

Shelley Rice

ARIADNE'S THREAD: ON THE BEACHES THAT ARE AGNÈS VARDA*

The Beaches of Agnès, Agnès Varda's autobiographical film released in 2008, begins with the artist walking backwards on a beach in Belgium that was a central backdrop of her childhood. It ends with Agnès sitting in her courtyard on the Rue Daguerre in Paris, holding a screen on her lap. Upon the screen is an image of herself surrounded by 80 colorful brooms, gifts given by friends to mark her 80th birthday. As we regard the photo on her lap, it becomes animated, and begins to recede into space behind the frame. In the end it is not Agnès but her image that moves backwards, as the artist muses: "It all happened yesterday, and it's already in the past. Sensation combines with an image, which rests. I remember as long as I am alive". Seen together, these two scenes encapsulate the relationship between the still and the moving image in Varda's beauti-

ful film. The animated body, in two or three dimensions, moves as long as it is able, but ultimately it will be the fixed image that stays with us.

Varda said as much in 1984, responding to questions about the relationship between photography and cinema in *Photogenies*, no. 5: "La photographie ne cesse de m'enseigner comment faire du cinema. Et le cinema me rappelle a tout instant qu'il filme pour rien le mouvement puisque toute image devient souvenir et que tout souvenir se fige et se fixe. Dans toute photographie, il y a la suspension d'un mouvement qui finalement est un refus du mouvement. Le mouvement y est en creux. Dans tout film, il y a la volonte de capter la vie mouvant et de refuser l'immobile. Mais l'image fixe est en creux dans le film comme la menace d'une panne de moteur, comme la mort qui guette". The still image, with its power to fix

itself into a souvenir, to encapsulate in form an iconic truth, is like the specter constantly threatening the mobility of cinema. In some cases, she says, a photograph can embody in one image the whole of a film's message. Varda saw a still from the Louis Delluc's *The Woman from Nowhere*, a picture of a woman with a long shadow alone on a country road; its effect was so powerful she never felt the need to see the entire film. Similarly, people she meets on the streets of Paris in her documentary short *Daguerre Beach* remember specific pictures, feelings and characters from *Daguerreotypes* but never the full narrative. Agnès is a filmmaker, but she began as a photographer, and she understands the strengths and limitations of her media, the ways in which they work both together and at cross-purposes. "Pour moi", she wrote in the same issue of *Photogenies*, "cinema et photographie vont de pair dans ma tête comme un frère et une sœur ennemis [...] après l'inceste".

Walking backwards on a beach, or in another location important to the artist's biography, is a trope that repeats itself at regular intervals throughout the film, signifying Varda's regression into her own past. Although the narrative begins with her childhood

En algunos casos, nos dice Varda, una fotografía puede llegar a condensar en una sola imagen todo el mensaje del film

and ends with her 80th birthday party, there is nothing linear about its trajectory. Recreating the erratic processes of memory and imagination, the work ricochets between the past and the present, transcriptions and reenactments, documentaries and dreams, life and art.

All of these various states are presented not in fixed relationships but as equivalent realities that often bleed into and inform each other. The film may be an autobiographical self-portrait, but its revelations are often simultaneously disruptions. During the first scene on the Belgian beach Varda announces that she would like to be filmed through spotty mirrors or, better yet, with her scarf hiding her face as it blows in the wind. "Even when we dump it all out we don't reveal much", Jane Birkin laughingly announces as she empties the contents of her handbag on the sidewalk in a short clip seen midway through the film. It is clear that Varda sees her art works – cinema, photos, visual images and installations, even family photographs – as the contents of her bag-of-tricks, her own personal *marque au puce*. She allows these prized possessions, gleaned from a lifetime of experience, to speak for her, to represent her in much the same way

Agnès en la playa, in her Director's Chair on the Beach. Agnès Varda/Cine-Tamaris



that Guillaume the Cat speaks for Chris Marker in several scenes.

This is, in other words, autobiography seen through a glass, darkly. The viewer understands this early on, when mirrors are placed on the beach by young assistants as Agnès announces that she will play the role of an old woman telling her life story. The mirrors are deliberately positioned to reflect the North Sea and the sky rather than the people most of the time; like Robert Smithson's *Slide Works*, they dislocate the landscape and reflect it back on those who pass through their ethereal surfaces, whether they be young film technicians, trapeze artists, children reenacting faded family photographs

or contemporary surfers en route to the waves. In various ways the glass illuminates Agnès' diverse cast of characters, those who have animated her life. The wood of the mirrors reminds Varda of her parents, her siblings and their childhood home; in response to her musings the scene shifts through old family photographs and then lurches forward to a hilarious recent encounter with the man who lived in the house in Brussels that was occupied by the filmmaker and her family before World War 2. Past and present are juxtaposed seemingly randomly; there is a patchwork quilt quality to the fluidity of memory, with time periods often differentiated mainly through color: old

photographs and early films are black and white, while contemporary scenes or reenactments are announced in Technicolor. There is clear linearity in the narrative, but the forward movement of chronology is layered and complex, composed of reminiscences, fantasies, recurrent images and dreams. "Memories are like flies", she announces at one point, "swarming through the air". This swarming effect is built into the structure of the film which is, as she states several times, like a picture puzzle whose diverse fragments need to be assembled around a center.

That center, of course, is the parallel evolution of Varda's life and her art, and their continual interface through the medium of time. The barriers between personal and professional life are non-existent within the context of this film; art grows out of life and then jumps back into it. The courtyard at Rue Daguerre is simulated as a film set, and tons of sand invade the real streets to create an urban beach that links her home and work spaces in Paris. Scenes that actually happened during the artist's childhood are recreated much later within cinematic narratives; youthful daydreams (Varda wanted to join the circus, and sit in the belly of Jonah's Whale) become actuated in her later years through the medium of film. Thinking back to her first job as a retoucher of damaged photographs, she sees in their decay the beauty of the mildewed ceiling in her home that has figured prominently in several of her films. When she remembers a picture of a potato taken early in her career, her mind careens forward not only to scenes of potato pickers from *The Gleaners and I* but also to her recent installation (and performance, as a talking potato) at the Venice Biennale. Dreams are the stuff of life, Varda seems to be saying, and images recur and reproduce themselves through time, their changing contexts mirroring not only personal trajectories but also the upheavals of the historical world. Algerian Independence, the Vietnam War, Abortion Rights, the Black Panthers and Iraq

Above: Photo of Agnès with Brooms. Below: Photo of Agnès with Cat. Agnès Varda/Cine-Tamaris



play their parts here, in both life and art, participants in Varda's journey as surely as the marine landscapes that mark her path.

The artist explains right away, at the very beginning of the film, why seascapes are so significant to her: "If we opened people up we would find landscapes. If we opened me up, we would find beaches". The symbiotic connection between people and places is a constant in Varda's work; her characters are deeply rooted in the landscapes within which they act. Given the importance of locations to her, it is perhaps not surprising that places are often used as structuring devices in her narratives. Cleo walks through real Parisian streets and spaces from 5:00 to 7:00; *The Vagabond* is punctuated by 13 panning shots of roadsides as Mona hitches rides across the country. Varda's trajectory through time has played itself out on beaches, in Belgium and France, in Los Angeles and Corsica and Cuba. These seascapes are the recurring stage sets of her autobiography, marking its chapter breaks; as her life evolves, the beaches change. The family moves from Brussels to Sete; she later becomes a student in Paris, at the Ecole du Louvre. This long-ago movement in time is reenacted by the octogenarian Agnès as she pilots a small boat from Sete to Paris. En route, she passes a young woman reading on the banks of the Seine who "represents" the student Varda, two temporal manifestations of the same persona passing (literally) like ships in the night. These two Agnèses are soon joined by a third: the young actress France Dougnac, who in Varda's early film *Naussica* played a young art student reading on the banks of the Seine who is robbed and outsmarted by the young beatnik Gerard Depardieu.

This simultaneity, the eternal return and recurrence of time, is perhaps the central motif of Varda's autobiographical work, the thread that links the Beaches that are Agnès. Like body and soul, or film and photo, these seascapes vacillate between temporality and eternity within the context of the film. In an in-

terview with her young friend Bastide included in *Daguerre Beach*, Varda discusses the metaphoric meaning of sand in her work. "Sand is an hourglass," she says, "sand is time, sand is the beach, sand is the sea," she chants. Continually morphing, this fluid substance embodies the temporality of cinema, with its animated shifts and dislocations, its fluidity of movement and meaning. A film scholar who has worked as the archivist for Varda and her deceased husband Jacques Demy, Bastide mentions that he appreciates Agnès' work because it is mythological, because there is a Thread of Ariadne that links all of her creations. Varda, who loves ancient art and literature, thoughtfully agrees,

and mentions that for her the sea is *The Odyssey*, the stage set for Ulysses, who has been a starring character in both her photographs and her films.

In this case cinema followed photography. Her short film *Ulysses* – whose theme is the intractability of memory and our capacity to see the past anew – grew out of her obsession with a black and white picture she had taken years before. A "directorial" photograph of a nude man and a child posed on a beach, the still image is given a history in this narrative work. There are interviews, discussions and reminiscences with and about old friends, all of them attempting to resituate the image in space and time by reconstituting its context. Ulti-

Photo of Agnès with Mirrors on the Beach. Agnès Varda/Cine-Tamaris





Left: Photo of Daguerre Beach. Right: Photo of Agnès with circus performers. Agnès Varda/Cine-Tamaris

mately, however, this search for a Barthesian “studium” is complicated, since the people involved in the making of the picture don’t always remember it. Memory embalmed in form, the mysterious photograph is unloosed from the actual event it depicts. Isolated and immobile, it transcends history to become an open-ended field of dreams. Like the sea, it has two faces, only one of them mired in time. “Time has passed”, Varda says in the film as she sails through Paris and her life. “Except on beaches, which are timeless.”

This duality, between time and timelessness, echoes Varda’s obsession with mortality and immortality, visualized in the parade of pictures of those who have departed the earth. Agnès has spent her life photographing and

filming beloved friends and colleagues, those whose friendship and assistance have brightened her passage on the planet. Still alive and active at 80, she is left with an archive full of ghostly images; her *oeuvre*, to some degree, has become a sacred altar. While proudly displaying a recent exhibition of black and white photographs of theatrical personages in a beautiful chapel in Avignon, the artist breaks down in tears. Caught between her pride in her artistic achievement and her horror that the still photographs are specters of impending deaths (“a catastrophe that has already occurred”, Roland Barthes would say in *Camera Lucida*), she sees the past and the present superimposed. The futility of trying to visually reconstitute the dearly beloved overwhelms her. Before

they were living people, animated players on the stage of life; now their still photographic traces are all that remain, silently inhabiting the same space.

The most cherished of the dead is, of course, her beloved husband Jacques Demy, whose presence and artistic genius permeate the film. On some level this autobiography echoes the structure of a family album, highlighting relatives and friends who have struck the rich emotional chords of a life well lived. Varda’s immediate family – her two grown children, her grandchildren – has always played a large role in her art as well as her life. Here they function as an anchor for her, the “sum of her happiness”, a “peaceful island” of protection in the vast and unpredictable sea of life. They are always with her, dancing on the beach in her imagination. She “sees” them when she is at home in Paris, even as she “sees” Demy’s face in the trees outside her window. The Beaches that are Agnès are landscapes of the mind, and there the past and the present, the near and far coexist, visualized through the magic of the camera. During the film, she explains this magic simply, as “la lumière qui (est arrivée) quelque part et qui est retenue par des images plus ou moins sombres ou colorées”. Unlike the dead, those rays of light are still with us; like memories, they rest when the physical traces of cherished lives recede from sight.

Toward the end of *Beaches*, Agnès takes us on a tour of her recent exhibi-

Photo of Agnès in Boat with Eiffel Tower. Agnès Varda/Cine-Tamaris



tion at the Fondation Cartier in Paris. Thrilled to have suddenly been transformed from an old filmmaker into a young plastic artist, she tells the story of a glass shack, covered with colorful rolls of film, shimmering in the light of the gallery. The original film was a failure, she says. But once gleaned and metamorphosed, the rolls make a splendid installation, with the screen actors immobilized to become wall art. Sitting in the cabana, she explains: "Quand je suis là, J'ai l'impression que j'habite le cinéma, que c'est ma maison, il me semble que j'y ai toujours habité". As she wanders through the gallery at the age of 80, happily moving among her avant-garde art works, it's hard not to notice that she begins to walk forward once again, into the future.

Notes

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Shelley Rice was born in New York City, U.S.A. in 1950. A critic and historian of photography and multi-media art since 1973, she is a Professor of Art History and Photography Studies at New York University. Her writings have appeared in a range of publications like *Art Journal*, *Artforum*, *Art in America*, *The Village Voice*, *French Studies* and *Etudes Photographiques*, and her books include *Parisian Views*, *Inverted Odysseys: Claude Cahun, Maya Deren, Cindy Sherman*, and *The Book of 101 Books. The Seminal Photographic Books of the Twentieth Century* (Roth Horowitz, LLC: 2001). In 2010, Professor Rice was named a Chevalier in the Order of Arts and Letters by the French Minister of Culture.

Photo of Family Dancing on the Beach. Agnès Varda/Cine-Tamaris

