

## THE PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN THE WORKS OF AGNES VARDA

\* \* \*

### AGNES VARDA'NIN ÇALIŞMALARINDA KADIN TASVİRİ

Mine ÇİMEN\*

#### **ABSTRACT**

In her long-lasting career spanning more than six decades, Agnès Varda has created myriad works varying from short to feature, documentary to fiction, even some of uncategorised. Despite mostly regarded as hybrid, they are unwaveringly revolving around two contexts: women and their experience of everyday urban life. Positioning within the main scheme of gender and urban studies, in the first part of this review study, I will try to shed a general light on Varda's peculiar feminine universe reflecting upon her filmography with references to her personal life and her films. The eclectic style of hers that is highlighted with the themes of versatility and reflexivity will be the main trajectory. In the second part, the act of walking as well as the act of looking; that is, her nomadic cinema and how she subverts the male gaze will be explored. Overall, while the portrayal of women in the works of Agnès Varda will be on the main agenda, through the perspective of her women who are always on move, who always transgress the boundaries and subvert the patriarchal discourses; the representation of the body, the notion of gaze and experimenting with city spaces will also be analysed.

**Keywords:** *Agnès Varda, urban studies, feminist films, woman directors, female gaze, nomadic cinema.*

#### **ÖZ**

Atmış yılı aşkın kariyerinde, Agnès Varda kısıdan uzuna, belgeselden kurmacaya birçok farklı işler üretmiştir. Bunlar genellikle hibrit çalışmalar olsa da, hepsi temelde iki eksen etrafında dönmektedir: kadınlar ve onların gündelik şehir yaşamları. Toplumsal cinsiyet ve şehir çalışmaları ekseninde konumlanan bu çalışmanın ilk kısmında, Varda'nın filmografisine de yansıyan kendine has feminen dünyasına genel bir ışık tutmayı amaçlamaktayım. Bunu yaparken yönetmenin kişisel hayatına ve filmlerine de referanslar verilecektir. Çok yönlülük ve özdeşünümsellik gibi temalarla vurgulanan yönetmenin eklektik tarzı ana izleği oluşturacaktır. İkinci kısımda, yürüme ve bakma eylemleri, başka bir deyişle göçebe sinema ve eril bakışı nasıl yitirdiği araştırılacaktır. Özetle, temel tartışma

\* Yüksek Lisans, İstanbul Bilgi Üniversitesi.

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1149-1867> ♦ e-Mail: [minecimen@gmail.com](mailto:minecimen@gmail.com)

konusu Agnès Varda'nın çalışmalarında kadın temsili iken, sürekli hareket halindeki, sınırları aşan, ataerkil söylemlerin yıkan Varda'nın kadınlarının perspektifinden bakarak, beden temsiliyeti, bakış (nazar) kavramı ve şehir deneyimleri üzerinden ilerleyecektir.

*Anahtar kelimeler: Agnès Varda, şehir çalışmaları, feminist filmler, kadın yönetmenler, dişil bakış, göçebe sinema*

### **The Aim and Importance of the Study**

The aim of the study is to shed a light on the filmography of Agnès Varda, through the projectory of gender representation. While certain tropes like the act of walking (mobility), the act of looking (body) will be followed, some traits like self-referentiality, self-reflexivity is to be underlined, as well.

### **Methodology**

Within the main scheme of gender and urban studies, this study employs qualitative methods. The theoretical framework of the study incorporates concepts and modes of analysis put forward by feminist film theory. Feminist critical discourse analysis and elements of semiotics and psychoanalytical theories are applied which gives an overall approach as interdisciplinary.

### **A General Review**

In the constant pursuit of female subjectivity and its visual representative apparatus, Varda has proven that authentic representation of women is indeed possible, unlike the mainstream which has long excluded, misrepresented or just passed by it. Indeed, "there certainly is a female visual currency, a female pool of stories to choose from and female sensibilities to represent" (Hossain, 2011). It has been this women's visual vocabulary what Varda has been after capturing. Since one of her first shorts *L'opéra Mouffe* (*Diary of a Pregnant Woman*, 1958), Varda has declared that gender does matter in art and cinema, and that both genders do have a different way of seeing. The sixteen-min short which presents a mosaic of Parisian impressions through a pregnant woman's perception (indeed her body) seems to foreshadow the traces of Varda's peculiar feminine universe. As Sandy Flitterman-Lewis approves in *To Desire Differently*, this essayistic short "marked a turning-point for her, as she began to see the cinema as an ideal means to express what she was coming to perceive as her own personal—and feminist—vision" (Flitterman-Lewis, 1990: 225). As Lewis points out, her self-reflexive and self-inclusionary praxis give her films a subjective (personal) perspective as much as the feminist vision. Indeed, she has been so self-reflexive that one can trace her works only to get a gist of her life and her changing views. Even before the making of *Les plages d'Agnès* (*The Beaches of Agnes*, 2008), Alan Williams had noted: "Varda's films, documentary and fiction alike, have been a form of intellectual autobiography. In them

one can follow both her personal and political issue—in particular, the development of her feminist—and her formal and aesthetic interests” (Williams, 1992: 357). Her works, despite being self-reflexive and subjective, are not devoid of versatility, though.<sup>1</sup>

From the earliest to the later films, Varda has demonstrated an astonishing “originality and versatility in matters of both subject and of treatment” as Flitterman states in her aforementioned book (Lewis, 227). This announces another trademark of Varda’s films: versatility. She has a bitterly sarcastic and versicoloured personality endorsed with a relentless female curiosity which she subtly and wittily reflects upon her works. Thanks to this transference of her kaleidoscopic personality into her oeuvre, she has created a versatile pieces of art. As film critic Jonathan Romney highlights the versatility as the major trait of Varda’s peculiar style of filmmaking: “She is reinventing herself all the time. She seems a thousand different filmmakers but one filmmaker at the same time. Whether working on a document or fiction, there is a sense that she is going out into the world to find something new. There is always a readiness to invent” (Romney, 2010). This unceasing search for the novelty indeed hardly left her until she died at 90 in 2019, thus giving her works a unique authenticity. Her relentless pursuit of the novelty and new ways of expression drags Varda to subvert the boundaries of the mediums of creating art, as well. Her mingling different genres is evident in her self-coinage notion of *cinécriture*, aka cinematic writing, in which she delineates her interdisciplinary motivation of finding the cinematic mediums, and inviting us to read her films like a literary text, aka a cine-text.

Varda does have a holistic view of filmmaking as analogous to written expression in practice; nonetheless, her appreciation for ‘the image for its own sake’ is also apparent throughout her filmography. Her official training in photography visibly contributes to her interdisciplinary approach. Clearly, her films exhibit her photographer’s eye in the artful composition of the shots as well as in her use of still images and close-ups. To set an example, at the beginning of her career, in 1964, in *Salut Les Cubains*, she montages 1800 photos that she has taken on the streets of post-revolutionary Cuba. Blended with the rhythm and dance, this short photo-film was an indication of her eclectic style proving how she relishes wandering through the different mediums of art, and thus blurring the boundaries of genres. Beside her deployment of eclectic mediums, the film is also important as it shows Varda’s work has always been integrated to its socio-political background. (photo 1)

### **A Feminist Review over Varda’s Filmography**

No matter what mediums she applies, her films are still mostly woman centred, aka *film de femme*. As Phil Powrie writes: “At the center of Varda’s films is often a woman, either gazing or gazed upon, a woman who is an avatar of Varda herself” in the essay ‘Heterotopic Spaces and Nomadic Gazes in Varda’. He furthers: “Varda’s films try to create an awareness of who we are, through an awareness of who she is, an awareness that focuses on spatial relations” (Powrie, 69), which wraps up her whole filmography. Her

---

1 The trait of self-reflexivity is to be probed in detail in the last part of this study.

self-reflexive praxis is a tool of ‘empathy generator’ which is an indispensable element of female gaze (term adapted from Jill Soloway). Likewise, Ruth Hottell more recently notes, in the oeuvre of Varda, unlike classical Hollywood, it is the female characters who are at the centre role in the narrative while “the males are relegated to secondary roles, even when the subjects purportedly treats a man’s happiness” (Hottell, 67). What Hottell refers to is clearly the film *La Bonheur* (Happiness, 1965), which is seemingly about a man’s happiness; however, under its coverage, it is about feminine identity (subjectivity) and how it means nothing to the masculine ideology which tends to standardise femininity. As this early film of Varda confirms, talking about female autonomy or subjectivity will hardly be possible as long as these patriarchal schemes are subverted, which she subtly does.

Patriarchal schemes are so strongly rooted in the society that finding ‘room’ in it as a woman can be quite challenging. It is proved in the ways of how Varda’s rare position as a female auteur among *La Nouvelle Vague* (French New Wave) directors -all of whom were males- leads to her being marginalised as a woman. Her being labeled as the mother of New Wave or even worse as the grandmother makes it clear. Yet, she wittily reverses this exclusionary denomination pointing the reason as her pioneering the movement since her debut *La Pointe Courte* (released in 1956) is widely acclaimed as the precursor of the New Wave. Georges Sadoul explicitly regards it as “truly the first film of the nouvelle vague” (Vincendeau, 2019). Her being discriminated from the group, despite being the pioneer, could clearly be viewed as gender-based. Varda’s marginalisation within this male-dominated group is well represented in an image in *Les Plages d’Agnès* where the photos of male members of the movement are positioned in a rectangular form surrounding a photo of Varda from 60s. Her eyes are shut in close-up, and her index finger covering her mouth to indicate silence. Reinterpreting the collage of surrealist René Magritte, Varda plays with the notions of vision and silence inflected through the female body. Thus, while subverting the “traditional male voyeur/woman-as-object-of-male-desire dichotomy”, she also points at her situation in the movement (McFadden, 49). **(photo 2)**

Varda’s cinema has always challenged the dominant paradigms of feminine identity. As clearly stated by Katherine İnce in “Feminist Phenomenology and the Film-World of Agnès Varda” (2012): “Varda’s filmmaking may best be understood, I would contend, as a performance of feminist phenomenology deriving from her woman-subject’s desire, experience and vision, a carnal *cinécriture* she has now developed and refined for more than half a century” (Ince, 14). In fact, among the academic studies, although the early works of Varda in 50s and 60s were more approached in terms of the tenderness and sensitivity, from the 70s on, her feminist approach has been examined relatively more. It could be linked to the 1968 Bobigny abortion trial during which Varda was one of 343 women having co-signed a manifesto announcing they had had an abortion (which was illegal then). From that time on, Varda’s feminist approach climbed up and when 70s arrived, it had peaked. In fact, 70s was clearly the most feminist years of Varda’s cinema,

with the increasing influence of the second wave feminism and political movements in the background. It was in this decade when she made *Réponse de femmes* (Women Reply, 1975), *Daguerréotypes* (1976) and *L'une chante, l'autre pas* (One Sings, the Other Doesn't, 1977). All these films centre on the issue of home and family and/or a woman's right not to pursue them. Quite expectedly, all focus on woman bodies and represented images of women in different stages of life.

In the second part of this review study, taking the gender issue as the orient of her works, I aim to focus on analysing Varda's female characters under certain projections. In this respect, firstly their nomadic nature will be under the microscope, which delineates the reasons why her female characters are always on the move. Followingly, urban scheme is to be visited as her works have long been analysed within the urban paradigms. Later, the (female) body and its depictions is to be discussed together with Varda's own body as a self-intruder into her films.

### **Walking Women of Varda (Nomadic Cinema of Varda)**

Varda's cinema could be claimed to be nomadic cinema. As Powrie asserts in his above mentioned essay: "It is by a traveller, about travellers" (Powrie, 68). The one and only way to reality is through subjectivity, and movement through the objects is what is necessary for the realisation of this subjectivity. As Virginia Woolf has mentioned in *Street Haunting*, it is only through wandering, one can reach their authentic subjectivity. Contrary to sedentary inclinations of women's domestic position, Varda's woman protagonists are always on the move. To say with Woolf's words, they are mostly "stepping out of the shell-like covering", much like Varda herself whose family had to immigrate from Belgium to France due to a war when she was too young. From that on, Varda has always had a nomadic stance whose one "feet on the ground but whose passionate curiosity and concern sprout out in all directions" (Thomas, 2002). As Özgen Tuncer puts, in Varda's films, "the female protagonists who are on the move not only constantly elude fixating and sedentarising powers, but also trigger a transformation in the territories they travel through" (Özgen Tuncer, 114). It is through and thanks to this representation of a female character on the move, Varda successfully brings about 'a politics of walking' into her cinema while resisting the sedentary inclinations of women's positions, and thus providing them with a chance of transformation both for the sake of themselves and for the spaces they have been to. This transformation is the key element and essential component of Varda's women who claim their own subjectivity through practising the act of walking. Here, I would like to refer to Michel de Certeau who carries the issue of walking into philosophical sphere. To him, there is certainly a rhetoric to the act of walking, and walking the city streets is 'a form of utterance' which uncovers the meanings embedded in the city and gives rise to spaces which would not be seen (De Certeau, 103). It is possible to see walking as a *transformative* activity carrying a force for subjectification during which one is "absent" and gains "something of one's own" (ibid., 103).

De Certau's words are noteworthy since Varda applies the versatile forms of walking. The best sample of this is the film *Cléo de 5 à 7* (Cleo from 5 to 7, 1962) where the Parisian protagonist's perambulations lead to her eventual transformation as well as the city Paris which is unfold like a second lead character. In other words, "Cléo's wandering has been interpreted as a journey towards *self-discovery*, a transformation from a non-identity (of a woman) to identity, from an object toward the subject, which comes as a gift brought by urban experience" (Çimen, 2023).<sup>2</sup> **(photo 3)**

Another female nomadic character could be Mona of *Sans toit ni loi* (Vagabond, 1985) whose relentless walking through the suburban could be read as a rebellion or resilience against the sedentary norms of women in patriarchal society; in a way, "a form of political resistance" in Braidotti's phrase. Rigidity and strictness of the boundaries is reflected in Mona's constant eluding the frames. She is drifting in an out of the frame just like she drifts in and out of relations. The opposite direction of tracking shots (from right to left) which is in tune with the retrospective style of the film (as Mona's death is announced at prologue) proves the film to be a subversion of conventional western style of reading and shooting (from left to right). Indeed, Mona's relentless walking could be read as *trespassing*; her nomadic body as an *intruder*, blurring the public and private spheres as there is no distinction for her. **(photo 4)**

Though the styles vary in a coherent way to the narrative, the act of walking is always present in Varda's films as an indispensable component of female subjectivity. Especially in her late films, thanks to digital technology that has provided her with a freedom of mobility, Varda herself could wander freely, record her observations, scout like a detective and collect the images. In her self-calmly "wandering-road-documentary" *Les Glaneurs et la Glaneuse* (Gleaners and I, 2000), Varda wanders through both in time and in space -in accompany with the probing hand-cam which she uses like a pen, writing her 'essayistic film'<sup>3</sup> (Corrigan, 70). This type of walking -akin to a gleaner- needs stooping, though, which is a modest mode of perception as well that needs a humble interaction with the surroundings. Rather than being a detached observer, "cine-glaneuse" Varda (term adapted from Chrostowska) becomes an involved participant-observer as much as ensuring her position of humility.

---

2 For detailed analysis of the film, my study can be visited: <https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/pub/film/issue/78496/12480>

3 The *film-essay* (or *cine-essay*) is a hybrid genre of non-fiction film forms, often documentary which describes "the many-layered activities of a personal point of view as a public experience". Film-essays are open-ended and non-linear in structure with an emphasis on the subjectivity of the filmmaker/ narrator. In his book *The Essay Film* (2011) Timothy Corrigan positions Varda as a *film-essayist*.

## **Varda's Experimenting with City Spaces**

*"Come into my films, the door is open, there is light,  
the light captured on the inhabited landscapes that I  
have filmed"* Varda

Fusing the autobiography with fiction, social commentary with subjective narrations, Varda has created hybrid works, and in most of her works she has gone beyond using the city as the backdrop. Although she shot mostly in Paris, contrary to its common romanticised representations, she has investigated the Parisian everyday life in her peculiar and deeply simplistic, yet subtly sophisticated way. This is not a romanticised or metaphorical city for sure, but more like a character or an element of anthropomorphism in a sense. As I claim, the city and human beings are co-dependent and co-defining in Varda's films, in a symbiotic relation. Her approach towards the space, in this sense, has close affinities with cultural geographers who argue that lived experience turns a place into a space, and that space is socially constituted through the interaction of boundaries, representations and practices. Similarly, one cannot understand Varda's characters out of the context of the spaces they have been to. Varda herself admits and declares this undeniable influence of spaces on her oeuvre by uttering these words back then in 1961:

"I think people are made of the places... I think environments inhabit us...  
By understanding people you understand places better, by understanding  
places you understand people better" (Michaud and Bellour 1961, 14).

In other words, the 'poetics of space' is indispensable when analysing her works. Varda personally attended the lectures of Gaston Bachelard whose book *La Poétique de l'E-space* (The Poetics of Space, 1958) distinguishes between 'abstract space' and 'lived space' only to recognise how he moved from a rationalist to a phenomenological approach. Similar to her professor, Varda believes that "lived or inhabited space is known phenomenologically through participation in or inhabitation of the world" (Bénézet, 222). So, in her cinema, the poetics of space as an integrated component serves as a useful material for the academic studies.

As Flitterman Lewis suggests "the effects of place on social relations and on characters have been a recurrent thread in Varda's work, and she mostly reflects upon a dynamic between stasis and mobility as well as the interaction between character and environment" (Lewis, 224-37). Another respectable scholar, Alison Smith, has spared a whole chapter to 'People and Places' (1998) to draw the attention to Varda's refined obsession with the places where she clearly states "Varda believes that place has a profound effect on character and perception and this was a guiding principle in her work as far back as 1961" (Smith, 60). Eventually, in 2017, just two years before her death; Varda has announced and crowned this diptych-obsession of hers with a film she codirected with muralist/photographer JR called *Visages Villages* (Faces Places) where she travels around the rural of France's 'inhabited landscapes' (with Varda's above quoted phrase), or likewise with Delphine Bénézet's expression of 'embodied spaces'. "In Varda's work,



space is neither objective nor topographic, and often it is invested by someone's presence and by his or her embodied subjectivity" claims Bénézet (344). That could be what makes her films 'experimental' projects conducted on city streets. The city and the human body (dependent and defining each other), and as such, the city is composed of embodied spaces.

Thanks to Varda's peculiar *modus operandi*, the city is saved from being a merely predefined setting, but gained more philosophical meaning through both the spatial practices and networks of interaction. As geographer Doreen Massey regards cities as "large, intense, and heterogeneous constellations of trajectories demanding of complex negotiation" (Massey, 155), we can claim the city is opened for 'complex negotiation' through Varda's cinematic mediums. Her treatment to the city can be labeled as 'urban interventions' which refer to be "involved in but frequently disrupt everyday urban life," and which "make use of artistic and creative means to question and explore social problems and conflicts without necessarily prescribing solutions" (Pinder, 731). Both embodying and transforming the urban spaces, Varda's women's experience with the city spaces does include a kaleidoscopic range. These women both celebrate and question, both transgress and subvert the everyday urban life through the dual struggle of representing the daily routines and rhythms in the city, and experimenting the urban practises, as well. The quotidian urban life is what valorised city spaces and moved Varda's female characters. As Gillian Rose claims "the everyday is the arena through which patriarchy is (re)created – and contested" (Rose, 35) Having combined with Varda's unique *modus operandi*, these city spaces are turned out to be experimental spheres, urging us to requestion and reconfigure the contemporary (mostly urban) everyday life, as well as subverting our own presumptions of the city.

### **The Body**

A woman's right to her own body, control over her reproductive organs, choice over her pleasures and desires is the first step towards recognising and realising herself as an individual subject. Hence, to capture intimate sexual and larger philosophical discourse of a female's life has been the target of feminist film makers among whom Varda takes up a respectable space. Clearly, the representation of woman body is an indispensable element in Varda's oeuvre. Whether pregnant or ageing; whether ill or dead, the female body is constantly held under her microscope. Her emphasis on the material aspects of the woman body is transgressive, both exposing and contesting the socio-cultural boundaries.

The body is indispensably first space of women, our homeland, yet defining it is difficult. According to feminist geographer Robyn Longhurst: "the body [...] is a surface of social and cultural inscription; it houses subjectivity; it is a site of pleasure and pain; it is material, discursive and psychical" (Longhurst, 91). Similarly, Varda addresses the body from both the exterior and the interior, showing how its very inscription from the outside affects the subjective experience of women, together with space that plays central role in this dialectic. To set an example, in *Documenteur* (1981), the protagonist Emilie



watches her nude body before the mirror for a relatively long time when the city LA does not seem to accept her. She is an outsider, a French woman in America and a single mum. This film (which is self-claimingly her most self-reflexive and emotionally most attached one) clearly shows how body and city space co-operate and co-define each other. Once expelled from the other -the foreign spaces-, we turn back to our homeland -our own body. Thus, problematising the traditional distinction between the space and the body, Varda does bring into new discussions. **(photo 5)**

When the female body is on the agenda of representation, mirror motifs are indispensably worth mentioning as deployed recurrently by Varda. Looking at the above mentioned scene of Emily's watching her nude body from another aspect, we can see that her self-watching is far from the mainstream representations. Indeed, the reason for the mirror deployment is to show the female character's self-looking; as well as through the mirror, to establish an empathy and closeness between the female character and the spectator. Thus, common depictions of the woman looking at the mirror symbolising vanity or a sin has been contradicted once and for all. Similarly, in her short documentary *Les Dites Caryatides* (The so-called Caryatids, 1984), Varda shows us how the history (depicted as the naked female mythological figures) has been utilised as an excuse to demonstrate the naked woman bodies in public. However, quite wittily, Varda counteracts the images of statues with a flesh-blood naked male body, only to shock and render us in questioning our conventionally settled perceptions of nudity and its gender discriminating sights. We are rendered in a questioning of how we are used to being exposed to seeing nude woman bodies, but not men's. Feride Çiçekoğlu states the way that scene still puts a smile on our face proves that our way of seeing has not changed since then (Çiçekoğlu, 2019). Besides, using the poetry of Baudelaire over the female beauty by her own voice-over, Varda subverts and replaces his misogynist stance in favour of women, hence *historiography* is to be opened for a re-questioning in Varda's visual journey through the elegant caryatid statues. **(photo 6)**

In Varda's works, nudity (quite opposing to a nakedness) is a part of subjective experience which is always there as a space of everyday life. That's why, when her characters look at the mirror naked or make love on the seaside, it is not the *voyeuristic* pleasure of looking we get, but a *voyageur* look (term adapted by Bruno). It is the empathic feeling we get through the character's experience of her own subjectivity, which forces us to question our own's, as well. As John Berger famously suggests in *Ways of Seeing* (1972), "'ideal' spectator is always assumed to be male and the image of the woman is designed to flatter him" (Berger, 98). The surveyor was invariably male, and the female was the surveyed in most visuals. As a consequence, he famously claims "Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at" (ibid., 68). Influenced by Berger's ideas and building her study on psychoanalytical matrix, feminist film critical Laura Mulvey has probed this issue of women's objectification by the dominant male gaze in the fields of mainstream cinema (in classical Hollywood of 1940s-1960s). In her oft cited essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (1975),

she has drawn attention to the sexual objectification of women in cinema. Adopting the Lacanian gaze and applying it to feminist film studies, Mulvey has introduced the theory of 'male gaze' into the field. As a socially constructed derivation of patriarchal discourses, the term has later been affiliated to 'voyeurism' (looking as sexual pleasure mostly secretly), and 'scopophilia' (Freudian term referring to the narcissistic pleasure of both looking and being looked at). The male oriented gaze, thus, has become an investigation subject, especially in the fields of cinema (more generally in visual arts) and in feminist film theories, which will be used in this study as well. Mulvey most famously states:

“In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*” (Mulvey, 62).

In the mentioned essay, the power of using cinematic mediums is underscored as the camera can be used as a political weapon for visual manipulation by promoting the male gaze, feeding his voyeuristic fantasy and presenting sexual gratification to his eyes as well as ideologically masculinising the spectators. That is, to Mulvey's theory, having been rooted in patriarchal ideologies and discourses, 'gender power asymmetry', is a controlling force in cinema that is constructed merely for the pleasure of the male viewer. However, this asymmetry is subverted in Varda's works where the gaze is not relational to power, but to empathy and even sympathy with the character. In other words, a naked female body is never naked, but nude in Varda, neither does it feed voyeuristic pleasures. To set, in *Documenteur* we are there the feel the *pathy* of Emelie, to company her with this emotion. We, as spectators, are there to “embrace her lived experience”, which is quite expectable from female gaze as Iris Brey suggests in her book *The Female Gaze: A Revolution Onscreen* (Brey, 2020) where she tries to theorise the concept.

In *Réponse de Femmes*, to give another example, female characters (mostly nude and staged women of different ages), directly staring at the camera and asking questions about womanhood like: “What does it mean to be a woman?”, “Do all women want to become mothers?” (**photo 7**). They seem to pose these questions directly to the spectators in Brechtian style, which is utilised as a method for subversion of male gaze. Delphine Bénézet claims “these questions address and challenge the ways in which the female body is perceived, represented and treated by society and the media. The bodies on screen force spectators to question their views and their position in society” (Bénézet, 318). Thus, while the subversion of the voyeuristic male gaze is ensured, Varda's approach towards the woman body representation is being unfolded. In fact, embodiment and the issue of looking is at the centre of her peculiar female gazed approach, which is already announced by this statement of Varda: “The first feminist gesture is to say right, OK, I'm being looked at, but I'm looking too... it is the act of deciding to look, and that the world

is defined by how I look and not how I'm looked at" (Mandy, 2000).<sup>4</sup> These sharply accurate words of Varda compose the frame of this article. The female body has long been the one looked at, the spectacle; however, what is suggested by Varda is that it is not how the world looks at the woman, but how the woman looks at the world.

When the body is in the question, haptic shots (especially on body parts) are called for action as one of the trademarks of Varda's cinematic mediums. In her book *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (2000), Laura Marks defines haptic imagery as "the eyes themselves function as organs of touch" (Marks, 162). That is, haptic vision is a more tactile-based, closer-to-the-body form of perception, creating a feeling "as if touching a film with one's eyes" (ibid., 162). Thus, the visual image gains a materialistic and kinaesthetic aura. While optical visibility "sees things from enough distance to perceive them as distinct forms in deep space," haptic looking "tends to move over the surface of its object rather than to plunge into illusionistic depth, not to distinguish form so much as to discern texture" (ibid., 162). As Marks accentuates, in optical visibility the eye perceives objects from a far enough distance to isolate them as forms in space; that is, there is an assumed separation between the viewing body and the object in optical vision. However, the haptic perception "privileges the material presence of the image" (ibid., 163) as it involves the body more; that is, not the representational power of the image, but its *corporeal* presence is prioritised. To illustrate, in *Jacquot de Nantes* (1990), haptic shots on her husband Jacques Demy's aging hands will be re-animated only one decade later in *Gleaners and I* (2000) by caressing the skin of Varda's own aging hands, thus offering a connection between the two bodies as well as the two films. Within her long-standing working life, different from other directors, Varda has revisited her previous works, sometimes their settings and applied recurrent mediums, which can give her cinema a trait of self-referentiality, as well.<sup>5</sup>

### **Self-reflexivity**

Surely, looking at the outer world does prioritise looking at ourselves. I suppose that is the reason why Varda does not refrain from employing her own body in her films, rather keep pointing her camera towards her own body. By employing her own body as a material object, she has also blurred the boundaries between the represented and the representing. Another example can be seen in *Jane B. par Agnès V.* (Jane B. for Agnès V., 1988) where she self-fashions with Jane Birkin, and in *Les plages d'Agnès* where she celebrates her career and imagines her death; the final cessation of her body.

---

4 For a detailed study over the act of looking and gaze, you can visit my study: <https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/download/article-file/3054016>

5 More than four decades after *Cléo de 5 à 7*, Varda invites the actors to the same spaces to get their reflections and makes the film *Cléo de 5 à 7: souvenirs et anecdotes* (2005), or similarly she shoots *Les glaneurs et la glaneuse... deux ans après* (The Gleaners and I: Two Years Later, 2002).

Another most note-worthy sample of utilising her body as a material is probably in shooting Daguerreotypes where she winds a cable around her body from her home to the film's location which is eighty-meter-far. Her explanation about this occasion is worth mentioning:

“I started with the idea that women are attached to the home. So I attached myself to my home, literally, by imagining a new kind of umbilical cord. I attached an electric cable to the electric meter in my house which, when fully uncoiled, turned out to be 80 meters long. I decided to shoot Daguerreotypes within that distance” (taken from Bénézet, 65).

In addition to previous samples, her self-reflexivity picks in *Gleaners and I* where Varda in her 70s opens up her ageing body with the haptic shots, intruding into her own film; even attaching herself to the title, with her voice-over as the story teller and as a metaphorical image collector akin to a gleaner. Through the scene of tableau vivant, where she refashions herself as a gleaner into Breton's picture, a bygone 19th century female figure has been resurrected in the embodiment of a 21st century female auteur. In a way, we can claim that “Varda transforms the figure from a passive, represented object to an actively embodied character brought to life by the filmmaker's own body” (McFadden, 65). (Photo 8) She seems to enjoy searching for what is lost/dead in the past (aka bygone) only to give it a voice at present, one more chance to live. Restoring and reanimating the past into the present, in a way from modernity into contemporary, she seems to weave in time, as well. In fact, the act of gleaning itself incorporates this tendency of resurrecting things. What is cast out or disposed by the mainstream regains life through the act of gleaning and its commemorates such as salvaging, recycling, bricolage et cetera. In a way, her ageing female body has been exiled from the aesthetic standards of beauty, her corporeality gains a new form as a leftover, cast out of the mainstream. Like the symbolic heart-shaped-potatoes, once disposed as misfit to the commercial standards, regains life at present. Indeed, the idea of a living potato is so Vardian that she uses them in an installation named ‘Patatutopia’ the 2003 Venice Biennale dressing up herself as a potato and attributing the potatoes with even heart-beats. (Photo 9)

One can easily claim Varda offers a sustainable, anti-consumerist way of living especially as she gets older. Through the act of gleaning, she seems to draw attention to the capitalist praxis reflected in overconsumption and poverty. Thus, offering a new way of looking at our surroundings, she critiques the consumeristic practises of the quotidian. As Elkin recently writes in ‘Agnès Varda's Ecological Conscience’, helping us to see the hyperactive cycle of our materialism, Varda shows us a way to “consume less” and “engage with our environments more” (Elkin, 2017). She does prove that one's subjectivity has no dominance over another, only when an alternatively ecologic way of living would be possible.

## **Conclusion**

Introducing and underscoring some traits of Varda's filmography as being innovative, versatile, interdisciplinary, hybrid and self-reflexive, and thus subjective, the first part of this review study proceeds with a feminist review over the long-standing oeuvre of Varda. Her peculiar feminine universe representation, together with some references to her life and works, is discussed from the act of walking (aka nomadic stance) and the act of looking (gaze issue) respectively.

In the section of 'Walking Women of Varda (Nomadic Cinema of Varda)', the act of walking as a recurrent motif in the films is underlined with references to *Cléo de 5 à 7* (1962), *Vagabond*, (1985) and *Gleaners and I* (2000). Transformative power of walking is highlighted while some writers like Michel de Certeau, or Virginia Woolf is recalled. Here, the style of walking and its relation to the films' content is worth-noting.

As much as mobility is important, the interaction between one and the surroundings is as such. In the 4. part 'Varda's Experimenting with City Spaces', it is claimed that in Varda's films, the city (mostly Paris) seems to have a second lead role, which is attributed as anthropomorphic. In these 'inhabited landscapes', in a symbiotic-like relation, how city spaces and humans co-define and co-depend is to be analysed with references to scholars such as Flitterman Lewis and Delphine Bénézet.

In the section 5, the body -mostly female body- whose material aspects are underlined throughout the filmography of the director. While the traits are highlighted as transgressive as well as challenging, its addressing from both the exterior and the interior is to be noted down with specific references to the film *Documenteur* (1981) and *Les Dites Cariatides* (1984), where how the space and the body distinction is being problematised. Departing from mirror motifs, the issue of gaze is to be visited as classical narratives of male gaze are wittily subverted in Varda's works, with references to John Berger and Laura Mulvey only to conclude that unlike the classical *voyeuristic* pleasure of looking, Varda's works offer a *voyageur* look. Haptic shots on body is another sub-topic that is discussed here as a notable trademark of Varda's mediums.

In the last section, her self-intrusion into her own films and self-reflexivity is to be analysed. This is an important trait as boundaries between the represented and the representing are blurred. Specifically, with main references to *Gleaners and I* (2000), how she parallels herself with the historical figures of gleaners and today's scavengers of city Paris and how modest interaction with one's surroundings she suggests is the prominent inferences.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bachelard, G. (2014). *The poetics of space*. Penguin.
- Bénézet, D. (2014). *The cinema of Agnès Varda: Resistance and eclecticism*. Columbia University Press.
- Berger, J. (2018). Ways of seeing. In *Living with Contradictions* (pp. 189-198). Routledge.
- Braidotti, R. (1994). *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*. Columbia University Press. pp. 22-23.
- Brey, I. (2020). *The Female Gaze: A Revolution Onscreen*. <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5a68a5a4cf81e073e471d1ac/t/5f80921f4c46ce4f477e5145/1602261535527/Brey+Sample+Beginning.pdf>.
- Bruno, G. (2018). *Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture, and Film*. Verso. (first published 2002).
- Chrostowska, S. D. (2007). Vis-à-vis the glaneuse. *Angelaki*, 12:2, 119-133. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09697250701755092>
- Corrigan, T. (2011). *The Essay Film: From Montaine After Marker*. Oxford University Press, Inc.
- Çiçekoğlu, F. (2019). *Sözde Karyatidler. Manifold*. Available at: <https://mani-fold.press/sozde-karyatidler 02/06/2019>.
- Çimen, M. (2023). *Following in the Footsteps of Cléo*. Türkiye Film Araştırmaları Dergisi, 3(1), 48-56.
- De Certeau, M. (2002). *The Practice of Everyday Life*. University of California Press.
- Elkin, L. (2017). *Agnès Varda's Ecological Conscience*. The Paris Review. Available at: <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2017/10/20/agnes-vardas-ecological-conscience/>
- Flitterman-Lewis, S. (1990). *To Desire Differently: Feminism and the French Cinema*. University of Illinois Press.
- Hossain, R. (2011). Female directors, Female Gaze: The Search for Female Subjectivity in Film. *Forum, A Monthly Publication of The Daily Star*, 5. Issue 05. <https://rubaiyat-hossain.com/2011/06/13/265/>.
- Hottell, Ruth A. (2010). "Flying through southern France: Sans toit ni loi by agnès varda" *Women's Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 28:6, 675-69.
- İnce, K. (2013). Feminist phenomenology and the film world of Agnès Varda. *Hypatia*, 28(3), 602-617. Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24542005>.
- Longhurst, R. (2005). "The Body." *Cultural Geography: A Critical Dictionary of Key Concepts*. Ed. David Atkinson, Peter Jackson, David Sibley, and Neil

Washbourne. I.B.Tauris. 91-96.

- Mandy, M. (2000). *Filmer le desir. the factory/Saga Film/ARTE France/*
- Marks, L. (2000). *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*. Durham; London: Duke University Press. doi:10.2307/j.ctv1198x4c
- Massey, D. (2005). *For Space*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE.
- McFadden, C. (2014). *Gendered Frames, Embodied Cameras: Varda, Akerman, Cabrera, Calle, and Maïwenn*. Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson U P.
- Michaud, J., and Bellour R. (1961). Agnès Varda de A a Z. *Cinema* 61 (60): 3–20.
- Mulvey, L., (1989). “Visual pleasure and narrative cinema” *Visual and other pleasures*. Palgrave Macmillan. (first published in 1975)
- Özgen Tuncer, A. (2012). Women on the move: The politics of walking in Agnès Varda. *Edinburgh University Press*, 103–116. DOI: 10.3366/dls.2012.0049
- Pinder, D. (2005). *Visions of the City*. Edinburgh U P.
- Powrie, P. (2011). Heterotopic Spaces and Nomadic Gazes in Varda: From Cléo de 5 à 7 to Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse. *L’Esprit Créateur* Volume 51, Number 1, Spring pp. 68-82. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/esp.2011.0009>
- Romney, J. (2010). BFI Live: Jonathan Romney on Agnès Varda. Video conversation. Available at: [www.bfi.org.uk/live/video/333](http://www.bfi.org.uk/live/video/333).
- Rose, G. (1993). *Feminism and Geography: The Limits of Geographical Knowledge*. Minnesota P.
- Smith, A. (1998). *Agnès Varda*. Manchester University Press.
- Soloway, J. (2016). *Jill Soloway on The Female Gaze | MASTER CLASS | TIFF 2016*. *YouTube*. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pnBvppooD9I>
- Thomas, K. (2002). Meaning in gleaning. *Los Angeles Times*. Available at: <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2002-dec-19-wk-thomas19-story.html> (last visited on 20 June 2021)
- Vincendeau, G. (2019). “La Pointe Courte: How Agnès Varda “Invented” the New Wave”. *The Criterion Collection*. Available at: <https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/497-la-pointe-courte-how-agn-s-varda-invented-the-new-wave>
- Williams, A. (1992). *Republic of Images: A History of French Filmmaking*. Harvard University Press. Aydın, S. (2020, 10 09). Taammüden Anakronizm: Dizilerde Tarihin Politik Kullanımları. *e-Skop Dergi* (17). URL: <https://>



[www.e-skop.com/skopdergi/taammuden-anakronizm-dizilerde-tarihin-politik-kullanimleri/5897](http://www.e-skop.com/skopdergi/taammuden-anakronizm-dizilerde-tarihin-politik-kullanimleri/5897) (E.T.: 25.10.2021).

Woolf, V. (1930). *Street Haunting, A London Adventure*. Westgate Press (first published in 1927) <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/street-haunting-an-essay-by-virginia-woolf>

**VISUALS**



Photo 1: A footage from *Salut Les Cubain* (1964)



Photo 2. A footage from the film *Les Plages d'Agnes* (2008)



Photo 3: A footage from the film *Cléo de 5 à 7* (1962)



Photo 4: A Footage from *Sans toit ni loi* (1985)



Photo 5: A footage from the film *Documenteur* (1981)



Photo 6 : A footage from the film *Les Dites Cariatides* (1984)



Photo 7: *Réponse de femmes* (1975)



Photo 8: *Gleaners and I*, tableau vivant of Breton (2000)



Photo 9: A photo of Varda in her installation "*Patatutopia*" (Venice Biennale, 2003)

**Hakem Deęerlendirmesi:** ift “kr” hakem incelemesi.

**ıkar atıřması:** Yazar ıkar atıřması bildirmemiřtir.

**Finansal Destek:** Yazar bu alıřma iin finansal destek aldıęını beyan etmemiřtir.

**Peer-review:** Double-blind peer-reviewed.

**Conflict of Interest:** The author has no conflict of interest to declare.

**Grant Support:** The author declared that this study has received no financial support.



Ege niversitesi, Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü | *Ege University, Institute of Social Sciences*

**Ege Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi** | ***Journal of Ege Social Science***

e-ISSN 2651-4982

Cilt: 4, Sayı: 1-2, Ocak-Temmuz 2023 | *Volume: 4, Issue: 1-2, January-July 2023*

Sahibi (Owner): Ege niv. Sosyal BİLimler Enstitüsü adına Mdr (On behalf of Ege Univ. Institute of Social Sciences, Director): Prof. Dr. Mustafa MUTLUER ♦ Editrler (Editors): Dr. Ender ZBAY, Dr. ęr. y. Aytekin ERDOęAN ♦ Yazı İřleri Mdr (Managing Director): Koray KULEYİN (Enstit Sekreteri | Institute Secretary) ♦ Sekreteryaya - Grafik Tasarım/Mizampaj - Teknik İřler - Strateji - Sre Ynetimi (Secretariat - Graphic Design/page layout - Technical works - Strategy - process management): Ender ZBAY

[İnternet Sayfası \(Aık Eriřim\)](#)

[İnternet Page \(Open Access\)](#)

**DergiPark**  
AKADEMİK

<https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/pub/esbd>

*Ege Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi* hakemli, bilimsel bir dergidir; Ocak ve Temmuz aylarında olmak zere yılda iki kez yayınlanır.

*Journal Of Ege Social Science* is a peer-reviewed, scholarly, periodical journal published biannually, in January and July.