

DIA LO GUE



Agnès Varda (Belgium, 1928) is one of the greatest filmmakers in film history. She is known as the “Grandmother of French New Wave”, but she actually belonged to Left Bank Group together with Chris Marker, Alain Resnais and Marguerite Duras. After studying art history, she started working as an official photographer for the Théâtre National Populaire in Paris, but soon began making films. Since her film *Cleo from 5 to 7* (Cléo de 5 à 7, 1962), with its modern aimless wandering, Varda hasn’t stopped experimenting and positioning herself at the ideological and aesthetical vanguard of film. She made the leap from fiction to documentary with *Daguerréotypes* (1975), using her interest in photography by portraying the everyday life of the shopkeepers in her neighbourhood. In her own words “the immobility of this neighbourhood took the form of filmed photographs. By holding a post to the end of the film, they themselves

Montage of texts and interviews created by Christa Blümlinger (Université Vincennes-Saint-Denis) and reviewed by the filmmaker Agnès Varda in 2009*

Agnès Varda. From Photography to Cinema and Vice Versa

become portraits fixed in time, but some of the heads move, there is the hint of a gesture, they're breathing! They are vibrant daguerreotypes" (VARDA. 1994: 143-144). It is a double play between still and moving image, which is also present in *One Sings, the Other Doesn't* (Una chante, l'autre pas, 1976), a benchmark film for the feminist movement. She has never hesitated to put herself, and her environment, in the foreground. The magnificent *The Beaches of Agnès* (Les plages d'Agnès, 2008) rounds out this other side of her work.

After inviting her to take part in the *Dialogue* section of *L'Atalante*, we couldn't think of anyone more qualified to speak about the relationship between photography

and cinema. As the filmmaker isn't currently granting interviews on this subject because she believes that her filmography should speak for itself, in 2009, a German publication *Viva Photofilm* published a montage in which Christa Blümlinger took existing texts and combined them with images, under the supervision of the director herself. The result was titled *Filmfotomontage* and the English translation is presented for the first time below. Here at *L'Atalante*, we have decided that in this occasion, it will be Agnès Varda's reflections and experiences that will engage in a dialogue with the images.

Paula de Felipe Martínez

I. STARTING OUT: PAINTING-PHOTOGRAPHY-CINEMA

I had finished my first year at the École du Louvre, because I loved painting with all my heart, especially the old masters, but also, making a big leap, contemporary painting. [...] I never really liked the painters of the nineteenth century, although I've been to the exhibitions of Delacroix, Courbert... Despite spending three years at the École du Louvre, auditing classes and not doing very well in the exams, I didn't have any interest in filing index cards in some provincial museum; I told myself that being a photographer wouldn't be a bad idea, because you handled objects, cameras and lenses, and could learn how to work in the laboratory, you know, it was an craftsman's trade that gave you the chance to see things. At first, with some mo-

desty, I started learning with two elderly photographers (who later died), specialists in the works of painters and sculptors. I accompanied them to the artists' houses and to the Rodin Museum. It was a real learning experience, as you had to do it, it was full-time, and there were afternoon courses at the École de Vaugirard to pass the exam for the CPC (Certificate of Professional Competence), which was still compulsory to practice then. [...] Because of a number of circumstances, because I was a student in Sète and one of my neighbours, Andrée, married Jean Vilar, I made my debut when [Jean Vilar] created the festival in Avignon [...]. I had to help out with some tasks in order to get food and lodging during the festival. [...] The photos at the first festival were atrocious, completely blurred, it's incredible. I didn't get good photos because I should have got them to pose a little, there wasn't enough light on the stage. Year after year I did all the archives of photographs for those

Agnès Varda: *Ulysse* (1982)



festivals in Avignon, and when the National Theatre was created in Paris in 1951, [...] I continued taking photos and I got better at it. It was a very fascinating experience, because [of] the work we were doing there, Vilar's desire to go against all the fashions, against everything that was done back then, his idea that the theatre could be popular, accessible and of great quality, [...] all these things that now seem obvious were considered extraordinary in 1951. [...]

I worked for the National Theatre and for Vilar for almost ten years. [...] I was very young, really I was, and it was great that such responsibility was given to a young girl. I did everything: the photos of the stage, the photos included in the programs, the actors' portraits for the hall, press photos, articles and also a lot of archive shots that Vilar asked me to take, apart from corners of the stage,

the constructions, bare sets, that is, they were real archives, not like the ones made by newspaper photographers, who would come one day just to take the important shots. And I had huge headaches on each show: the photos for *The Prince of Hamburg* had to have a romantic touch, the photos for *Mother Courage* needed to be distanced, for *Arturo Ui* the photos had to be the gangster film style, things like that. [...]

It all happened like this. Later, the magazines that had published the photos of the National Theatre they liked hired me; then, they sent me travelling and finally I became a real photojournalist. [...]

Things happen in a mysterious way. I went on to portraits, which tend to be a little immobile, when what I wanted was to get closer to life, to the mystery of sus-



pending movement. I never had a calling to be a filmmaker, but in this life there is a wild staging, a rough positioning into place. Photographs of five people in one spot, or even what we see from this window here, with a snowy background; in one glance the forms and lines are registered to perfection. I mean, just before, they are a bit compressed, restricted, a moment later, the placement of the elements is fantastic. [...] I am inspired by the movements that occur and achieve a moment of beauty only then to come undone. There is a fragility in the images of life and an emotion that can't be suspended, except, sometimes, by a photo, but that can be re-invented by cinema.

I had the need to make a film, I think, because I told to myself: "It would be beautiful to find a form that could simultaneously be photography, sound and the distance between them, their separation". [...] I had lived far away from so-called Parisian and intellectual life, I barely read the newspapers; I didn't really know who was who and who did what. I found myself much closer to craftsmen, sculptors, painters, people who, in general, pay little attention to current affairs.

When I started working on my first movie in 1954, I wrote it my way, as a type of rough-cut movie, although I had taken photos in a small fishing neighbourhood, *Le Pointe Courte*, whose name became the title of the movie. I photographed every shot, every place, and I had made the drawings of the rest of the shots. It was a completely cut movie, something that I have never done again, shot by shot, image by image, in which moment the dialogue stops, if the dialogue continues in another image. [...] I didn't know anything; I hadn't even seen a camera before. I finished writing the film and I put it in my drawer, I guess like it was a teenager's poem, something that I never thought to publish. [...] It was by luck that I met Carlos Vilardebo, who said to me: "After all, why don't we make a movie?"

[Abstracts from a radio broadcast recorded by *France-Culture*, broadcast on the 27 of March 1978, *Nuits magnétiques*, N° Phonothèque INA: 78C1050N3074; text revised in 2009.]

II. ABOUT SOME FILMS, PHOTOGRAPHS AND A DIAPORAMA

"Hola" to the Cubans Socialism and the *chachachá*

At Christmastime in 1961, invited by the Cubans, I went with a Rolleiflex, a Leica and the project to take photos and to assemble them into a movie when I got back. I didn't have any of the best or latest cameras, like one of those with an automatic motor that opens the shut-

ter and takes bursts of shots like a machine gun. My only support was a small soft foot and I had to set up the Leica twice, which means there would be a few seconds between every shot. So, instead of reconstructing a continuous movement by filming some images that were very close in time, we couldn't do anything but construct a jolting continuity that gives the film the rhythm of a *chachachá*, a *bolero*, *danzón* or *guaguancó*.

When I got back to Paris with some three thousand photos, I prepared for filming calculating very carefully the duration of the music chosen. After that came the *banc-titre* (filming with a camera suspended vertically over the photographs), image by image according to the number of images to shoot each photograph, or detail or movement.

Talking about Cuba, Chris Marker had filmed *Cuba sí* (1961) a year before my arrival. I benefited from some of his contacts and from my ability to communicate in Spanish with Cubans with their southern character, so different from the socialism of the East. Beni Moré is the best dancer there is in the Red Army Choir. [...] Fidel's portrait that I did seems very allegorical to me: a soldier with sweet eyes and without any weapon.

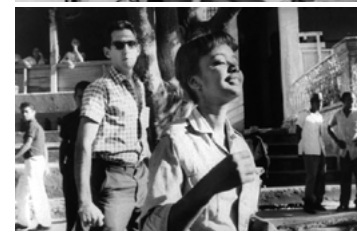
[Abstract from *Varda par Agnès*, Editions Cahiers du cinema, 1994, p. 133, revised by Agnès Varda in 2009.]

Ulysses

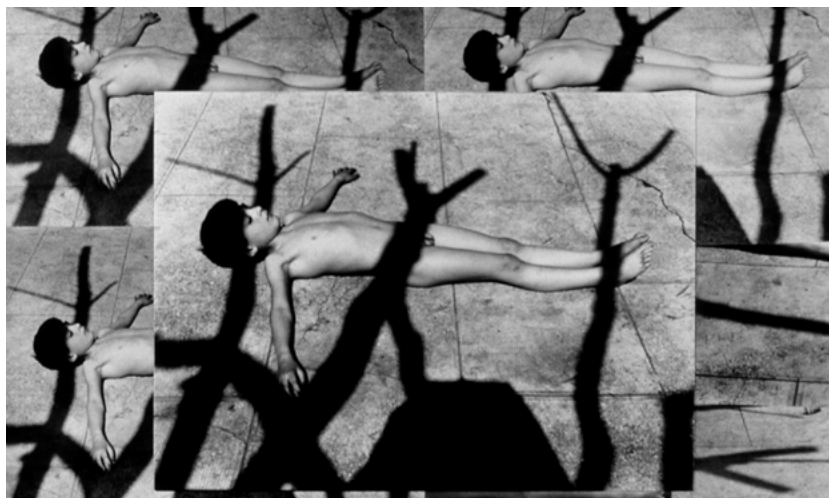
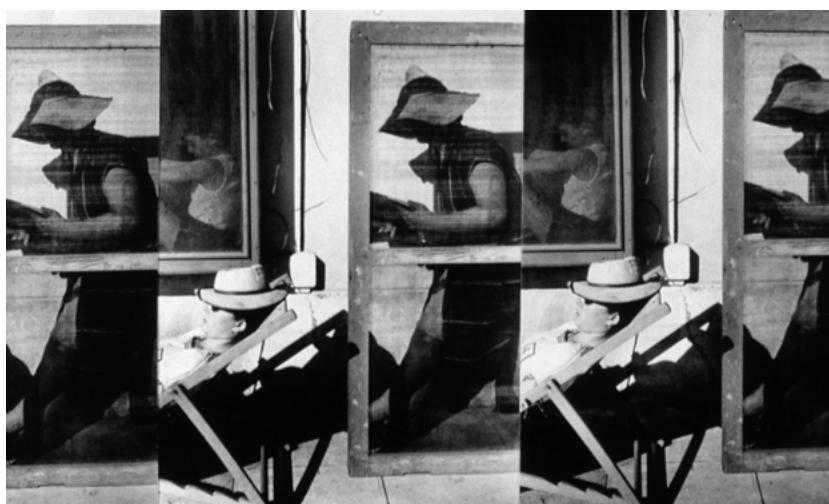
The photograph, the film

While I was preparing the show in Arles I realised that one of my photographs had been in the workshop for twenty years, over the door of a built-in wardrobe. It was clear that it was very important but I wondered why. And that question turned into the theme of a short film.

The small boy, Ulysses, who is sitting in the centre of the image, gave his name to the movie title. A name that is also mythical. [...]



Agnès Varda: *Salut les cubains* (1963)



Agnès Varda: *Ulysse* (1982)

From discoveries to frustrations, thanks to this short film I learned more about myself than through many conversations.

I dedicated it to Bienvenida, a magnificent woman I met in 1950 or 1951. She, her husband and their son Ulysses, who then was two or three years old, had crossed the Spanish border on foot; they were political refugees. We shared the same yard in the Rue Daguerre. Bienvenida, who helped me with everything, learned little by little how to work in a photo laboratory. She was enlarging and developing photos while singing songs from her native Alicante in her powerful voice, as if she was picking olives. I loved her generosity, her exquisite humour and her frankness when she spoke. For example, she never knocked on the door before she entered, and she would say: "A republican doesn't need permission to enter."

[Abstract from *Varda par Agnès*, Editions Cahiers du cinema, 1994, pp. 135-136.]

The diorama in the Théâtre Antique

Determined not to do anything but make films after *Cléo from 5 to 7* (Cléo de 5 à 7, Agnès Varda, 1962), I stopped working as a photographer. Twenty years later, Antoine Cordesse and Lucien Clergue asked me to prepare an evening for the Théâtre Antique in Arles, a mixed diorama with commentary. I needed to immerse myself once again in my old photos, and I even discovered some new photos to develop. I prepared the montage and the mixture with the amazing technicians at the Centre Pompidou, installing a system of drums that contained slides, as well as a system of synchronization to activate the change of slides and to insert the excerpts from the films (sequences in which photography had played an important role).

[Abstract from *Varda par Agnès*, Editions Cahiers du cinema, 1994, pp. 134.]

One minute for one image

Directed by Agnès Varda and presented by the Centre National de la Photographie, this is a series of mini-films about images and the imagination. Every afternoon, on FR3.

Photography on television and in the cinema is often something quick, rapid action and illustration, efficiency and movement, and we sometimes grow weary to the point of intoxication and bedazzlement from those waves of images that are

illustrated and displayed.

We talk about photographs, fixed images that are converted, beyond the representation of their object, into the signs and symbols of our mental world... Warning!... We are not concerned with critical or historical reflections on photography; what we are interested in is that *each image in itself*, made by one person, is seen by another person who *reads* it and proposed to thousands of others spectators, whether *amateurs* or simply curious.

A single photograph each time, in black and white or in colour, contemporary or old, portrait, group, news image, or an image of current fashion... (taken by photographers renowned or not, or even anonymous);

One every day, late enough to enter your mind shortly before you go to sleep. From eighty-nine to ninety seconds (i.e., a parenthesis in which to dream). It's a good length of time to look into a photo, but nobody would dare to say that one could take in a whole image in eighty seconds.

No music accompanying the image, because that would blur the gaze.

A commentary, but not during the first or last ten seconds of the broadcast (nothing at all, rather curious on television, an image to look at in silence, up to twice in ten seconds). The voices come from different people: photography lovers, passers-by, *amateurs*, neighbours, friends, other photographers, celebrities, children...

No stardom: each photo will have its chance and will not be identified until the broadcast is over.

One minute for one image is a series of mini-films about images and the imagination. It is a variation on the gaze and the gazes and it is an opportunity to show photographs that are worth pondering for a while. (Of course, it is also a tribute to the talent of the photographers.)

As an ex-photographer and filmmaker, fascinated with the effects of the word on the image and vice versa, I thought of suggesting *every photo as a place to dream*; it seemed to me that a bit of silence and a voice that communicates its personal impressions would stimulate the imagination of each and every person. When I say *dream*, I refer as much to the emotions as to the horror, the fascination, the charm, the admiration, the pleasure, the nostalgia, the complicity in humour, in short, an active dreaming, *the little film inside every person's head*. I proposed this series:

- to Garance, which had already produced my short *Ulysses* film (twenty minutes about a photo I took in 1954);
- to the Centre National de la Photographie, whose vocation is to promote photography among the widest and diverse public possible;
- to FR3, which is already scheduling a mini-concert every evening.

Evidently, there are millions of people watching at this hour: why not suggest to them to watch only before they turn their televisions off and to take a small journey in photography? Welcome, waking dreamers! Make some room for the imagination, obsession, strong images, the games of mirrors and gazes.¹

[Published in *Photogénies*, n°1 April 1983, no pagination.]

III. THREE ANSWERS TO THREE QUESTIONS ABOUT PHOTOGRAPHY AND CINEMA

In your opinion, in which film or films is photography (photographic activity) best represented?

I really liked *Blow-Up* (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1966). Antonioni showed the ridiculous excess of the photographer from fashion to fashion and at the same time, a serious professional obsessed with his work.

As an ex-photographer and filmmaker, fascinated with the effects of the word on the image and vice versa, I thought of suggesting every photo as a place to dream

The photography, for staging reasons, turned into a *mystery area*. The photographic image concealed secrets, and defended itself from the gaze.

I love photographs that resist; that's why I liked filming the photograph in *Ulysses*, which after 22 minutes of gazes and questions still continues to be a *place to dream* about exploring. The image backs away as the eye gets closer. This is the reason I like films where the photographic image is one of the elements and provides the real emotional material.

For example, in *Olstyn Pologne* (1981), a short film by Vincent Tamišier, or Wim Wender's *Alice in the Cities* (Alice in Den Städtchen, 1974), or even comic works like *Bread and Chocolate* (Pane e cioccolata, Franco Brusati, 1972), where poor Manfredi is taken to a police station because his image appears in the Polaroid snapshot of a Sunday amateur ... and it is revealed –the photo is the proof– that he dared to take a piss on a Swiss tree!

And then, there are films made with photos, such as the admirable *La Jetée* (1962) by Chris Marker, who dares, in the middle of all the still images, to include a moving shot of the face of a woman opening her eyes.

Has photography taught you anything about cinema? Or cinema about photography?

Photography has never stopped teaching me how to make films. And cinema reminds me every moment that the movement is never filmed at all, because every image turns into a memory and every memory is petrified and fixed.

In every photograph there is a suspension of movement which is ultimately a rejection of the movement. The movement is implicit. In every film there is a desire to capture life in motion and to reject still life.

But the fixed image is implicit in a film, like the threat of a motor breakdown, like the death that awaits us.

Photography and cinema: first cousins or sibling rivals?

Cinema and photography refer to one another –they are implicit– in their specific effects. For me, cinema and photography go together, like brother and sister who are rivals... after the incest.

[Published in *Photogénies*, n°5 April 1984, no pagination.]

THE BEACHES OF AGNÈS (LES PLAGES D'AGNÈS, AGNÈS VARDA, 2008)

About *Le Pointe Courte* (Agnès Varda, 1955) and the move from photography to cinema

For the editing stage, Alain Resnais joined the circle of cooperative volunteers. I see his classical face, and his features don't betray the passion and curiosity he feels for art, culture and every surrealistic complexity.

He himself took charge of the filming of a shot that was missing. Yes, in my yard we shot a *raccord* [match cut] of a street in La Pointe Courte [...]

During editing in 1955... a man was often calling Resnais on the phone: it was Chris Marker.

When he came, the only thing we saw of him were his leather jacket, his boots, his gloves and glasses.

He is so discreet that he is represented by a cat called *Guillaume-en-Egypte*. He is the creator of some excellent films and of some comments that are equally good. He is the one I like doing things with; he is my friend and auditor. But I changed his voice.

Why did you make the leap from photography to cinema?

You see, I remember that I needed words. I believed if you put the images on one side and the words on the other, that would be cinema. Of course, I learned later that it is something quite different.

Were you a cinephile?

No, not at all. Until I was twenty-five, I probably hadn't seen more than nine or ten movies. I don't have training in film, I haven't been an assiduous viewer; I imagined it and then I threw myself into it. [...]

[...]

About *La cabane de l'échec*, the installation created for the private exhibition *L'île et Elle* at the Fondation Cartier (2006)

This cabin has a history.

Agnès Varda: *La Pointe courte* (1955)





Agnès Varda: *Ma Cabane de l'échec* (2006)

Once upon a time there were two good-looking and talented actors, who had acted in a movie which turned out to be a flop. Like a hardworking gleaner, I recovered the abandoned copies of this film and we developed the reels. Two good-looking and talented actors found each other again on the walls, pierced through by the light.

What is a film? A light that comes from somewhere and that is held by images of varying degrees of darkness or colour.

When I'm there, I have the impression that I live in film, that it is my house, and it seems to me that it has always been.

[Abstract from the commentary and the dialogue of the movie *The Beaches of Agnès*]

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Notes

* Editor's note: Montage of texts of Agnès Varda created by Christina Blümlinger [Filmfotomontage, Textfragmente, ausgewählt von Christina Blümlinger]. In HAMOS, Gusztáv; PRATSCHKE, Katja; TODE, Thomas (eds.) 2010), *Viva Fotofilm, bewegt/unbewegt* (pp. 81-97). Marburg: Schüren. *L'Atalante* is grateful to the author for selecting the fragments and to the editors of the aforementioned book, as well as to Agnès Varda/Cine Tamaris to allow *L'Atalante* the use of the images that accompany the text. (Editor's note.)

¹ Each series of fifteen broadcasts is based on a different personality and constitutes an *imaginary album*. These personalities include, alongside Agnès Varda, Robert Doisneau, Christian Caujolle, Henri Cartier-Bresson and Samia Souma.

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