

GLEANNING IMAGES FROM OTHERS AND MYSELF WITH A DV CAMERA: AGNÈS VARDA'S *THE GLEANERS AND I*

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Resumo: O documentário *Os Respigadores e a Respigadora* de Agnès Varda é um dos mais excitantes e reveladores trabalhos do cinema europeu de autor. A metáfora abrangente de respigar constitui uma reconsideração crítica de algumas atitudes da nossa sociedade de consumo. Este filme ensaio de dados factuais e pessoais e, também um trabalho em progresso através do qual a cineasta questiona a sua vida e mostra a sua fascinação pela arte, em especial pela pintura.

Palavras-chave: cinema digital, documentário, pintura, auto-retrato, road movie, respigar tradicional e moderno.

Resumen: El documental *Los espigadores y la espigadora*, de Agnès Varda es uno de los trabajos más interesantes y reveladoras del cine europeo de autor. La metáfora de espigar es una reconsideración crítica de algunas actitudes en nuestra sociedad de consumo. Esta película ensaio de datos factuales y personales es también un trabajo en progreso por el cual el cineasta questiona su vida y muestra su fascinación por el arte, la pintura especial.

Palabras clave: cine digital, documental, pintura, retrato de uno mismo, road movie, recoger tradicional y moderno.

Abstract: Agnès Varda's critically acclaimed documentary *The Gleaners and I* is one of the most exciting and revealing digital works within European auteurist cinema. The all-embracing metaphor of gleaning constitutes a creatively critical reconsideration of some depreciated attitudes in our consumer society. This film essay made of factual and personal materials is also a kind of work in progress through which the filmmaker herself calls her life into question and shows her fascination for art and mainly painting.

Keywords: Digital cinema, documentary, painting, self-portrait, road movie, traditional and modern gleaning.

Résumé: Le documentaire *Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse*, d'Agnès Varda est l'un des travaux les plus excitants et révélateurs du cinéma d'auteur européen. La métaphore du glanage est une reconsidération critique de certaines attitudes dans notre société de consommation. Cet essai cinématographique, à base de données factuelles et personnelles, est également un travail en cours par lequel la cinéaste s'interroge sur sa vie et sa fascination pour l'art, surtout la peinture.

Mots-clés: cinéma digitale, documentaire, peinture, portrait de soi, road movie, glaner traditionnelles et modernes.

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When you reap the harvest of your land,
Do not reap to the very edges of your field
Or gather the gleanings of your harvest.
Do not go over your vineyard a second time
Or pick up the grapes that have fallen.
Leave them for the poor and the stranger.
Leviticus 19:9-10

The Gleaners and I: a first person documentary

Agnès Varda's 2000 celebrated documentary *Les Glaneurs et la Glaneuse* (literally, The male gleaners and the female gleaner) was rendered *The gleaners and I* for the English spoken audience –Varda herself mentions this detail in her sequel *Two Years After (Deux ans après, 2002)*. The lack of grammatical gender in English has obviously brought about the change, but the result could not be more accurate in order to deconstruct the levelling metaphor of two contrasted practitioners of gleaning¹ by restoring the identity of the individual to its most *subjective* expression: 'I'. Moreover, by putting together two complete different elements, the 'and' of the title does not function only as a mere opposition and/or addition but as the strong link from which the film is meant to be seen: *they and I*. From the very title, the female filmmaker or *glaneuse* proclaims herself to be part of the story: the subject becomes also object which is none other than a social one: the new modern forms of 'gleaning'.

Yet I should make clear one significant point about this correlation between the filmmaker's self (*la glaneuse*) and the object (the gleaners), i.e. the imbrications of self-portrait and documentary: all that is said about the

¹ The French title is in fact a play on words based on gender in order to stress the feminine voice. The first part of the title (*les glaneurs*) is the plural form that may refer to male, female or both, but the second part (*la glaneuse*) can only be female. The same construction would not work if the filmmaker were male. The second clause of the title stresses her singularity (feminine) opposite a plural subject. Whether it is 'la glaneuse' in the original version or 'I' in the English one, the female identity is obviously stated by whoever signs the film: Agnès Varda.

former is considered a “digression” with regard to the latter – this term is used by the filmmaker herself as if Varda, humble and respectful but also conceding herself a space by having a self-justifying stance, did (not) want to deviate from the central topic. The all-encompassing metaphor of gleaning allows this identification since all the individuals in the film are considered gleaners in both a literal and a figurative sense: they collect things from the ground whether in the country, on the seashore or in the town; the female filmmaker collects some thrown-out objects and, more importantly, she collects images and sounds.



Fig.1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3

The Gleaners and I could be seen, obliquely, as an illustration of the theory of one of the most distinguished characters in the film: the psychoanalyst and viticulturist Jean Laplanche. He presents himself as “a psychoanalyst, but above all a theorist or rather a philosopher of analysis”.

He prioritises the other over the self in the formation of the human subjectivity, an “anti-ego philosophy” (“*une antiphilosophie du sujet*”)² that “shows how man first originates in the other”.³ My aim here is to compare the others and the self not in psychoanalytical terms but as two interconnected strands of the narrative. As a ‘glaneuse’ Varda is but a narrative-symbolic construction derived from her contact – *factual* but above all *textual*– with all the ‘gleaners’ disseminated in her documentary. Gleaning is constructed by the filmmaker as a real and imaginary world that seduces her and is fully invested with her subjectivity. At the beginning of the film, she prioritises the others (real gleaners and those represented in paintings) over herself. Then, by means of a metaphorical process, she *allows* herself to be constituted as a *glaneuse* with aesthetic vocation (performing in front of Jules Breton’s canvas “La glaneuse” the playful substitution of an ear of wheat by her small camcorder). It is only when she confers herself this strong symbolic identity that she *feels* the competence to occasionally “digress” from that subject (others) and talks about herself (her ageing body).

I shall discuss at the end of this essay the ethical implications, if any, of interposing the self with social and political issues in a documentary film. For now, it is sufficient to stress that Varda talks about herself not in the straightforward way that others do but only by means of a deeply stylised metaphoric and aesthetical process (as a filmmaker-*glaneuse* she only ‘speaks’ about her ageing body and things that catch her artistic eye, above all her fascination for art and mainly painting). Even in terms of her mediations through image and sound Varda assumes certain ‘restrictions’.

² Film quotations in English subtitles are respected according to the DVD released in 2002 by American Zeitgeist Video, but I put forward the French version when it is noticeably different from the translation.

³ Laplanche takes the decentring of the human subject beyond the familiar parameters of post-structuralist French theory and reformulates Freud abandoned ‘seduction theory’ as a general theory of primal seduction. For an overview of his work on otherness in English see Jean Laplanche, *Essays on Otherness*, London / New York: Routledge, , 1999.

In *The Gleaners and I* Varda always interacts openly with the interviewees but prefers to stay off-screen as a voiced presence in order not to overshadow the gleaners. She allows herself to be on-screen mainly in the ‘digressions’, which generally occur in private places such as her home or her car (in both cases she appears mostly in a fragmented manner: in brief glances on driving mirrors, close-ups of part of her face showing one eye, arms, and above all showing *her hands*). However, she takes centre stage in three moments of direct intervention on screen: 1) when she reveals her attraction towards the potatoes with the shape of a heart and intervenes following the interviewee talking about the discarded potatoes as they do not fit the commercial shape; 2) when she appears alone eating a fig; this is the only significant moment in which Varda talks on screen as she appeals to the audience in this occasion: alone and surrounded by fig trees whose fruits are about to go off, she permits herself to criticise those who do not offer their fruits to the gleaners; 3) when she catches a sight of an antique shop called “Finds” (“Trouvailles”) while travelling by car, decides to enter spurred on by curiosity and *finds* inside precisely a painting about female gleaners. Indeed, these three moments of personal interventions seem to epitomise three aspects of the Vardian conception of documentary: the aesthetic, the critical and the self-referential. They are also present in the most striking sequences of the film, two brief self-portraits at home in which the filmmaker feels compelled to reflect about her ageing body using paintings as a reference: Jules Breton in the first, Rembrandt in the second. I shall analyse in detail these key sequences at the end of this essay.



Fig. 4



Fig. 5



Fig. 6



Fig. 7

Varda's visual and aural approach ('disembodied' voice presence in the encounters with the gleaners and fragmented body in the self-referential digressions)⁴ is at the same time a deference to the social subject and also a poetical, ethical 'restriction' about her intimate ruminations. Despite this style of representation being connected to the *Nouvelle Vague* cinematic tradition, such subjective digressions would have been considered as an intrusion at that time. The way in which *The Gleaners and I* presents the

⁴ It should be taken into account that the 'disembodied' off-screen voice implies Varda's body behind or next to the camera, which is also acknowledged by the characters' gaze. Her voice also signals the distance (near/ far) from the speaker because the hidden microphone is closer to the interviewee. The dialectics between Varda's spontaneously inflected voice off-screen and her thoughtful, calm voice-over commentary enriches the aural/visual strategy of the first person narrator/character: *a strong sound presence that has the self-given potentiality of appearing occasionally (and mostly fragmented) on screen*. In both image and sound Varda operates sinecdochical ways of rendering her physical body. Furthermore, some point-of-view shots embody her first-person narration.

correlation between ‘they and I’ disavows conventional notions of genre: the film is neither an orthodox documentary nor an integral self-portrait but an amalgamation of both. *The Gleaners and I* is a poetic and personal essay that enlarges subjectivity and authorship in documentary film made in the digital era.

Although the majority of the characters leave a deep mark on the audience, the aim of the documentary is not to explore, to a large extent, personal motivations or interests (except for the last character to appear in the film, the Master in Botany Alain who is really a special and fascinating character). With the exception of two who reappear briefly, characters simply arrive, take up their place and go out –they are the transitory chapters of a “wandering road_documentary” (Varda’s description of her film). The filmmaker is the only character to have the right to reappear; she is the distinctive protagonist, the only individual who shows, up to a point, her intimate self. The internal and symbolic logic of the film is imbued by the subjectivity of the filmmaker, her articulating voice and her wrinkled body: “they and I”, “the country, the town... and my home”, “the road and my hands”.

Countryside, art and city gleaners

The film starts with a reference to the illustrated dictionary Larousse: “To glean is to gather after the harvest”. A reproduction of Jean-François Millet’s famous painting *The Gleaners* (*Les glaneuses*, 1857) appears in that page of the dictionary and it is evident that this famous canvas acts as an essential reference for Varda, a true art lover, when making a documentary about today’s gleaners.⁵ Thus, before the filmmaker travels throughout

⁵ There is also a reproduction of Jules Breton’s *La glaneuse* in the dictionary and Varda comes back to it before her performance in front of that canvas. Both paintings ‘gathered’ by the dictionary and in turn ‘gleaned’ by the filmmaker are the core of the film and its title.

France to gather images of the surviving and new forms of gleaning, she heads for the *Musée d'Orsay* to show *in situ* Millet's painting next to some tourists, especially some Japanese females taking pictures with their digital cameras. In the next sequence, an old female peasant says that gleaning, as it used to be, is an activity that died out completely "because machines are so efficient nowadays" (but other gleaners "are quite pleased when the machine malfunctions" as some will tell Varda later on). Using as mementos some brief beautiful footage and paintings, Varda makes clear that gleaning in the past was a female practice. As Millet's painting conveys, gleaning is linked to poor women in rural societies. The female peasant tells us that the long day of gleaning, from the very early morning, was very hard work but women shared their time, food and labour in such a way that is now well remembered. Whilst drawing on different sources and materials in order to ground the origins of gleaning, Varda states from the very beginning that paintings are not of lesser interest than real people.



Fig. 8



Fig. 9

What is the legacy left by those old female gleaners? Is this activity still relevant in our "satiated society" ("société de la sacieté")? What has gleaning become these days? Varda's film is the witty answer to these questions. Putting gleaning as a vast metaphor of our time and also as the *raison d'être* of Varda's quest, the documentary becomes a sort of work in

progress, a huge panel of characters and places, a bunch of images gathered to account for this essential gesture: those who bend down to collect something, whatever it may be: fruits, grapes or vegetables in the countryside; food and leftovers in the rubbish containers and city markets; all sort of domestic utensils, electrical appliances and other paraphernalia on the streets.

Varda feels secretly attracted by this “modest gesture of stooping to glean in the towns today as in the fields yesterday” which she comes to record in what she regards as the most humble of all film forms, the documentary. This physical gesture is part of a menial work that combines religious and socio-economical values: an ancestral ritual of gratitude and respect toward the earth, an old practice for poor women and a way of not wasting anything.

The most remarkable feature of the new practitioners of this ancestral gesture of ‘walking with a stoop’, whether in rural or urban areas, is their solitude. The loss of the ceremonial, collective sense –feminine in the past and now mix-gendered but indicating nevertheless a broader masculine presence– comes to stress the struggle for survival as the only common factor between the modern gleaning and the traditional one. However, a number of lively scenes, such as the Nenón family singing together and using the pruning shears as rhythmic musical instruments in the vineyard, confirms that not everything is degradation or disappearance. Yet this is much more in tune with the overall sense and mood of the film because what it does is to celebrate the repetition or replacement of any form of gleaning, even when it is identified in the town with the people who live rummaging around rubbish and leftovers on the streets. Even with a suggestive sense of criticism and denunciation, *The Gleaners and I* constructs a worldview completely affirmative, optimistic, and full of

vitality.⁶ It is like a return to the Garden of Eden, to the state of nature where the only thing you need is to bend over or stretch your hand to collect the earth's fruits. There is no sin, therefore no money, no economic exchange. With no value in exchange, the labour of gleaning is not actually a job. In any case it is gratifying work as everything you collect is yours. It is far beyond the dream of communism (in gleaning, private property is temporally 'cancelled' after the harvest, but the collection is essentially an individual or familiar task) as the scrupulous commandments of the bourgeoisie.⁷ Paradoxically, the scene that gets closer, in visual or pictorial terms, to the representation of (an individual) paradise is the one that shows the filmmaker, as a critical and lonesome Eve, picking up and savouring a fig that she calls "fruit from heaven".

Varda's view on modern gleaning, which is close to either the abandoned garden or the dumping ground, revises the social myth of original sin and enlarges our views on dialectical pairings such as happiness and conflict, innocence and labour, abundance and scarcity, dirtiness and purity. To pull together in the same all-inclusive metaphor those who collect spare potatoes in the country, oysters in the seaside, and detritus in the street or parsley in the market bins should involve advantageous prerogatives. Firstly, to demystify the social meanings of rubbish as the realm of the execrable and those who approach that world as despicable (it may even involve a choice not ruled exclusively by necessity but also by ethical and

⁶ The film actually produces a joyful impression in the audience. This is corroborated by the vast number of generous people who wrote letters and gave gifts (both related to artworks made out of gleaned materials) to Varda, as it is said and shown in the follow-up film. This extraordinary response and the international commercial success of the film were, in fact, the main reasons for making the sequel.

⁷ Many critics and reviewers have pointed out the utopian, undisciplined sense implicit in the metaphor of gleaning. See for example Jake Wilson, "*Trash and Treasure: The Gleaner and I*", <http://www.senseofcinema.com/contents/02/23/gleaners.html>

political responsibility)⁸. Secondly, it is worthwhile to set up an openly poetic point of view about a marginalised social behaviour whose senses and meanings cannot be reduced exclusively to ideological or political terms. By taking rejected food out of the capitalist process and redeeming it from the incipient process of decaying, gleaners remind us not only of the traditional values of saving and preservation but of the basic truth that food is in the end a sacred value.

The intensely subjective treatment of the topic is first and foremost the organising element of the film since the voice-over commentary guides purposefully the events shown. Varda is on tour and her guiding voice-over combine freely and amusingly her encounters with the gleaners, her self-reflexive stays at home, her visits to museums and her good-humoured anecdotes on the road. She organises the narrative in three consecutive segments or axes: 1) countryside, 2) art, craftwork and recycling, 3) town. This segmentation is more indicative than homogeneous. Each segment follows the same pattern of randomness and dissemination from her trips. For instance, those who collect oysters and grapes are included in segment 2 or those who pick apples in segment 3. The ‘gleaners’ interviewed are equally diverse and dispersed: country people, farmers, unemployed and poor people, artists, lawyers, retrievers, activists, etc. Those who glean or pick up things are driven by necessity, fun, habit, political or artistic reasons. The sense of drift in the film is paramount, but Varda always finds a way to make connections: in her commentary, she constantly uses figures of speech involving repetition such as pun, anaphora and anadiplosis (the repetition of the last words or phrase of one sentence at the beginning of the next); visually, she uses all sort of associations and rhymes. These techniques in both text and image, which can occur simultaneously,

⁸ This question about choosing freely to be a scavenger or a “picker of recyclable material in the landfill” is raised by Eduardo Coutinho in *The scavengers (Boca do lixo*, Brazil, 1992) and Lucy Walker in *Waste Land* (Brazil/UK, 2010) among others.

reinforce the concatenation and make the flow of the film more lively and meaningful.⁹



Fig. 10

At the beginning of the film the rap song sequence, arranged as a video clip, lightens the tone of the documentary and presents us with an explicit moral and social lesson which is at odds within a film comprising a plurality of perspectives. Although the sequence starts with Varda's short social reflection on modern gleaning ("there is no shame, just worries") that soon gives way to the two masculine rappers voices,¹⁰ the bulk of this clip consists of a succession of isolated shots on urban gleaners, especially old women rummaging through the leftovers around the stalls in a street market.

⁹ Some examples may help to illustrate these recurrent procedures of repetition and concatenation: a) One textual example: "As we are talking about grapes and wine (end of the episode with the chef) we might as well go to a wine area" (next episode in Burgundy); b) Three visual examples: the line of Parisian underground and furrow on the field; horizontal shapes in the abstract work of Louis Pons and horizontal lines on the road; Varda's hand in the second self-portrait and hands in a painting by Utrillo; c) An example of both text and image establishing four links: Salomon retrieving *fridges* from the street, a '*fridge-demonstration*' (the figures are playmobil toys) in a recycling art exhibition for kids, a leftist *demonstration* in Varda's neighbourhood passing by the sculpture of a *lion* "made on bronze", the *lion* in Arles "made of stone".

¹⁰ In fact *Two Years After* shows that the rappers are a boy and a girl, but the girl voice sounds like a masculine one.

Some correspondences between Varda's words and the lyrics of the rap actually suggest she intervened in its composition:

*"To bend down is not begging
but when I see them sway my heart hurts!
Eating that scrap-crap,
they've got to live on shit-bits,
they've got to frisk for tidbits.
Left on the street, leftovers, rough stuff with no owners.
Picking up trash like the street sweepers.
Zero for us, for them much better.
They got to roam around to kill the hunger.
It's always been the same pain, will always be the same game".*

Varda shoots these anonymous people with a profound sense of respect – the camera carefully avoids showing their faces – and also stresses the individuality and loneliness of mostly elderly bending women of a similar age to Varda's. There is no doubt that the symbolic substratum for the poetic metaphor of gleaning lies in our mothers and grandmothers.¹¹ It is worth recalling here the Book of Ruth, which can be seen as the poignant old story that relates old women (widows), gleaning and poverty. In the documentary, gleaning is mostly deemed a generational activity not only by the female peasant, but also for those who glean for fun or habit (the "inventive and thrifty chef" Edouard Loubet) or artists working with retrieved materials (Hervé).

A charismatic lawyer –'his bible' or penal code in his hands and dressed with a gown while talking next to a field of cabbages– explains

¹¹ At the end of the documentary Varda, careful about showing a women's point of view, recalls that she began filming when television showed an eclipse (a total solar eclipse occurred on August 11, 1999) and "ended the film the first of May" while a bouquet of flowers emphasises the French Mother's Day.

Gleaning images from others...

effortlessly to us the current and the old rights of gleaning in France: “Gleaning is allowed with absolute impunity from sunrise to sundown after the harvest”. And the old edict from 1554 “just says the same as the law today. It allows the poor, the wretched, and the deprived to enter the fields once the harvest is over”. However, Varda’s film leads us to deduce that gleaning will be only done with the permission of the owner. Not just because gleaners usually do not know the law but primarily because of the imposing weight of social representation of private property. If the farmer does not allow it and prefers to let the fruits rot, as happens in the protectionist vineyards of Burgundy and with the fig trees, no gleaner will almost certainly dare to use his/her actual legitimacy. When Varda intervenes in the fig trees field, she assumes in fact this state of affairs; she does not give rise to the question politically but in terms of personal choice on the part of the farmers: “I half-feel like interfering but it is none of my business, it’s their fruit... Anyway, half the people are stingy. They won’t allow gleaning because they don’t feel like being nice”. This statement presupposes that farmers allowing gleaning is the result of philanthropic values such as generosity or “being nice” while the film also points out that some farmers are driven by pure profitability as gleaners carry out effective cleaning work after the harvest. On the other hand, when Varda raises the question of gleaning and private property to the lawyer, which provokes an understandable surprise in her, the reasoning carries no further consequences:

Lawyer: If gleaners remain within the law farmers cannot say anything, cannot sue them for anything.

Varda: Even on their property?

Lawyer: Even then, precisely gleaning is always on private property.

We can easily expect the sensible lawyer to speak or read literally the law without observing the contradictions or loopholes but it is difficult to understand how Varda, astonished, does not follow the logical questioning: what should a law-abiding gleaner do to collect vegetables or fruits in a property whose owner does not permit gleaning? What would happen legally to these gleaners who despite “remaining within the law” could have a serious conflict with reluctant owners averse to gleaning? Varda places this talk with the lawyer as a rhetorical response to a gleaner (the response is actually to the audience) who does not know his rights as a gleaner. However, the film does not explore what would happen to gleaners if they knew (better) their rights; if and how that could change their approach to gleaning. Although politics does not have to be at odds with poetics in a postmodern social ‘subjective documentary’ as it happens in Chris Marker’s films, the omission of further relevant questioning confirms certain lack of political and social energy.

If we compare the urban gleaner –specifically those who search for food in the bins and the markets– to the archetypal country gleaner, the former is clearly more subjected to clash and conflict. Varda prefers not to stress this point because of the broad thematic approach and the light-hearted tone and style of the film. Yet Varda presents some young squatters in conflict with a supermarket where they frequently rummage through its bins. Varda makes a connection with her film *Sans toit ni loi* (*Vagabond*, 1985) when she says: “I wanted to know how these homeless coped with the law” (“Je voulais savoir plus sur ces jeunes *sans toit face a la loi*”). Varda interviews the three parties at stake: the youngsters, the manager of the supermarket and the magistrate. The staff of the supermarket douses the bins with bleach because of the mess left by the youngsters. In turn, the youngsters took this as an offense and broke the surveillance cameras and wrote graffiti on the walls. As a result they were prosecuted and ultimately lost the case. The magistrate stresses their disruptive behaviour in court. In

the middle of this vignette, Varda's unnecessary position on this well-presented event does not go beyond a simple remark on beauty with a hint of social commentary: "Their beauty is poignant when you realise that, for whatever reason, they got most of their food from trash cans".



Fig.11

On the other hand, there is also the rivalry among the urban gleaners themselves. The film provides only one example of this underlying conflict which vindicates significantly how documentary is often driven by chance. The camera accompanies black Salomon, a kind and supportive man, seeking leftovers in a market and suddenly we heard an old woman shouting rudely at him when noticing the proximity of the man. This instant captures an extraordinary moment of the struggle for survival, showing the strategy of the physically inferior individual trying to defend his or her territory. However, it can also suggest how the white woman feels 'psychologically' stronger, exerting her arresting 'social' power over the black man.

There are four touching stories of gleaners rummaging food in the bins: two men who do it out of necessity, the unemployed, alcoholic Claude who lives in a ruinous caravan and affectionate, wandering Salomon who lives with his Vietnamese friend Charly as scrap dealers salvaging objects; and two other characters who cannot be included in the conventional sphere

of the marginalised because of their ethical and political activism: François, the young man with the big boots and Alain, a highly educated man with a master's degree in Botany. The last two live mostly from the trash. Varda makes contact with them in the streets in two different ways: François is a well-known person in the neighbourhood and makes an appointment in a cafe; the vegetarian Alain is frequently seen by Varda in the market and she needs all her nerve to approach him. Proud and courageous François rages against the ecological disaster on the French coast caused by the oil tanker Erika and also against consumerist people and their wastefulness. Varda for once supports his complaint by inserting news footage of the rescue operations after the Erika's spill. Alain's thinking and way of life expand beyond the issues explored by the film: he lives in the suburbs of Paris, gets up at 4am, sells a social magazine outside an underground station and in the evening gives literacy lessons to foreign immigrants as a volunteer in the hostel where he lives. Without resorting to his ideological or ecological concerns, he justifies living on leftovers as a means of saving money. His lifestyle is a kind of Franciscan disagreement. Varda shoots him collecting and eating leftovers in the market from a respectful distance. She shows here more instability and discontinuity than usual in framing and editing – the interviewee is barely seen talking onscreen but through syncopated cutting and a-synchronous sound. This style of representation confers the episode of Alain in the market a peculiar quality. Months later, Varda goes to Alain's residence in the evening and shoots him giving lessons in the hostel. If bending over is a humble gesture and documentary a humble genre, this character, not by chance the last one, would suggest, in a broad sense, a lucid portrayal of Laplanche's "anti-ego philosophy" (in fact, Varda dedicates to him the largest chapter in *Two Years After*).



Fig. 12

Alain's episode is the penultimate sequence in the film. Varda confesses that the last two sequences impressed her the most. The final scene of the documentary presents us with images of Hédouin's painting *Gleaners fleeing before the Storm* in the Museum of Villefranche sur Saône being moved from the stockroom to the courtyard in order to be seen and filmed. Varda expressed her desire to see *in situ* this oil on canvas she had only seen before in a black and white reproduction. A storm is brewing at the precise moment Varda's desire is satisfied: "to see it in broad daylight with stormy gusts lashing against the canvas was true delight". If Varda tries to "accommodate chance" ("composer avec le hazard") like the artists using rejected objects, chance acts here more genuinely than in the sequence of the painting found in the antique shop¹² or in the one called the "dance of the lens cap" when she forgot to turn the camera off.

¹² This sequence is in fact a series of coincidences. Firstly, the shop is called 'Finds'. Secondly, Varda comes across the amateur painting after being beckoned by two automatons. Thirdly, the painting "combines both the humble stooping of Millet's gleaneresses and the proud posture of Breton's gleaneress. The painter had one old dictionary at hand". Not surprisingly, the filmmaker needs to justify herself: "Honest, this is not a movie trick. We really did find these gleaneresses purely by chance. This painting has beckoned us because it belonged to this film".



Fig.13

Varda can be easily included in the group of collectors of discarded objects with aesthetic vocation who appears in the middle part of the documentary. In fact, this segment comes immediately after two consecutive sequences: the first, she describes her “gleaning of images” as an “activité de l’esprit (...) sans législation” (filming objects such as reddish vegetables and overexposed sunflowers as an ‘artistic’ counterpart to the final part of the lawyer’s lecture on gleaning for fun) and then her second self-portrait via Rembrandt. The way Varda relates art and gleaning enlarges the central metaphor. Artists and retrievers convey the pleasure of gift when coming across the gleaned object: “They are like presents left on the streets, it’s like Christmas” (Hervé); “It’s like a lottery” (Salomon), “I treat them like treasures” (Varda). Whether they glean by necessity, for pleasure or by choice, in urban or rural locations, the experience of gleaning entails notions of infancy, adventure, discovery, and fortune. Artist gleaners treat objects like messages in a bottle or remains of a shipwreck. According to Renaissance poet Joachim du Bellay’s poem recited by Jean Laplanche, what gleaners do is “to gather relics”. Abandoned objects have a past that it is still alive; they leave their traces that beckon the street explorer and can be incorporated as a “second chance” by the artists. The gleaned object is

invested with the revered sense of a ‘found object’ that “contains a part of us”.



Fig.14

Is there any relation between gleaning and psychoanalysis? Like gleaning, psychoanalysis feeds on everything that is discarded, refused, acting in the margins of conscience and reason, “what other disciplines consider useless and valueless” (Benoliel, 63). In *Two Years After*, Laplanche and Varda regret not having thought of this relation in their previous encounter. Now Laplanche says that Freudian psychoanalysis is “a kind of gleaning”: “We pay attention to things no one else does: what falls from speech [discourse]. What is dropped, what is picked up; words which are beside usual speech are of special value to psychoanalysts because things which are picked up or gleaned are more valuable to us than what is harvested”. Despite (or maybe because of) this omission in *The Gleaners and I*, Varda makes a remarkable visual association which introduces to us Jean Laplanche’s “double life”. Laplanche appears first as a wine grower. Then, when Varda introduces to us his ‘second profession’, which is in truth the first, she pays attention to a small spot of white paint in a cracked wooden window in his house. While Varda utters “Jean Laplanche, a keen

wine grower, has another calling, psychoanalyst” we are shown four shots: one long shot of a ruined wall and three extreme close-ups of the white spot, each one getting closer to the spot.¹³ This is the only significant moment in the film where the voice-over commentary is not trying to fix the events and its meanings.¹⁴ This ‘plastic’ relic of eroded material, shown as a gradual focus on the object, depicts, no doubt, the deep undertaking of psychoanalysis. The changing and fragile condition of the spot mirrors that of the knobbly wood which was entirely painted in the past. The spot is in fact strongly tied to a wooden knot with spirals looping like in Hitchcock’s *Vertigo*. The wooden knot keeps the spot going in the same way gleaners expand the cycle of life and death of objects. The spot of white paint is a second nature to the wood and portrays it like a purely abstract form: a headless white bird? The map of an unknown territory? Metaphorically it is no other than the hand of time. The big topics of death and time, art and nature are rendered in such a plastic stage –“gleaned” by an artistic eye who loves “filming rot, leftovers and waste”.

The possibilities of the small DV camera for the self-portrait: *To film with one hand my other hand*

The widespread adoption of digital video cameras and new media in the late nineties, which parallels, on a much bigger scale, that of the seventies with the first analogical video cameras, is certainly the most significant factor within the contemporary globalising transformations for the understanding of the pervasive proliferation of first-person film narratives such as the

¹³ The window is clearly not a part of the wall we see and this suggests that maybe it is not Laplanche’s estate. Varda could have used some discarded shots at the time of editing as a way to aesthetically emphasize Laplanche’s profession.

¹⁴ Varda’s affinity for visual/textual connections are mainly stated explicitly by the text as it happened just a moment before when Laplanche says “I took over my father’s state” and Varda connects a brief shot of a reddish spot in the middle of a grey wall surface with a *plongée* shot of Laplanche’s state surrounded by trees.

family film, diary film, first-person documentary, and the personal-essay documentary (Aufderheide: 1). It is well known that these tiny digital cameras, due to their flexible technical features, are particularly apt for domestic use and therefore suitable to self-representation. Yet *The Gleaners and I*, mixing intelligently personal and broader issues, cannot be strictly considered a confessional film nor can it be included, in terms of its narrative and aesthetics, in the socially activist, first-person video storytelling format that has mushroomed in the digital age. In this autobiographical videomaking “identity is no longer a transcendental or essential self that is revealed, but a ‘staging of subjectivity’ –a representation of the self as performance. In the politicisation of the personal, identities are frequently played out among several cultural discourses, be they ethnic, national, sexual, racial, and/or class based” (Russell 1999: 276). Varda’s documentary obviously takes part in this historical, sociological and technological sphere but primarily takes root in the strong tradition of European auteurist cinema. Astruc’s theoretical contribution of the *caméra-stylo* (camera used as a pen) and French *Nouvelle Vague* had already used small formats such as 16 mm synchronous shooting permitting hand-held long continuous takes not only as a means of personal aesthetic expression but also as a concurrent way to deal with individual, private matters. Varda has always shown a confident preoccupation for including herself, her family (above all her late husband Jacques Demy) and the people around her in films such as *Uncle Yanco* (1967), *Daguerreotypes* (1974-75), *Ulysse* (1982), *Jane B. par Agnès V.* (1987), *Jacquot de Nantes* (1990), *Les Demoiselles ont eu 25 ans* (1993), *L’univers de Jacques Demy* (1993-95). *The Gleaners and I* is mostly the result of the encounter of the old lady of the *Nouvelle Vague* with digital technology, an encounter that constitutes the crux of her documentary. Therefore, it is not surprising that she shows herself just as she is at that time, displaying her signs of old age, opening the doors of her house,

considering, as a filmmaker, the aesthetic and narrative possibilities of the small digital camcorders.

Nearly five minutes into the film, at the museum in Arras in front of Jules Breton's *La glaneuse*, Varda stages with ease her identification with the female gleaner's "proud posture" –as Varda describes her in a subsequent sequence. This tall and good-figured woman is not portrayed bending over as Millet's female gleaners but is standing straight. Varda, in front of two wardens standing on stools and holding amusingly a shawl, emulates the female of the painting by keeping a bunch of wheat on her shoulder. Then she drops it and replaces it with her small camcorder: "There is another woman gleaning in this film, that's me" ("L'autre glaneuse, celle du titre de ce documentaire, c'est moi").



Fig. 15



Fig. 16

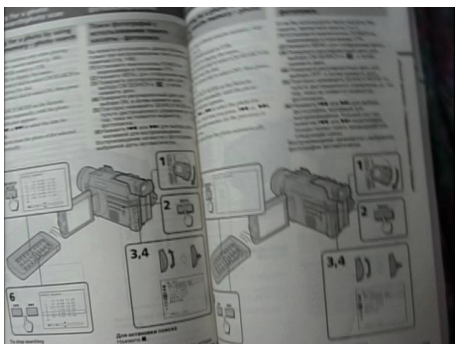


Fig. 17



Fig. 18

Next, this gleaner of images present us with her new tool: “These new small digital cameras are fantastic (detail shot of Varda’s eye; part of the screen betrays its pixelated texture), their effects are stroboscopic (the pixelation expands on the screen while a new shot of a hand shell-covered mirror appears), narcissistic (the small mirror turns in front of Varda’s face) and even hyperrealistic (the mirror continues turning but, when it stops, there turns up the drawing of an old woman with a sad expression in the mirror)”. Varda ends this compressed introduction with a shot of the camcorder user guide and begins another sequence that intensifies, under a strange oneiric atmosphere, her travel through the looking glass. There is first a blurred to in-focus sweep in slow-motion from a houseplant to Varda’s face; she is lying down in a divan and stretches her hand, refusing the camera. Continuing with the same reddish and brown dominant textures and strong contrast between shades and lights, the sequence carries on with digital effects of discontinuity and fading over Varda’s foreshortened face looking seriously at the camera. These effects make her face move back and forth at the lower right angle of the frame, intensifying the game of refusal. Finally, in a darkened room, the small camcorder is used as a mirror in order to show closely Varda combing her hair. In fact, she is exploring her hair roots; we see in detail, in the foreground, her white hair roots and wrinkled hands while in the background the mirrored surface of the wooden furniture reflects the same act from the back. The ability of the digital camera for self-exploration is so acute that the filmmaker needs to clear up her thoughts to end this sincere self-portrait:

“No, no, it’s not *O rage*,
No, it’s not *O despair*,
It’s not *old age, my enemy*,
It might even be old age my friend
But still my hair and my hands
Keep telling me that the end is near”.

The presentation of the small digital camera gives way to the intimate self-representation of the filmmaker's ageing female body. The divorce between camera-mirror and subject is the stylized reproduction of the shock produced by that mirroring. It is an anguished psyche as a result of a physical landscape. Varda's distinctive visual style combining informality and untidiness with a strong sense of composition turns out to be particularly significant in this self-mirroring scene endeavouring to distort any trace of visual realism. Making no concession neither to exhibitionism nor to playful theatricality, the outcome is however more realistic and expressive. Locating her self-inscription in video art and experimental film and photography rather than in painting or art house film, the filmmaker offers herself in extreme close-ups that show her eye falling towards the lower right corner of the frame, dramatising the proximity of the death.

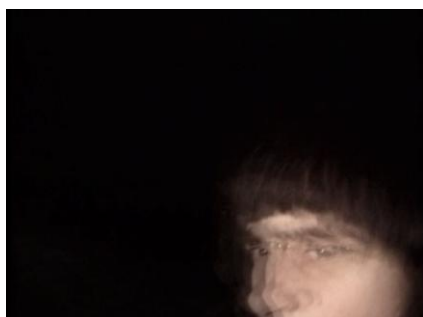


Fig. 19



Fig. 20

Despite the fact that memoirs and self-portraits are generally linked with old age or the end of lifetime, it is worth stressing again that Varda's first cinematic experience with the DV camera is devoted at times to self-contemplation.¹⁵ The camera user's guide will not say it but its technical

¹⁵ Varda observes two sides of the mini DV camera: the report side ("I arrive when something is going on, I film it and a few minutes later on everything is over") and the 'notebook' side: "things that happen when I am on my own, thoughts and urge of images

specifications might be easily connected to the feminine hand mirror: small, light, manual, portable, easy-to-use, malleable and privately used (which here means above all autonomy and immediacy). These tiny cameras also have a more acute quality of perception thanks to technical functions such as enlargement –a shot in macro of Varda’s hand in the car ends her self-portrait. Kiarostami does the same at the end of *10 on Ten* (2003), where an ant’s nest in the skin of the earth is the object to think over the capacity of perception and revelation of these cameras. Benjamin’s thinking on film is still valid in the age of the clinical, sharp textures of digital images: “enlargement not merely clarifies what we see indistinctly ‘in any case’, but brings to light entirely new structures of matter” (Benjamin 2002: 117).

The hand filmed by the other hand holding the tiny camera is the leitmotif of the film. It is mostly used when travelling by car, first as a simple description of Varda’s ageing hand, then closing her hand like an iris and ‘catching’ trucks they overtake in the motorway.¹⁶ Another striking variation happens when the heart-shaped potatoes appeals to the filmmaker and she immediately films them in close up with one hand while collecting and putting them in her bag with the other hand. Here, Varda makes use of her great affinity to pun and constructs a syntagm to grant a “mythical status to the humble potato” (Rosello 2001: 32). For she brings them home in her bag and films them again while putting forward her particular protest

related to personal, immediate impressions”. For this reason she would film on her own and would never ask for a cameraman to film her own hand. See ‘Le numérique entre immédiateté et solitude’, *Cahiers du Cinéma* 559, p. 62.

¹⁶ Ernest Callenbach says: “These trucks are everywhere, hauling food and other goods to and fro at an immense expenditure of petroleum in the modern industrial-agribiz mode. The trucks are in fact a key element of the hugely wasteful system to which gleaning is a response, and like the rest of the world, Europe is busily constructing new and vastly subsidized highways for them” (Callenbach 2003: 48). However, the reason given by the filmmaker herself is quite satisfactory: “On the road there are a lot of trucks of the kind we love when we were kids. It’s like a child’s game”; “I’d like to capture them [trucks]. To retain things passing? No, just to play”. It is a return to childhood through an archetypal game using one’s hand as an iris mechanism that catches what we see through the eye. This playful way of framing an object is also a consequence of the mini-DV because the left hand just duplicates what the (hand-size) camera does.

against waste by means of a metonymic transfer between the heart-shaped potatoes and the name of a French charity meal program (called “les Restos du coeur”): “It dawned upon me the Good Heart Charity Meals. Why not organise an expedition on the day the potatoes are dumped?” Varda had already taken a black and white picture of a heart-shaped potato in 1953, a year before her first photography exhibition as she exclaims in *The Beaches of Agnes* (*Les Plages de Agnès*, 2008). She liberates the heart-shaped potato from capitalist contempt and turns it into an art object, decorative and natural at once, whose decaying skin is filmed in macro with the same attentiveness she gives to her ageing skin.



Fig. 21

Half way through the film Varda presents another self-referential digression about old age. This time the painting reference is Rembrandt and it comes after a personal remark about the “gleaned souvenirs” brought from a trip to Japan. Back at home Varda examines the stains on the ceiling and makes a visual gag by framing three fragments of the damp surface with the same golden frame (using a simple digital effect) and adding to each a famous signature: Tapiès, Guo Xiang, Borderie. Then, she opens her suitcase, spills out on the table postcards of Hokusai, Mount Fuji and sumo wrestling, some souvenirs and other bits and pieces, some Japanese catalogues on her photographs and films and, at last, some postcards

reproducing one of Rembrandt's numerous self-portraits, that of 1654, and also a painting of his wife Saskia, *Saskia in a Red Hat*¹⁷ and covers them with her hand: "This is amazing. In a department store in Tokyo, on the top floor, there were Rembrandt paintings, original Rembrandts. Saskia up close... and then my hand up close, I mean, this is my project: to film with one hand my other hand. To enter into the horror of it. I find it extraordinary. I feel as if I am an animal, worse, I am an animal I don't know. And here is Rembrandt's self-portrait but it is just the same in fact, always a self-portrait".

Here, Varda in the circular exploration of her hand takes up again two intrinsic capacities of the mini-DV camera working together: enlargement and self-portrait. Both are now redefined as *her personal project* ("to film with one hand my other hand") in order to confer an "extraordinary" disclosure: the horrified feeling of contemplating her enlarged ageing skin and liver spots like the features of bestiality or monstrosity ("I am an animal I don't know"). The ambiguities of the first self-portrait –the paronomastic verses about *old age* culminating the visual game of refusal– make way now to a plain description of the shocking self-image: the terror of old age and mortality. However, this 'disclosure' is not solely given by the optical or aesthetical capacities of the digital camera, it is also the result of the reference to an enormous artist framing and sublimating the whole moment: Rembrandt. In fact, Varda constructs this sequence, and the previous one, as a chain of aesthetical or metaphorical ('gleaner of images', 'souvenirs gleaned', 'artistic stains in the ceiling') and "realistic" syntagms (back home from a trip to Japan; photographs of Varda, her son and daughter in the Japanese catalogues) in order to make plausible

¹⁷ Both paintings of Rembrandt (1606 - 1669), the 1654 *Self-portrait* (72 x 58.5 cm) and *Saskia in a Red Hat*, circa 1635 (also called *Half-length Figure of Saskia in Rich Apparel*, 99.5 x 78.5 cm) are in Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Staatliche Museen Kassel, Germany. There is a third painting in the series of cards which I have not been able to identify in various compilations of Rembrandt's works I have checked (Bredius, Bolten/Bolten Rempt, Schwartz); I consequently deduce it is probably a rejected work or attributed to followers.

the encounter between her hand and ‘Rembrandt’. For this reference is unmistakable: his prodigious output of eighty-six self-portraits over the span of forty years is unique in art history¹⁸. Varda takes this model of self-portraiture as an object in miniature (postcards) that is at her hands in order to make a conjuring trick. The hand revealing the horror of old age is the same hand that –by moving just one finger– is able to cover, reveal and recover Rembrandt’s face. Rembrandt actually puts ‘face’, however tiny, to the *detail* of Varda’s hand – a study or sketch that, in painting, would be part of a much larger project. Thus, Rembrandt acknowledges the spectator’s gaze before Varda curtains it off with her finger. In fact, it is with this game that Varda winks at us to show that her set piece is not a banal gesture of self-portrait in digital imaging but something that may gain more weight in contact with such a reference.



Fig. 22



Fig. 23

¹⁸ By the time Varda was filming *The Gleaners and I*, the first exhibition ever devoted to the Dutch painter’s self-portraits, *Rembrandt by himself*, was being held at the Mauritshuis in The Hague and afterwards at London’s National Gallery (January 2000). The exhibition displayed sixty-six of these works in paintings, etchings and drawings that constitute a “sort of visual diary, a forty-year exercise in self-examination”. Varda knowingly did not choose one of Rembrandt’s late self-portraits “as they reveal this rigorous self-reflection most profoundly” but one of him in his late forties. The association with old age would have been unmistakably obvious. Instead, Varda sought to stress Rembrandt as a reference of first order both in painting history and in self-portraiture. For all quotes in this footnote, see Susan Fegley Osmond in the bibliography.

Varda's distinctive visual association (through montage) becomes here an optical association (within the same frame) which is at the same time effective and problematic. I have already suggested that Rembrandt's self-portrait functions as a way to aestheticise the self-exploration in macro –but this *artistic* reference also implies the connotation that the *cinematic* exploration, which is the core of Varda's project, is insufficient in itself.¹⁹ The connection between Rembrandt's postcards and the filmmaker's hand does not produce a new sign, a new structure of meaning; it is nothing but a literal (optical) identification of self-portraiture in both cinema and painting (in re(pro)duced scale). Hence Varda's justificative attitude: "it is the same in fact, always a self-portrait". The same procedure operates at the precise moment Varda jumps from Rembrandt's postcards –in this case the detail of Saskia's sumptuous necklace– to her hand: "Saskia up close ("Saskia en detaille") and then my hand up close". Varda employs the expressive, mysterious tone of a storyteller so as to emphasize the supreme reference: taking postcards out of an envelope is "amazing" ("Alors, c'est ça qui est formidable") and the postcards reproductions are called "original Rembrandts" ("vrai Rembrandts"). This is a rhetorical way to call attention to the artistic reference since Varda shows obviously postcards (some of them even repeated twice) and this acknowledges its specific reproducibility. However, Varda deliberately avoids saying 'postcards' and

¹⁹ The macro exploration of Varda's hand is in itself as *cinematically* revealing as the ant's nest in Kiarostami's *10 on Ten*. However, it is worth to acknowledge that Varda's hand playing with Rembrandt's self-portrait has two other implications. Firstly, the pictorial reference is at the same time the 'diegetic pretext' for Varda's second self-portrait and the uninhibited, proud aspiration of being part of an artistic genre rooted on the Renaissance. Since visual self-portrait in photography, film or video-art is unavoidably indebted to painting, the traditional locus for "a highly narcissistic genre, deeply linked to self-promotion and the presentation of the way in which the artist positions himself or herself in society" (Ruscarolo 2009: 181), it is clear that Varda's claim for posterity is more inviting by comparison with 'Rembrandt'. Secondly, Varda's project ("to film with one hand my other hand") relates handicraft aesthetics (Rembrandt's reference intensifies the old manual work practises and the artistic phenomenology of the *hands*, a part of the body that permeates the whole of *The Gleaners and I*) to digital aesthetics. Her personal project keeps in tune with cinema's contemporary exploration of the relation between body and machine.

the first person of the eluded action, *I bought*: “there were Rembrandts, *true* Rembrandts... in the top floor of a department store in Tokyo”. Her aesthetical metaphor of gleaning disguises here a crucial difference: unlike the strong experience of gleaners proposing different alternatives to consumerism, Varda’s “gleaned souvenirs” have been purchased. In this case the metaphor of gleaning is to consumption and commodity as the ‘auratic’ reference to Rembrandt is to his technologically reproduced postcards. These objects are not here to question social, materialist or capitalist forces nor even to relate or reveal a personal experience but rather, to aesthetically condense Varda’s subjectivity (which is mostly ‘artistic’). If the objects that “sum up a trip to Japan” infer a devalued experience, the main object ‘selected’ from the cluster of stereotyped souvenirs hastily extended over the table, the postcards, expresses even more clearly the banal and globalized gesture of that experience. Deprived of the value of personal experience or memory, Varda’s objects, like the return of the repressed, betray their inscription in the realm of consumption and above all her *disposition d’esprit*. For her “images, impressions, emotions” do not rest obviously on the objects brought from Japan but in her inner intimations of old age. Rembrandt takes the supporting role: his operational range does not function as a potential aesthetic experience, but as a ‘bodily’ reference that is ocularly ‘caught’ with the same visual pleasure than the trucks.

B. Benoliel says that Varda films her hand not as hers but as the hand of *others* (“comme un *autre*”) and such alterity is somehow confirmed in her shocking self-image (“*Je suis une bête que je ne connais pas*”). Like many others critics, he also sees in that hand traces of her late husband Jacques Demy’s hand – the hand of the one she misses. Demy died of AIDS while Varda was shooting *Jacquot of Nantes*, a fictional account of his teenage years. The film ends with enlarged detailed shots of his skin, eyes, white hair, hands and other parts of his body consumed by the disease. Varda’s underlying relation to Demy (even though she was unaware of it as

she says in the poignant closure of *Two Years After*) is also suggested by her ring in the left hand and by Rembrandt and his wife Saskia.

Varda's autobiographical project, "to film with one hand my other hand", seems to be an auterist option on how to use, in a *personal* way, digital cameras: the right hand "writing" with the mini-DV camera ("cinécriture")²⁰ the left hand: a thespian hand that is both an enlarged detail of organic matter and also acting out. Since each hand 'knows' perfectly what the other does (they work together in a well-developed plan behind and in front of the camera), this project seems to be an invitation to infuse strategies of fiction and self-portrait (let's say subjectivity) into documentary filming (to some extent, the uncontrollable and fortuitous events that happen to others). *The Gleaners and I* accomplishes this project of interposing subjectivity with alterity, social issues with personal subjects through an inspired, playful process of figuration: performance, tableau-vivant, poetical metaphors, visual associations and aesthetical representations.

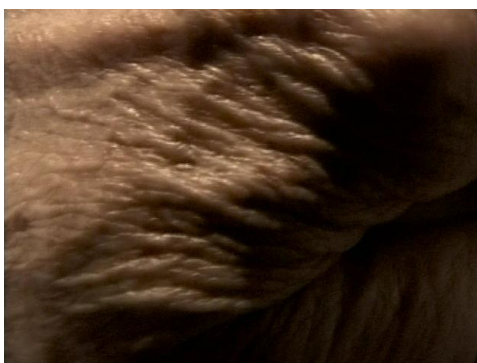


Fig. 24



Fig. 25

Varda's 'subjective documentary' on the new social practices of gleaning indicates the expansion of a self-assumed visibility and

²⁰ Varda's description of her 'cinematic writing': "En écriture c'est le style. Au cinéma, c'est le cinécriture" (Varda 1994: 14).

(re)presentation of the filmmaker's self and her personal worldview –as Rascaroli says, unorthodox, personal, reflexive 'new essay films' "point to their extra-textual authors as the true source of the act of communication" (Rascaroli, 2009: 7). If the overtly first-person voice-over was the response to the omnipotent third-person voice-over in documentary film; if the admission of the partial, contingent, personal viewpoint was the reaction to the declining persuasiveness of objectivity and authority, the increasingly inclusion of the filmmaker's presence and his/her personal world comes as an unsurprised outcome in the digital postmodern age. It has never been 'easier' in all documentary forms to say 'I' with all its consequences. Indeed, this is the move from an institutionalised convention to a personal hybridisation of genres; in Varda's case the social documentary is intertwined with autobiographical forms such as self-portrait, travelogue, diary and notebook. The fact of including the personal sphere of the director in documentary –which is a mode of representation conventionally not reserved to him but to other social actors– is not itself a problem (in ethical nor even in aesthetical terms) but in any case, the issue lies in how and to what extent this process is done or mediated –each film poses its own ethical and aesthetical dilemmas and for that reason it is problematic or even inappropriate to generalise models of ethics in documentary filming. If the "central question for documentary ethics, as Brian Winston arises, is how much mediation is ethical" (Winston: 181), Varda's film provides an apt response to this question. The *measure* of this ethical mediation is always acknowledged by Varda's formal sense of restriction: by staying off-screen in her relation to social actors, reflexively performing in *tableau vivant* her first inclusion,²¹ showing quick, fragmented shots of her body when her presence comes onscreen and ultimately being extremely conscious of the

²¹ As I suggested at the beginning of this article, the playful aestheticisation of the self is not only a way Varda talks about herself but *a way to ask permission* (to herself, to gleaners, to the audience) to be fully part of a social documentary.

interplay between her self-representation and the representation of others. The filmmaker's self is indeed a relational self who *relates* a multifaceted variety of characters, places, artistic manifestations and phenomena under the all-embracing metaphor of gleaning. Laplanche's dictum about how one is constituted through the intersubjective relation to the other person surely coincides with Varda's approach. Cooper also finds that Varda's attitude to alterity involves a privileging of the others over the self (Cooper 2006: 89) as the film "turns an inwardly directed gaze outwards [in order] to question the self-reflective status of the autobiographical mode and to film others using the mirror of the self, while preserving a Levinasian asymmetrical relation between the two" (Cooper 2010: 61). Even if one considers documentary in an orthodox way, the dilemma of including the self in documentary is here surmounted by a stylised process of poetic metaphors i.e. aesthetics transcends possible ethical limitations imposed on the self. For the aestheticisation is operated to the self (filmmaker-gleaner), not to the others (gleaners). The self, invested as a filmmaker *glaneuse*, is allowed to have a space of digression or solo interludes where she can perform *her two unique, restricted topics*: old age and artistic fascination. And both topics are primarily universal, reunited in Rosello's opportune description of the film: "(self-)Portrait of the Artist as an Old Lady". In short, the stylization of the self is at the same time an 'ethical' deference to the social actors (her performative self does not try to prevail over the others, i.e. *I do not want to be the protagonist...*) and an 'aesthetical' elevation, a positive differentiation from others (*...but at the end I know that I am the protagonist*). Since gleaning is in fact an obsolete social practise, the all-inclusive Vardian metaphor of gleaning with strong historical, artistic, and critical repercussions is undoubtedly one of the most powerful auterist worldview in contemporary documentary and also in cinema *tout court*.

The only drawbacks in Varda's well-elaborated poetic and subjective documentary are the followings: a) the aestheticisation of the self is

problematic in the second self-portrait: this is the result of a long aesthetical circumlocution that suggests certain difficulties to shift between the social subject and the personal one and also implies an impoverishment of personal experience; b) a self-justificative tendency to sentimentalism and class guilt in relation to the gleaners living on leftovers – as Tyrer says Varda “repeats like a mantra ‘I never forget’ the people who glean to survive” (Tyrer 2009: 169). The former implies that the self-assumed ‘restriction’ to talk about personal experiences cannot always be surpassed by the stylisation of the self. Varda’s return from a trip to Japan, a sort of diarist gesture which annotates her only experience outside filming, old age and paintings, is partly a narrative failure because the heavily self-justificative stylisation (fear to be *too subjective* in a social documentary?) suffocates somehow the singularity of the self. The latter does not let the poetic metaphor of gleaning retain its essential breadth and ambiguity (in fact, when Varda reviews *The Gleaners and I* in *The Beaches of Agnès* she continues moralising about the subject: “To see so much waste, while others are going hungry it’s deplorable”).

It is not surprising that from *The Gleaners and I* on, Varda’s vision and practice on digital media increasingly involves her subjectivity, her life and her personal memories: *Two years later*, the video installations *Patatutopia* (2002), *The wives of Nourmoutier* (*Les Veuves de Nourmoutier*, 2005) and *The Island and She* (*L’île et elle*, 2006) and above all her last film so far *The beaches of Agnès*, an autobiographical film-testament. Varda continues fostering her digital project as a mirror image; her playful style of representation and performance have been much more developed in *The beaches of Agnès* using different media and artefacts such as installation, exhibition, re-enactment, homage, psychodrama, split-screen, animation. However, since Varda has acknowledged *The beaches of Agnès* as her last film, her project of creatively mixing the self with social issues exposed in *The Gleaners and I* will not go forward as a new form of social

documentary and remains an isolated moment in which the female filmmaker, using the mini-DV camera for the first time, comes to apprehend the fears of her ageing body by conceding a one-off “self-portrait of the artist as an old lady”.

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Filmography (features)

Uncle Yanco (1967), Agnès Varda

Daguerreotypes (1974-75), Agnès Varda

Ulysse (1982), Agnès Varda

Gleaning images from others...

Sans toit ni loi/Vagabond (1985), Agnès Varda

Jane B. par Agnès V. (1987), Agnès Varda

Jacquot de Nantes (1990), Agnès Varda

Boca do lixo (1992), Eduardo Coutinho

Les Demoiselles ont eu 25 ans (1993), Agnès Varda

L'univers de Jacques Demy (1993-95), Agnès Varda

Les Glaneurs et la Glaneuse/The Gleaners and I (2000), Agnès Varda

Deux ans après/Two Years After (2002), Agnès Varda

10 on Ten, (2003), Abbas Kiarostami

Les plages d'Agnès/The Beaches of Agnès (2008), Agnès Varda

Waste Land (2010), Lucy Walker