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Rebecca J. DeRoo, *Agnès Varda Between Film, Photography, and Art*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2018. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. x + 238 pp. \$34.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9780520279414.

Review by Paula Amad, University of Iowa.

In the recently released *Visages Villages (Faces Places)* (2017), Agnès Varda, the filmmaker often introduced as the overshadowed “mother” or “grandmother” of the French New Wave, puts herself in the disquieting position of being stood up by the shadow-casting giant of the New Wave, Jean-Luc Godard. At first glance, the choreography of this rejection comes across as a slightly abject set-up. The always charming and humble Varda knocks politely at the door of the always reclusive and misanthropic Master, seeking a response or affirmation, if not of her impact in French cinema, then of her own personal connection to Godard through their shared past (encompassing her status as the widow of the filmmaker Jacques D  my). Varda waits for Godard, in the end crying. In typical fashion, the cad misses his *rendez-vous*. In the subsequent image of the aged, female filmmaker waiting for Godard, the film’s climax delivers a powerful and somewhat sly indictment by Varda of the New Wave’s and film history’s treatment of women filmmakers. Varda has the last word. *Visages Villages*, co-directed with the artist and muralist known as JR, is the latest critical and popular success of a filmmaker with a striking cross-generational, cross-genre, and cross-media appeal, whose films are renowned for championing the lives of ordinary people on the screen. Though her own eyes may be failing her, Varda, now 89 years old, continues to watch and record the world driven by an insatiable but respectful curiosity for cinema’s unique ability to befriend and keep its *rendez-vous* with ordinary people.

Rebecca J. DeRoo’s book sets out, like other recent works on Varda, to revisit her complicated position as one of the only female directors to enter the orbit of the history and myth of the French New Wave. More than that, DeRoo brings Varda out from the margins of the French New Wave, arguing for her own critical space and place, especially regarding the importance of intermedia influences upon her prolific and diverse filmmaking. The book could not have been published at a better time, following the wave of popular and critical interest in Varda, evident in the *Toute Varda* twenty-two-DVD box set (containing thirty-six films) released in 2012 by Arte and Varda’s production company Cin  -Tamaris, and culminating recently in her being the first woman to win an Honorary Academy Award. That this honor was then quickly followed by not winning in the Best Documentary Feature category, for which *Visages Villages* had been nominated in 2018, underscores the continuing neglect of one of the world’s most influential and creative female filmmakers. Expanding the scope of previous works that deconstruct the cult-like myth of the New Wave through the lens of gender, such as Genevi  ve Sellier’s *Masculine Singular*, DeRoo’s book contributes to a revitalization of scholarly attention to Varda, that includes recent books by Kelley Conway and Delphine B  n  zet as well as the edited collection of interviews with Varda by T. Jefferson Kline.^[1] Where B  n  zet offers an original theoretical reemphasis upon the importance of embodiment and ethics within Varda’s cinema and Conway draws illuminating social and reception contexts from the richness of Varda’s personal archives, DeRoo focuses

upon the “dialogue with multiple aesthetic media and traditions” (p. 1) as a central focus of her filmmaking practice worthy of a book-length study.

DeRoo’s book is structured through seven chapters, with the first and last serving respectively as introductions to debates surrounding Varda and explorations of the current turn to autobiography in her ongoing work. Each of the five intervening chapters takes a key film and theme as its focus. The second chapter reexamines the impact of neorealist aesthetics in Varda’s first film, *La Pointe courte* (1954), a study of a French fishing village interspersed, in a purposefully paradoxical contrast, with a portrait of a bourgeois couple visiting from Paris. Praised as an expression of *auteur* cinema at the time of its release—by critics as important as André Bazin—the film is often positioned as a forerunner to the New Wave movement. DeRoo argues that the film subtly questions neorealism’s supposedly straightforward humanist defense of cinema’s ability to record the lives of ordinary people via evocations of Renaissance painting techniques, a rejection of a spectatorial position based on identification, and sound-image relations that emphasize the unknowability of the villagers and the limits of cinematic representation.

The next chapter turns to an interrogation of the politics of female happiness in Varda’s “most misunderstood film” (p. 49) *Le Bonheur (Happiness)* (1965). Against its critics, DeRoo exposes how the film undercuts the surface antifeminism of its storyline of domestic bliss via an ironic use of advertising-related visual clichés of the housewife’s “serving hand.” The fourth chapter continues the exploration of Varda’s mixture of the popular with the political by focusing on the feminist methods in her musical *L’une chante, l’autre pas (One Sings, the Other Doesn’t)* (1976-77). In support of the latter, DeRoo claims Varda “adapted specific Brechtian theories circulating in progressive film theory and practice” (p. 71) at the time to deconstruct the heteronormative aspects of the Hollywood musical. DeRoo shows how Varda also referenced contemporary activist movements in support of women’s reproductive rights in which the director herself participated. Although the more blatantly political earlier title of the film *L’une chante: Mon corps est à moi (One Sings: My Body Is Mine)* was rejected, DeRoo reveals that the film’s political message clearly prevailed as it was screened as part of “feminist consciousness-raising efforts” (p. 83).

The fifth chapter deals with one of Varda’s most unusual documentaries, *Daguerréotypes (Daguerreotypes)* (1976), which takes its name from the street on which she lives and works in Paris and which she uses as a backdrop to an exploration of *petit métiers* “types” within the context of urban and economic transformation. Expanding upon her earlier argument regarding Varda’s critical employment of *petit métiers* professions as a critique of photographic and cinematic documentary traditions within *La Pointe courte*, DeRoo argues *Daguerréotypes* provides, through a more elaborate deployment of these visual “types,” a subtle critique of the processes of both documentary filmmaking and the “modernization and gentrification” (p. 95) inherent within the neighboring Montparnasse development project.

In the sixth and probably strongest chapter of the book, DeRoo provides a detailed study of *L’Île et elle* (2006), a multimedia installation, dealing with issues of widowhood, mortality, and documentary, that occupied the entire Cartier Foundation for Contemporary Art in Paris. In this chapter, DeRoo convincingly continues explorations, pursued in previous works such as Steve Ungar’s important study of *Cléo de 5 à 7*, of the rich intermedia context to Varda’s work that predates the Cartier Foundation installation.[2] Varda’s foundations in art history and photography are clearly central to her art-installation work. The strengths of this chapter are no doubt also due to DeRoo’s expertise in contemporary art practice (the topic of her first book) and her curatorial experience, including co-curating a retrospective on Varda in 2016 at the George Eastman House titled *Agnès Varda: (Self)Portraits, Facts and Fiction*. DeRoo also productively draws upon this expertise in the book’s final chapter, which turns to the “gestures of retrospective” practice apparent in Varda’s recent work, such as *Les Plages d’Agnès (The Beaches of Agnès)* (2008), a cinematic self-portrait in which the director continues the interweaving of the objective and subjective in her work’s ongoing blend of fact and fiction.

Throughout the book, DeRoo is careful to foreground Varda's own complex self-fashioning in interviews and her autobiographical films in which we can see the "occlusion of the political intentions behind her work as well as her strategic shaping of the 'facts' surrounding her life and oeuvre" (p. 18). DeRoo is most suggestive on this aspect of Varda's work when she touches on the difficult question of desire and love vis à vis the relationship between Varda and her husband Démy, who died of AIDS in 1990.

As illuminating as these readings are, the book might have benefited from additional work at the editorial stage. The text relies unnecessarily on summarizing secondary literature (repeatedly referred to as "critics and scholars" [p.32, p. 36]) on Varda, which it also often reduces to a single viewpoint. DeRoo's argument, mostly based on close readings of scenes, repeatedly insists upon the same refrain: that contrary to certain "misreadings and misunderstandings" (p. 8) in reviews of Varda's work, the films are actually "more complicated and challenging to decipher" (p. 39) and subvert any criticism due to their ironic deployment of imagery. On the one hand, DeRoo successfully avoids the traps of "retroactively canonizing [Varda], rehearsing traditional canons into which her work does not entirely fit, perpetuating stories of her marginality...or simply asserting her uniqueness" (p. 18). On the other hand, she may have fallen into another one, evident in the, at times, overly defensive aspect to the argument. Varda's prolific, inventive, and unique work stands on its own and does not need excuses made for it. Perhaps the author's insistence on responding to what feels like each and every bad review comes from her closeness to Varda while writing the book (she mentions how crucial "Varda's guidance" [p. 16] was to the research). While it might be beneficial to have access to an artist one is writing about (for example in DeRoo's observation that Varda "strategically promoted myths of her own [cinematic] naïveté and separateness" [p. 17]), it might also have constrained the project. In addition, DeRoo's claim that her archival research "is unprecedented in the scholarship on Varda" (p. 16), appears somewhat exaggerated given Conway's book from 2015 which also draws upon privileged access to Varda's Ciné-Tamaris archives. Finally, while DeRoo understandably steers clear of focusing on Varda's most well-studied films, the fiction films *Cléo de 5 à 7* (1960), *La Vagabonde* (1985) and the documentary *Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse* (2001), a further attempt to weave in their seminal impact might have been a fruitful addition to the book's central film analyses.

These reservations aside, DeRoo's work is a welcome and significant contribution to scholarship on a still too-neglected filmmaker and has much to offer those wanting an introduction to Varda and key issues animating critical reception of her films. The book is a well-researched, accessible, and timely addition to expanding scholarship on Varda as a pioneering and dynamic French filmmaker whose multifaceted oeuvre is central to ongoing and urgent debates about feminist film practice, filmmaking as an intermedia art form, and the ethics and aesthetics of documentary practice.

NOTES

[1] Geneviève Sellier, *Masculine Singular: French New Wave Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008); Delphine Bénézet, *The Cinema of Agnès Varda: Resistance and Eclecticism* (London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2014); Kelley Conway, *Agnès Varda* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015); T. Jefferson Kline, ed., *Agnès Varda: Interviews* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2014).

[2] Steve Ungar, *Cléo de 5 à 7* (London: BFI, 2008).

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