’s status as a vacant female figure. The remainder of this section will focus on how the many varied voices of *Sans toit ni loi* illustrate their various attempts to retain authorial control over Mona yet ultimately remain diminished figures at the margins of the narrative. In addition to the satirical alter ego of Mme Landier, Varda transfers the compulsion for authorial control over Mona onto multiple witnesses. Yolande (Yolande Moreau), a young housekeeper preoccupied with her problematic relationship with a petty criminal, attempts to assimilate Mona into an idealized conception of

what she should be in relation to her own life. Yolande initially admires Mona but eventually realizes her true nature, in contrast to many other characters who experience a brief, fleeting sample of Mona's personality.

Yolande first encounters a sleeping, immobile Mona who is in the midst of a locked embrace with David, a squatter in the chateau where Yolande's uncle works as caretaker. Yolande romanticizes and mentally retains a stilled image of the scene, measuring it against her own flawed relationship. Later, Yolande encounters Mona on the side of the road, and resolves to keep her as a charitable project when she learns that Mona and David's perceived love for each other was transient in reality. Yolande replaces her idealized view of Mona with one of over-identification; she now perceives Mona to be as unlucky in love as she. Yolande's distorted identification with Mona takes physical form when Mona dons Yolande's housecoat and briefly pretends to be Yolande in order to trick the nearly-blind Tante Lydie. Yolande recognizes the fundamental divergence between herself and Mona when she catches Mona and Tante Lydie enjoying a drunken camaraderie, and banishes Mona from the house and her life.



Fig. 23, Mona imitating Yolande

Alison Smith aligns Yolande's rejection of Mona with that of the other female witnesses who attempt to forge a relationship with Mona based on understanding and identification.³⁴ Smith differentiates between the female and male response to Mona by categorizing the male witnesses as "superficial" in their approach to Mona.³⁵ Smith does, however, overlook the significance of Mona's relationship with Assoun, the Tunisian vine cutter. Assoun initially appears to be fleeting in his significance to both the narrative and Mona. Their undefined relationship, which becomes a connection of note through Assoun's seemingly heartfelt pledge to care for Mona, is brought to an abrupt halt when Assoun's returning co-workers reject Mona due to her femaleness. Mona reciprocates the rejection by angrily ordering Assoun to fetch her things, effectively terminating any possibility of further communication.

Mona and the narrative move swiftly forward on to the next stop on the road, and it is not until the end of the film that we become privy to Assoun's witness statement. Assoun distinguishes himself from every other witness through his direct address, which is wordless and full of silent emotion as he simply stares into the camera and kisses the scarf that for a time belonged to Mona. His unrelenting gaze projects a sense of discomfort onto the viewer and suggests a conscious, regretful acknowledgement of negligence and inaction. With the exception of Mme. Landier, who proves futile in her attempts to rectify her perceived neglect, each witness contributes to Mona's demise through their attempts to exercise authorial control. Each witness displays this controlling tendency through one of two ways. Witnesses such as Yolande and the goatherd recount the manner in which they attempted to mould Mona to fit their own idealized ways of life; others such as Jean-Pierre compartmentalize Mona

through their narrative accounts of her perceived actions and persona. In contrast to these narrative avenues, the absence of words in Assoun's silence indicates a deliberate evasion of authorial control over Mona.

The desire to harness Mona plagues many of the witnesses and ultimately leads to her isolation and, in turn, her death. These individual attempts to indoctrinate Mona according to their varying lifestyles are swiftly followed by outbursts of intolerance, and contrast with Varda's own refusal to maintain a concrete level of authorial control over Mona's story. By eradicating her authorial position, Varda relinquishes narrative control which would further contribute to Mona's narrative demise. The twelve tracking shots which constitute the basic structure of the film do, however, subtly indicate Varda's recurrent authorial presence throughout the film.

In a supplemental interview on the Criterion Collection DVD edition of the film, Varda describes how each tracking shot organizes the narrative. The tracking shots, which include the only instances of non-diegetic music, directly reference Varda's authorial presence. The series of shots, which Varda calls "la Grand Série," pan from right to left as Mona walks alone against various landscapes. The shots become interconnected as each shot appears to begin where the previous left off: "[The shots] all have something special to look at. At the end of one long movement, we overtake [Mona] and the camera stops on a farm machine. And the next dolly shot, maybe 5 or 6 minutes later, starts with [another] farm machine and ends, for example, on railings."³⁶ Later in the interview, Varda describes her intention of connecting the tracking shots "at a distance." This emphasis on a continual distance from her protagonist further

supports the idea that Varda deliberately removes herself from a position of totalizing authorial control in favour of a limited narrative omniscience which works in tandem with a number of divergent perspectives. The tracking shots establish a sense of narrative linearity in contrast with the subjective, temporally divergent accounts of various witnesses, and ultimately serve as subtle reminders of Varda's imperceptible constructive presence amidst the multitude of individual narratives.

While the viewer must remain conscious of the potential fallibility of each witness account, by the end of the film it becomes clear that Mona is a consistently structured figure throughout the narrative. The film sketches out a portrait of a vacant female figure through a collectivity of experience derived from multiple perspectives. At the same time, however, the viewer must remain conscious of the fact that not every perspective may be accurate. Jean-Pierre, for example, could create a version of Mona that is more drunken and repellent than Mona was in actuality. He narrates her slovenly behaviour to a friend while seemingly trapped in a phone booth at the train station while a drunken Mona cavorts around the station. It could be argued that Jean-Pierre exaggerates her condition so he can finally articulate his true opinion of her, if only to himself and his friend on the phone. However, the inclusion of multiple witnesses in a single setting – the train station – suggests the accuracy of Jean-Pierre's perspective due to the fact that it is accompanied by the presence of both Yolande and David. However unreliable their respective accounts may have been before, the scene at the train station serves as the climax of the film through its position as a site of narrative convergence, and reasserts an overarching yet detached authorial presence.

Early on in the film, while conversing with the goatherd, Mona proudly and succinctly describes her approach to life with the declarative statement, "I move." The train station becomes a site of dramatic irony when it becomes clear that Mona is no longer the one moving; her counterpart, the Avignon-bound Yolande, now assumes that particular role. Shortly after her arrival at the train station which results in her introduction to a group of junkies, Mona admits to being tired of moving. The climactic scene in the train station ends with Mona's drunken consideration of "pausing," as she performs a word play between the verbs "to pause" and "to pose," when offered the prospect of a career in pornography. The significant decline in her initial impetus of constant movement furthers the argument that objectification and the misguided attempts of multiple witnesses to inscribe a static existence by way of assimilation ultimately leads to Mona's death.

Varda defuses her own narrative authority by inscribing a self-righteous authorial agency onto various characters. She dubbed the film "Rashomona" during filming; a reference to Akira Kurosawa's 1950 film *Rashomon* which thematizes the potential fallibility of any perspective by way of contrasting witness testimonies.³⁷ The viewer is drawn into the narrative through the ever expanding multiplicity of narrative perspectives.³⁸ Mona's narrative absence works in tandem with the film's continual assertion that the fallibility of perspective applies to those who reside both within and beyond the narrative. She is a vacant yet centralized female figure whose first person perspective remains elusive and subsequently interrogates the preconceived notion of authorial control.

The inherent evasiveness of Mona's character and the aesthetic of distance between subject and author can be further understood through the ethnographic qualities of *Sans toit ni loi*. Mona's insurmountable inaccessibility is akin to a recurrent consequence of ethnographic study, wherein the ethnographer is unable to fully access the true characteristics of their subject. Catherine Russell's postmodern reading of Eadweard Muybridge's photographic motion studies can be related to the ethnographic tendency Varda ironically depicts throughout *Sans toit ni loi*:

as a documentary study, Muybridge's grids depend on an absolute referentiality, and yet that referent – the human body – is radically transformed through repetition, as if it too were made anew. The body does not become a character, and the models are not named.³⁹

The effect of depersonalization through repetition is found within the narrative of *Sans toit ni loi*. While each encounter with Mona produces varying effects on the witness, their failed attempts to impose their respective lifestyles upon Mona form a repetitive link between each narrative thread. Each witness becomes guilty of essentializing Mona, who remains nameless to everyone save Varda's authorial figure, due to an inability to see beyond their own perspective.

Russell's description of Muybridge's shooting process helps to further clarify Varda's authorial approach to her evasive subject:

because Muybridge shot the successive stages of physical activities from two or three different angles, and printed the photographs above each other on each plate, the study has the effect of decentering vision. There is no ideal point of perspective; the photographer as artist is effaced by the vision of the machine that sees from three different points simultaneously.⁴⁰

The multiplicity of perspectival angles in relation to an anonymous subject, combined with the effacement of the artist's vision in favour of a distanced perspective, effectively describes the

ethnochoranic construct of *Sans toit ni loi*. While Mona would otherwise be the film's ideal point of perspective, her status as central narrative point becomes paradoxically obscured through her inherent inaccessibility and the subsequent narrative reliance on external perspectives to reconstruct this centre. The film is, in short, a narrativized ethnographic portrait which thematizes the impossibility of subject transparency. Mona maintains the position of the vacant female figure so that *Sans toit ni loi* can retain a realistic aesthetic of ethnographic mystery.

Jane B. par Agnès V.

Like *Sans toit ni loi*, Varda's documentary portrait *Jane B. par Agnès V.* (1987) interrogates the relationship between author and subject. The two films diverge in the sense that with *Jane B.*, Varda vocally emphasizes her own sense of authorial control instead of aligning herself with a multiplicity of perspectives. Actress-singer Jane Birkin is the subject of the film, which weaves documentary-style interviews with narrative interludes that express various facets of Birkin's personality. The film assumes a conversational tone between director and actress and suggests a collaborative effort on the part of both. Sarah Cooper notes how *Jane B.*

highlights the self-effacing but ever present figure of Varda. In *Jane B.* hers is not the portrait she is interested in filming but she appears as the one who films: she affords herself a place in what becomes a collaborative project, but still, as this film title also suggests, a secondary one in relation to her subject.⁴¹

The identification of Varda as a self-effacing figure corresponds to her recurrent authorial style, as discussed in relation to *Sans toit ni loi*. I would argue, however, that the title of the film in fact emphasizes the extent of Varda's authorial control, and reasserts her continual presence in place of self-effacement. Birkin's name is given status equal to that of Varda, however the inclusion of the word "par" (or "by") is a proclamation of authorial ownership over the iconic actress. The inclusion of Varda's name in the title directly positions the film as the product of her authorship.

Varda informs Birkin that "basically you give yourself to everyone's imagination. Perhaps it's that which fascinated me, which made me want to make this film. Because I can install my daydreams in you – stories from mythology, movie memories, things I have in my head." Early in the film, Birkin submits to Varda's vision when she remarks, "what's important is the eye behind the camera, or the person with the paintbrush," prompting Varda to describe Birkin as "a modelling clay Eve on an editing table." By foregrounding Varda's authorial position throughout the initial setup of the film's narrative, Jane B. is aligned with the vacant female form by way of narrative malleability.

Jane B. par Agnès V. differentiates significantly from the vacant female figures of *Sans toit ni loi*, *Le Bonheur* and *Les Créatures* in that Jane is permitted to respond to Varda using her own voice. One scene involves Jane on stage in full Flamenco costume, yet she soon rejects the role she has been given in favour of her own clothes. Much like Mona, Jane embraces anonymity and voices the desire to "faire un film comme si j'étais transparent, anonyme, comme si j'étais n'importe qui." Varda then relates the story of the Inconnue de la Seine. The

Inconnue is a young, anonymous woman who drowned herself in the Seine when Varda was a student in Paris. Her tragic beauty led to the creation of a plaster mould of her face, which resulted in the mass production of miniature novelty masks. The dissemination of multiple renderings of her image into the collective consciousness corresponds to the ethnochoranic form. According to Varda, the appeal of the Inconnue centres on the fact that everyone can project their own subjective versions of her personal narrative, much like the narrative structure of *Sans toit ni loi*.

Later on in the film, Varda frames Jane directly below a statue while Jane discusses her distaste for the formal perfection of statues. In correspondence with Jane's preference for exposed flaws, the statue becomes instantaneously emblazoned with graffiti by way of a graphic match cut. Varda then proceeds to forge a dialogue with her subject, and in turn deviates significantly from her previous films' ironically passive interrogation of the statuesque female form. Jane B. becomes a progressively interrogative incarnation of Varda's vacant female form; one which has been permitted the narrative agency to express her own desires for the first time.

Jane's centralized position becomes one of recurrent self-effacement through her onscreen relationships with male counterparts. Jane is continually positioned at odds with various male movie stars of French cinema throughout the fictionalized sequences which interweave Jane's direct-address confessionals. Jean-Pierre Léaud plays a controlling lover to Jane's placating woman; Philippe Léotard plays lover and accomplice, and ultimate murderer, to Jane's treacherous, art dealing femme fatale. Serge Gainsbourg, Birkin's real-life ex-

paramour and musical collaborator, also makes an appearance in which he coaches her through a recording session. The sequence interweaves with a live performance of the song, with Jane singing in the darkness until an anonymous male figure literally pulls her into the spotlight.

This at times combative, yet continually imbalanced gender dynamic is a consistent feature of the narrative. Jane lends insight into her relationship with men when she narrates a series of archival images of herself from provocative photoshoots during the 1960s. She notes that she participated in these shoots so that "Serge would be proud of me," yet nowadays prefers a life of discretion due to her current relationship with a man (the filmmaker Jacques Doillon) who prefers to avoid public attention. The subservience to a directorial masculine gaze contrasts with the female authorial figure behind *Jane B.* Varda's role as a female figure of authorial control ironically perpetuates and directly responds to Jane's willingness to leave her sense of identity in the hands of male counterparts. Sarah Cooper outlines the way in which Varda allows Birkin to perform her own sense of desire: "as Birkin becomes a function of Varda's desiring vision, her film manifests itself as an interpretive response to Birkin's own desire to perform an unremarkable identity."⁴² While it may be argued that Varda simply perpetuates Birkin's objectified persona by way of her undeniable position as author, her own participatory role in the film, when combined with Birkin's direct address to the camera, establishes a self-reflexive performative response to the patriarchal objectification Birkin, like many other women, continues to endure.

The noir art world sequence with Philippe Léotard includes a chase sequence through a labyrinthine warehouse. A trio of male thugs, led by Léotard's painter, pursue Jane around

stacks of boxes. Leotard shouts to his henchmen, “elle est seule?” to which the viewer observes she is in fact supported by her own duo of male lackeys. This statement becomes all the more resonant when examined in relation to the overall film. The combative fictional sequences, when combined with the dialogues between Jane and Varda, establish a narrative based on Birkin’s apparent dependence on others.

The dialogic nature of Jane’s reconstructed identity continues in Varda’s reimagining of the Greek myth of Ariadne, who fell in love with the heroic Theseus and guided him out of the Minotaur’s labyrinth using a jewel-encrusted spool of thread. The motif of the labyrinth corresponds to the structure of the film itself, yet Varda defuses the independent nature of Ariadne by adding a male pursuer, in the form of a cameraman. *Jane B. par Agnès V.* can certainly be positioned as a feminist interrogation of the desires projected onto an objectified actress, as both Sandy Flitterman-Lewis and Alison Smith argue.⁴³ When interpreted through the ethnochoric structure, the film becomes an interrogation of the detrimental effect of heterosexual relationships upon a vacant, malleable female form.



Fig. 24, *Jane’s mise-en-abyme portrait*

The aestheticization of Jane's relationships with multiple figures renders *Jane B. par Agnès V.* a mise-en-abyme portrait of a single person, constructed in the ethnochoranic style. Towards the end of the film, Jane dances in front of a multi-panelled mirror, vamping for the camera and the viewer with a Marilyn Monroe impersonation, which illuminates the prismatic structure of the portrait. The mise-en-abyme sequence elaborates on the centralized presence of masculinity in Jane's life as a series of anonymous, brightly costumed male figures dance ominously behind her. The anonymity of these male figures in conjunction with the centralized, assertive self-performance of Jane B. achieves a subversive commentary on the vacant female figure of the ethnochoranic form and ultimately indicates a significant development in Varda's feminist aesthetics. While the bulk of the film portrays Jane's largely problematic relationships with men, this scene suggests that a fully formed sense of identity is attainable through the construction of this cinematic portrait.

Just as the witnesses of *Sans toit ni loi* implicitly contribute to Mona's demise through their callous neglect, Varda depicts a Jane B. whose identity has been indelibly shaped by (male) others. The narrative structure of *Sans toit ni loi* interrogates the witnesses' approach to Mona by making its author complicit with the neglectful secondary characters. In *Jane B.*, Varda explicitly foregrounds her authorial role and simultaneously allows Birkin to vocally respond to this authorial figure. As a result, the previously objectified form known as Jane Birkin becomes replaced by the responsive, multifaceted persona of Jane B.

Conclusion

Each film discussed in this chapter interrogates the female experience through the ironic image of the vacant female figure. Towards the end of *Jane B. par Agnès V.*, Varda describes her constructive process: “it’s like when one does a puzzle, there are bits here and there. And then little by little the design is revealed. And then one finds an empty space.” Mylène, Thérèse, Mona and Jane characterize this empty space at the centre of their respective narratives. Varda’s self-referential approach to authorial control aligns her own central role as filmmaker to that of her protagonists. The paradox of the centralized void is reasserted through her self-effacing authorial role. Varda continually draws attention to her attempts to cede explicit narrative control, yet by doing so, ultimately emphasizes her constructive presence throughout her films. Once again, the effect of modernist irony allows Varda’s authorial modesty to render her much more than a faceless, omniscient authorial figure. By foregrounding narrative structure instead of the auteur figure, Varda becomes a fully formed artist who positions the viewer as witness to the intricacies of her creative process.

Much like Julia Kristeva’s generative maternal force, each of these centralized female figures become sacrificial victims of effacement in the wake of multiperspectival narrative expression. Self-sacrifice is inextricably bound to a recurrent dependence on others; a characteristic readily voiced by Jane: “I don’t really much care what you do with me, as long as I feel that you love me a little.” The device of the vacant female figure effectively summarizes the confusion over whether or not Varda can truly be positioned as a feminist filmmaker. The kaleidoscopic ethnochoranic structure works to contrast these statuesque female forms with

multiple secondary perspectives. Each vacant female figure metonymically represents the female experience while the multivocal cacophony of surrounding narrative particles indicates the privileged, multifaceted perspective of a society that forces women to inhabit abstract categories.

NOTES

¹ This line is taken from a song ostensibly written by one of the male lead characters in *Lions Love*, sung for filmmaker-turned-Vardian alter ego, Shirley Clarke. *Lions Love*, Streaming video, directed by Agnès Varda, *The Cinéma d'Agnès Varda*, (1969: MUBI, 2010).

² Julia Kristeva, "The Semiotic and the Symbolic," *The Portable Kristeva*, updated edition, trans. and ed. Kelly Oliver, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002). 36.

³ Ibid.

⁴ See the protagonists of *L'Une chante, l'autre pas* (1976), *Documenteur* (1980-81), and *Kung Fu Master* (1987) for further insight.

⁵ Julia Kristeva, "Women's Time," *The Portable Kristeva*, updated edition, trans. and ed. Kelly Oliver, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002). 366.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ See Genevieve Sellier, *Masculine Singular: French New Wave Cinema*. Trans. Kristin Ross. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008).

⁸ Alison Smith notes that the film, which received a mixed critical reception upon its release, remains invisible even in France, despite the largesse of its stars. *Agnès Varda*, (Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press), 7-8.

⁹ Julia Kristeva, "Place Names," *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Art*, ed. Leon S. Roudiez, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, and Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 249.

¹⁰ Kristeva, "Motherhood According to Giovanni Bellini," *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Art*, ed. Leon S. Roudiez, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, and Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 242.

¹¹ Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 113.

¹² Geneviève Sellier, *Masculine Singular: French New Wave Cinema*, trans. Kristin Ross (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008), 98.

¹³ Claire Johnston, "Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema," *Feminism and Film*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan, 32.

¹⁴ Richard Dyer, *Pastiche* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 163.

¹⁵ Johnston, "Women's Cinema," 32.

¹⁶ Sellier applies Andreas Huyssen's argument for a gendered division between elite (male) and mass (female) culture to the New Wave: "with a mixture of contempt and compassion, the [New Wave films] explore the new commonplace of elite culture that allows a derisive look at women's emancipation. Associated with the society of consumption, women symbolize its alienating effects by transforming themselves into merchandise for the best price and thus bearing little in common with sexually and socially emancipated figures like [Françoise] Sagan or [Brigitte] Bardot." *Masculine Singular*, 20.

¹⁷ The film *Thérèse* refers to is Louis Malle's *Viva Maria!* (1965), in which Moreau and Bardot play vaudeville performers who go by the names Maria I and Maria II. Interestingly, multiple shots align Moreau and Bardot with statues replicating the female form.

¹⁸ Rebecca J. Deroo, "Unhappily ever after: visual irony and feminist strategy in Agnès Varda's *Le Bonheur*." *Studies in French Cinema* 8, no. 3. 189-209.

¹⁹ Claire Johnston dismisses *Le Bonheur* as a "portrayal of female fantasy [which] constitutes one of the nearest approximations to the facile day-dreams perpetuated by advertising that probably exists in the cinema." "Women's Cinema," 32.

²⁰ Deroo, "Unhappily ever after," 196.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 203.

²² Varda, "Interview with Barbara Quart," *Film Quarterly*, (June-July 1986): 6.

²³ Agnès Varda, Nathalie Sarraute. "To Nathalie Sarraute." *Sans toit ni loi*, DVD, directed by Agnès Varda. New York, NY: The Criterion Collection, 2007.

²⁴ "By making her own position one of certainty and doubt, Varda simultaneously foregrounds and disturbs the invisible enunciation of the patriarchal narrative, and offers us a fiction that is problematized from the start." Flitterman-Lewis, *To Desire Differently* 289.

²⁵ David Bordwell, *Poetics of Cinema*, (New York: Routledge, 2008), 169.

²⁶ Alison Smith, *Agnès Varda*, 126.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 27.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 128.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 129.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Agnès Varda, "Press Kit for *Vagabond*." (Los Angeles: International Film Exchange Ltd., 1985): 8.

³² Sellier, *Masculine Singular*, 127.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Smith, *Agnès Varda*, 126.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Agnès Varda, Joanna Bruzdowicz. "Music and Dolly Shots." *Sans toit ni loi*, DVD, directed by Agnès Varda. New York, NY: The Criterion Collection, 2007.

³⁷ Agnès Varda, "Un Jour sous le ciel," *Les Cahiers du cinema* no. 378 (December 1985): 15.

³⁸ Varda states: "The audience is just continuing the list of witnesses who have seen Mona pass by." "Surface Tensions: Agnès Varda," interview by Naomi Wise. *Berkeley Monthly*. (June 1986): 16.

³⁹ Catherine Russell, *Experimental Ethnography: The Work of Film in the Age of Video* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 67.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Sarah Cooper, *Selfless Cinema? Ethics and French Documentary*. Research Monographs in French Studies 20. London: Legenda, 2006, 89.

⁴² Ibid., 82.

⁴³ See Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, "Magic and wisdom in two portraits by Agnes Varda: *Kung Fu Master* and *Jane B. par Agnes V.*" *Screen* 34 No 4. (Winter 1993): 302-320.; and Alison Smith, *Agnes Varda*. 134-141

CONCLUSION

'Everybody's Autobiography': Recentering Agnès Varda

Working from a single image taken from *Cléo de 5 à 7* (1961) of a circular crack in a window in which a series of lines radiates inward towards a single, centralized point, each chapter in this project centres on an aspect of the cracked window in relation to a wide selection from Agnès Varda's body of work. The radiating lines of the crack provide a basis for chapter one, which examines Varda's heterogeneous approach to time in photographic, cinematic, and digital forms. Chapter two centres on the vacant yet centralized female figure, a device which interrogates the female experience within homogenizing social roles. In short, this project demonstrates the way in which Varda narrates a pluralistic cinematic experience and promotes an aesthetic of collective individuality. The remaining pages will conclude with brief analyses of three works, *Les Plages d'Agnès* (2008), *Les Veuves de Noirmoutier* (2005), and *Documenteur* (1981), which effectively summarize this project in its entirety, while pointing towards formal and thematic expansions of the ethnochoranic structure within Varda's oeuvre.

Varda concludes a 2009 conversation with *Interview* magazine with a response to Jean Paul Sartre's idea that "Hell is other people": "well, I don't agree with Sartre. I like others. [*Les Plages d'Agnès*] could use Gertrude Stein's title, *Everybody's Autobiography*."¹ This pluralistic, inclusive approach to the individual applies not only to Varda's 2008 cinematic memoir, but her entire body of work. Her centralized position in *Les Plages d'Agnès* contrasts with her previously discussed narratives of authorial self-effacement, namely *Sans toit ni loi*. In the opening monologue of *Les Plages* she admits a predilection for the stories of others, however,

“this time, to talk about myself, I thought: if we opened people up, we’d find landscapes; if we opened me up, we’d find beaches.” *Les Plages* marks the first instance in Varda’s body of work where she explicitly positions herself at the perspectival centre, while engaging with a multitude of people and places against the organizational backdrop of the beach.

The film moves from the Belgian beaches of Varda’s childhood, to the Sètian harbour where Varda spent the wartime years on a houseboat, to the beaches of Noirmoutier where she vacationed with Jacques Demy. Varda interweaves clips from her films, in more or less chronological order, with often emotional remembrances of family members, friends and colleagues. The film ends with Varda seated in her installation *La Cabane de l’Échec*, a cabin-like structure constructed out of celluloid strips from her 1966 feature, *Les Créatures*. The installation, which has since been renamed *La Cabane du cinéma*, creates a mise-en-abyme effect through its ability to instantaneously convey multiple phases in Varda’s career: the New Wave filmmaker working in black-and-white with Catherine Deneuve; the mixed-media installation artist repurposing discarded reels of her failed film; the cinematic matriarch reflecting on her past lives through the lens of her latest project.

Les Plages, as an example of multifaceted autobiography, becomes a companion piece to *Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse*. As discussed in chapter one, *Les Glaneurs* contains autobiographical segments in which Varda incorporates her subjective ruminations on aging and the digital format to become one voice among a chorus of gleaners. For Sarah Cooper, *Les Glaneurs* is a plurivocal commentary in which the primary positioning of the voice of the Other makes it “less a self-centred portrait than one [. . .] in which the self is decentred through its

concern for others, being rendered unknown and unknowable in the process.”² With *Les Plages*, however, Varda recentres her autobiographical perspective and creates an ethnochoranic self-portrait.

The 2005 video installation *Les Veuves de Noirmoutier* is a polyvocal autobiographical portrait which translates the ethnochoranic form onto a new level of formal expression. *Les Veuves* encapsulates both the heterogeneous conception of time and the vacant female figure which illustrate the ethnochoranic structure in this project. *Les Veuves*, originally shown at the Galerie Marina Aboucaya in Paris, became part of Varda’s 2006 large-scale exhibit, *L’île et Elle*, which took place at the Fondation Cartier pour l’art contemporain in Paris.³ *L’île et Elle* pays homage to the island of Noirmoutier, where Varda has kept a home since the 1960s. The pieces of *L’île et Elle* recall *La Pointe Courte* through a fixation on the everyday life of a collection of island inhabitants, and also thematize grief, mourning, and loss in relation to Varda’s deceased partner, Jacques Demy, who succumbed to AIDS in 1990. In short, *L’île et Elle* is an ethnographic portrait of an island community in which Varda’s individual perspective is set against a polyvocal background.⁴ In the conclusion of her 2009 lecture at the Harvard Film Archive, Varda indicated an intention to abandon feature length filmmaking for the gallery installation format, because the medium “frees you from telling a story – I’ve tried to escape telling a story for some time now, and I much prefer impressions - going from one image to another.”⁵

Les Veuves de Noirmoutier is an impressionistic meditation on loss and survival which actively integrates the viewer into the life stories of fourteen widows. *Veuves* is a fifteen-screen video installation in which each widow occupies an individual screen through which to address

the spectator. The viewer is seated in one of the fourteen corresponding chairs, and listens, via headphones, to the widow tell the story of life with her husband, his death, and her life beyond his. The organization of the screens readily recalls the ethnochoranic form. At the centre of the rectangular collection of screens is a larger screen which projects an image of the beach; an empty table is the focal point. The widows intermittently circle the table, then wander off beyond the boundaries of the frame, towards the ocean, at once a cohesive group and a collection of isolated individuals.

Varda includes herself among the collection of widows, and occupies a screen at the bottom, second from the left. She refrains from sharing her own story of widowhood in favour of a sung version of Jacques Prévert's poem "Dmons et merveilles," and intermittently makes pain-filled eye contact with the camera. With *Les Veuves*, Varda continues the role she assumed in *Sans toit ni loi* and *Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse* as the decentred authorial figure. She remains largely silent in contrast to the openly expressive nature of the thirteen other women, who appear to generate their own narratives through their ability to speak when Varda herself cannot.

Les Veuves, a multifaceted ethnographic portrait of female experience, overtly adheres to the ethnochoranic structure and ultimately summarizes this project in its entirety. The widows range widely in age and philosophical approach to the state of widowhood, yet are brought together not simply by the experience of losing a life partner, but their geographical location off the beaches of Noirmoutier. Varied reflections on the aging process foreground the

issue of time, an approach which directly recalls Varda's digital images of her aging self and greying hair throughout *Les Glaneurs*.

Like Jane B. in *Jane B. par Agnès V.*, each woman is permitted to speak for herself through a direct address to the camera and occasional offscreen dialogue with Varda. The active agency of their varied responses, when combined with the direct spectatorial address, creates a collection of fully formed individual narratives. Much like Jane Birkin, and Cléo in the second half of *Cléo de 5 à 7*, these women assume control of their own narratives. At a certain point in every interview, Varda asks each woman to voice their opinion of the term 'widow.' Whether the widow embraces or refuses to identify with the word, each widow's subjective interpretation of the term actively interrogates a potentially homogenizing identificatory label.



Fig. 25, Preliminary sketch for *Les Veuves de Noirmoutier*



Fig. 26, Les Veuves de Noirmoutier

The image of the empty table figures prominently throughout *Veuves*. In the organizing central screen, an empty wooden table foregrounds the wandering widows on the beach then provides the centre for their rotating circle. Varda seats various widows at their otherwise empty kitchen and dining room tables, and allows the camera to linger on the table surface. Like the objects found throughout *Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse*, the tables of *Les Veuves* posit the materiality of time. The table, when placed in the foreground of the central screen, symbolizes an overarching aesthetic of centralized emptiness previously fulfilled by Varda's vacant female figures. Much like the objectified women of the French New Wave, the tables appear as though they are dependent on others for their existence, and become objects of tragic emptiness in *Les Veuves de Noirmoutier*. The individualized act of storytelling circumvents the possibility that these women, constantly surrounded by an aura of absence, will become vacant figures themselves.

The notion of memory, examined in detail with *Ulysse* in chapter one, continues here with *Les Plages d'Agnès* and *Les Veuves de Noirmoutier*. Both works reflect the fragmentary nature of memory and demonstrate the way in which the image and memory work in tandem to produce meaning. In *Veuves*, each widow is structured around a narrative based entirely on memory; Varda fixates on photographs and marital homes and ultimately renders the present little more than a comparative reflection of the past. While earlier works such as *Cléo de 5 à 7*, *Ulysse*, and *Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse* promote the capacity to remain within the present tense through a subjective reordering of time, *Veuves* succumbs to the antagonistic otherness of time by allowing the past to define the present.



Fig. 27, Still taken from *Ulysse* (1982), top; Fig. 28, Still taken from *Les Plages d'Agnès* (2008), bottom, from *Ulysse*, with digitally inserted video footage.



Fig. 28

Les Plages also centres on a retrospective approach to the present. The film oscillates between the distant past and the immediate present of a filmmaker who continues to produce significant work. A.O. Scott writes in his New York Times review that the film is “more of an essay in memory than a memoir. And, as such, it is about the way memory intrudes into and colours the present-tense flow of experience.”⁶ If there truly is “only the image,” as Varda concludes in *Ulysse*, then the image is ultimately renewable and adaptable to the multifaceted, ever-changing perspectives which comprise the ethnochoranic structure in its varied filmic incarnations. The central image of *Ulysse* actively fulfills this notion of renewability when it reappears in *Les Plages d’Agnès* with digitally inserted video footage of a vivid blue ocean superimposed onto the frozen black-and-white beach of 1954. The digitally captured motion of the crashing waves upon the motionless shore of the past instantaneously conveys the intersection between the immaterial digital form and the material photograph, a paradox of formal coexistence which defines Varda’s cinematic aesthetic.

A preoccupation with language and isolating loss similar to *Les Veuves de Noirmoutier* structures *Documenteur*, Varda's 1981 "emotion picture" which merits attention in the concluding pages of this project for its active interrogation of the ethnochoranic structure. The 65-minute film follows a stricken young French mother (played by Varda's editor, Sabine Mamou) in Los Angeles struggling to deal with the aftermath of a recent separation from her husband while caring for her young son Martin (Mathieu Demy, Varda's son). *Documenteur* is Varda's self-proclaimed favourite of her films; she admits in voiceover during *Les Plages d'Agnès* that in retrospect, Mamou's Emilie is another version of herself.

The biographical similarities between Varda and Emilie stem from Varda's undiscussed separation from Demy around the time when the couple were living in California while Demy completed a contract with Columbia Pictures. The film's wandering narrative follows Emilie against a backdrop of street murals as she attempts to reconstruct a life for herself and Martin, who is constantly fearful of separation from his distracted mother.⁷ Emilie's melancholic thoughts provide a voiceover for the film's documentary footage of various inhabitants of the local beach community, which is interwoven with Emilie's intermittent encounters with concerned friends and indifferent strangers. Like many of Varda's films, *Documenteur* concludes on an open-ended note of narrative uncertainty, with Emilie an isolated figure amidst the unceasing music and noise of a crowded street fair.

The title *Documenteur* is a play on the word 'documentary,' a filmic genre conventionally associated with factual truth, and 'menteur,' the (masculine) French word for liar. *Documenteur* is thematically preoccupied with the issue of separation, not simply from

one's partner but from one's self and the surrounding world at large. The language barrier for a French woman alone in Los Angeles allegorizes the internal disconnection between the individual and an external world which has suddenly become foreign. The film is primarily structured through a series of voiceovers which express Emilie's internal thoughts; however, Varda herself provides the introductory voiceover to the film:

Me, that's all I see –the faces. They seem real, more real than conversation. I feel lost in everything around words, in everything around faces. Where I am, there is nothing but words and faces. That woman, with her sullen face and lost eyes – she's mostly like me and she is real. But I don't recognize myself in that woman. Nothing comes to her eyes but faces. Lone faces, lists of faces, groups of faces, men's faces. Being separated from a man means living in exile from all men. Nothing comes to her mind but words, disconnected from the phrases. Lone words, list of words, groups of words. They are words which are in her head, immobile and suspended, words which are emotions: desire, death, disgust, pain, panic.

While she acknowledges the continuing presence of the multiple perspectives which comprise the ethnochoric, Varda voices an acute sense of alienation from the others who remain faces instead of fully realized perspectives.

In the introductory voiceover to *Les Plages d'Agnès*, Varda summarizes her approach to filmmaking: "it's others I'm interested in, others I like to film. Others who intrigue me, motivate me, make me ask questions, disconcert me, fascinate me." While the interest in others remains in *Documenteur*, the film chronicles an insurmountable sense of disconnection between Varda's fictional alter ego and the others who constitute fleeting surfaces in place of narrativized perspectives.



Fig. 29, Emilie in Delphine's bedroom

Emilie's internal distance positions her as a female figure who "needs others in order to exist," much like the female objects of the masculine French New Wave.⁸ She wryly observes that "if I had a nametag, I'd put 'out for awhile' on it," after confessing that "sometimes when I don't know what to do, I go and watch this woman," who works behind a laundromat counter because "she transfixes me, I let go." This anonymous woman interacts with others with a self-assured ease Emilie longs for.

Emilie is only able to distract herself from her inner turmoil when in the space of another person, namely that of her employer Delphine (the actress Delphine Seyrig). Emilie truly enjoys herself for the first time when asked by a crew of filmmakers to substitute her voice for that of Delphine's by recording a voiceover for their documentary; she appears to be at home for the first time in Delphine's bedroom where she strips naked and falls asleep on the bed after staring at her nude reflection in the mirror. In reaction to her separation from her husband, Emilie becomes a temporarily vacant female figure in relation to the external world.

She differs significantly from each of the vacant female figures discussed in chapter two, however, in that the film is structured entirely from her perspective.

Emilie's voiceover work within the film concludes with the phrase, "we never know if art imitates life, or life imitates art." This phrase, which is played back a second time while the camera lingers in close-up on a reel-to-reel sound recorder, effectively summarizes the blurred line between fiction and documentary which runs throughout Varda's body of work. *Documenteur* is, in effect, an exercise in ethnochoranic crisis which foregrounds the authorial alter ego as unstable and interrogates the structural integrity of the ethnochoranic. To return to Geneviève Sellier's argument that the French New Wave is indelibly entrenched in the first person singular, *Documenteur* is the product of a filmmaker who suddenly finds herself unable to see beyond the singular even though she is well-versed in the art of the plural.

"Autobiography becomes ethnographic," Catherine Russell argues, "at the point where the film- or videomaker understands his or her personal history to be implicated in larger social formations and historical processes. Identity is no longer a transcendental or essential self that is revealed, but a 'staging of subjectivity' – a representation of the self as performance."⁹ Varda's opening monologue in *Les Plages* outlines the difficulty of making a film solely about herself when her true cinematic interest lies in the narratives of others; she reconciles herself to this conflict with a claim that she is playing the role of a "little old lady, pleasantly plump and talkative, telling her life story."

For Russell, "autoethnography is a vehicle and a strategy for challenging imposed forms of identity and exploring the discursive possibilities of inauthentic subjectivities."¹⁰ Russell

positions *Sans Soleil* (1982), a film by Varda's Left Bank companion Chris Marker, as an exemplary instance of an authorial figure's attempt to decentralize himself within his own narrative. Russell writes that "*Sans Soleil* demonstrates the impossibility of an absolutely postmodern, decentered ethnographic film. In the labyrinth of reflecting mirrors, the dislocated global perspective ultimately points back to the subject position of the Western avant-garde filmmaker and his complicit audience."¹¹ Varda frequently attempts to decentralize herself throughout her work: she initially denies any comparison between herself and her fictional alter ego in *Documenteur*; she assumes a position of self-effacement in a bottom corner of *Les Veuves de Noirmoutier*, a visual expression of her concealment "within an intricate pattern of first-person pronouns," much like Marker in *Sans Soleil*.¹² With *Les Plages d'Agnès*, however, Varda acknowledges the impossibility of a truly decentred self-portrait.

At the beginning of *Les Plages*, Varda and her crew organize an elaborate series of mirrors reflecting off one another towards the camera, an act which literalizes Russell's labyrinth of ultimate self-reflection. She jokingly references her self-effacing tendencies when she asks the cameraman to "film me in old spotty mirrors and behind scarves," and positions each crew member in front of a mirror, effectively signalling the collective construction of the scene. According to Varda, "the tool of every self-portrait is the mirror. You see yourself in it. Turn it the other way, and you see the world."¹³ With *Les Plages d'Agnès*, Varda points the mirror in her direction, but ensures that the spectator is constantly aware that this mirror can be shifted at any moment.

The films discussed in this project centre on the notion that through the ethnochoranic narrative structure, the individual exists within the collective. The ethnochoranic narrative, as a cinematic activation of the fragmented, intricately woven female identity, produces multifaceted ethnographic narratives of individuals and social causes which ironically depict the female experience. Whether she is filming one hand with her other, interrogating the female experience via an ironically vacant protagonist, or giving narrative life to stilled images and handless clocks, the cinema of Agnès Varda puts forth a consistently structured aesthetic which is singular in its insistent emphasis on the plural.

NOTES

¹ Agnès Varda, "Agnès Varda," interview with Liza Béar, *Interview*, 2009, <http://www.interviewmagazine.com/film/agns-vara/>.

² Sarah Cooper, *Selfless Cinema? Ethics and French Documentary*. Research Monographs in French Studies 20. London: Legenda, 2006, 89.

³ The installation later took the form of a feature-length documentary, *Quelques veuves de Noirmoutier* (2006).

⁴ *L'Île et Elle*, Agnès Varda, mixed media exhibit, Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain, June 18 – October 8 2006.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ A.O. Scott, "Living for Cinema, and Through it," *The New York Times*, June 25, 2009.

⁷ *Documenteur* is often referenced as a companion film to Varda's 1981 Los Angeles street art documentary, *Murs murs*.

⁸ Geneviève Sellier, *Masculine Singular: French New Wave Cinema*, trans. Kristin Ross (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008), 98.

⁹ Catherine Russell, *Experimental Ethnography: The Work of Film in the Age of Video* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 276.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 276.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 305.

¹² *Ibid.*, 301.

¹³ Agnès Varda, in conversation with the author, September 10 2008.

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