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Marie-Claire Barnet, ed. *Agnès Varda Unlimited: Image, Music, Media*. Oxford: Legenda, 2017. 224 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and appendices. \$99.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-1-9096-6231-5.

Review by Dervila Cooke, Dublin City University.

The essays in this important and richly illustrated volume edited by Marie-Claire Barnet focus on the film, installation art, photography, and use of music by the multi-faceted and creative soon-to-be nonagenarian, Agnès Varda. Varda's work has been aptly described by Claudia Gorbman as "seriously playful." [1] Her first film, made in her mid-twenties, was the 1954 *La Pointe Courte*, mixing fiction and documentary in a fishing village in the south of France. That film later earned her the title of Grandmother of the New Wave, although she is more precisely associated with the looser Left Bank group that included Chris Marker and Alain Resnais. Although *La Pointe Courte* may appear to stress rootedness and immobility (while also underlining the possibilities of shifts in mentality), Varda is perhaps best known for films thematizing movement, for example her luminous "city film" *Cléo de 5 à 7* (1962), and the unsettling and enigmatic feminist film *Sans toit ni loi* (*Vagabond*, 1985), which roves through rural southern France, near the coast. Her 2000 documentary film, the partially autobiographical *Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse* (*The Gleaners and I*)—a road movie focusing on the reuse of waste and on urban and rural poverty—was a popular and critical success. Barnet points out in her preface that Varda has recently declared that she is now an installation artist (p. 7). However, true to her indefatigable form, she is continuing to create films, most recently in the collaboration with the photographer JR, *Visages Villages* (*Faces Places*) released in 2017, another roving film and one where the photographic portrait is central.

Despite an abiding interest in the city, Varda's work may perhaps be most aptly summed up by what Shirley Jordan and Barnet in a previous volume term "the key open space of the beach." [2] The title and content of the 2008 documentary and autobiographical film essay *Les Plages d'Agnès* support the centrality of such liminal spaces in her work, coastal beaches of course constituting the very edge of the nation. Along with her interest in various types of margins, Varda is also full of contrasts. For example, her attachment to the ever-changing and uncontrollable nature of the sea lies alongside an interest in the more restrained (and generally female-connoted) sphere of the home. Likewise, her "serious playfulness," itself a seeming paradox, involves the bringing together of melancholy and fun (often through wordplay, mise en abyme, mirrors and refraction), an allying of elements of dreamscape with quotidian life, and a mixing of nostalgia, memory, recycling, and looking forward. She is particularly interested in women's lives but also deeply invested in the individual in general, both male and female, old and young, as well as in local community.

Other book-length volumes of critical thought on Varda include the indispensable 1998 monograph by Alison Smith, the recent monograph on her cinema by Delphine Bénézet (2014), an edited volume in French from the Presses universitaires de Rennes (2009) that goes beyond cinema, as does Rebecca DeRoo's 2017 monograph. [3] The last two works are complemented by the volume under discussion. The essays in this volume address all three main aspects of Varda's work: filmic production (for which

she is best known), her photography (she initially trained as a photographer, and photographs are important objects in much of her work), and her art installations, which she has been exhibiting since about 2000. Two essays also focus in depth on how her use of music underscores her content.

Turning now to the individual essays in this volume, there are two analyses of *Le Bonheur* (1964). Mark Lee's piece mainly discusses baffled reactions by students and critics to the plot's key mystery: the disappearance of Thérèse and her death by drowning (was it accident, suicide, something else)? Lee, citing DeRoo, notes that the film has often been "disparaged for its seemingly antifeminist themes and opacity" (p. 87).^[4] Catherine Dousteyssier-Khoze's analysis of the film goes some way towards correcting the opacity. Her argument is that the film uses *mise en abyme*, cliché, and at times the flat, smooth lives of commercial advertising to underscore the unreal and unquestioning lives (both male and female) presented in this film. For her, the film emphasizes "the perversity of François's consumerist approach to happiness" (p. 101) and "can be read as Varda's hidden feminist and anti-consumerist manifesto" (p. 104).

Hannah Mowat's piece on ludomusicology (the study of the association between music and computer games) is refreshingly different and brings a little-discussed aspect of Varda's work to the fore: her interest in computers, or at least in the technical innovations they can afford. Mowat's analysis is novel and convincing. She first discusses the dancing avatar of Varda in the Second Life virtual world created by Chris Marker and included in *Agnès de ci de là Varda* (2011). She links this with Varda's interest in computer games in *Kung-fu Master* (1988) and her use of computer-generated music in *Les Créatures* (1966), or more precisely the cutting-edge algorithmic punchcard music by pioneer Pierre Barbaud. In her analysis of *Kung-fu Master*, Mowat focuses on the interaction of the music and the soundscape of the video game. She sees the music associated with Jane Birkin as either airy or sea-influenced while the asynchronous music and video-game sounds linked to the adolescent hero stress his greater level of autonomy. By contrast, Mowat views the random punch card-generated music in *Les Créatures* as almost robbing Edgar of control while the "highly chromatic solo violin part" suggests his battle to regain control of his writing (p. 79).

Phil Powrie's analysis of *L'Une chante, l'autre pas* (1977) is welcome, timely, and thought provoking, especially given the current interest in musical film, and the *comédie musicale* fame of Varda's deceased husband, filmmaker Jacques Demy. Powrie links Varda's interest in photography with the lyrics she wrote for the nine songs of the film, which function as almost a political tract, despite having been dismissed by some as frivolous at the time of the film's release (p. 45). Powrie notes that Jérôme, a photographer in the film, cannot get through to the truth of the women he attempts to capture in his images. Powrie stresses that Varda's project with this film is "to construct a female-centred identity rather than one imposed by a man" (p. 53). He sees the films as contrasting "male individualistic and inauthentic rock n roll" and "female folk collectivity" (p. 59). For Powrie, the music associated with the women in the film helps to construct a sense of "continually redefined and itinerant female identities" (p. 62).

In an excellent piece on *Les Dites Cariatides* (1984), Isabelle McNeill analyses Varda's feminist approach to the naked and semi-clothed female bearers of lamps or supporters of buildings in the Parisian streetscape (also including some intriguing points on *L'Opéra-mouffe* (1958)). McNeill points out that Varda sometimes uses vertical tracking shots to reveal angles on these statues that only technology can provide, thereby emphasizing the hiddenness of these apparently exposed sculptures. Other shots mimic the tilt of a head of a passerby in the street. Varda's classical and canonical references are highlighted, for example via McNeill's discussion of the Madame Sabatier incident where Baudelaire rejected a courtesan of whom he had long dreamed in statue form, when she finally offered herself to him in the flesh. Sabatier is said to be the model for the "Femme piquée par un serpent" sculpture by Auguste Clésinger in the Musée d'Orsay (1847). I have less sympathy for the downcast Baudelaire than either Varda or McNeill appear to do, but it is intriguing that Varda empathizes with his pain while also (and mainly) highlighting the commodification of women.

Fiona Handyside eloquently demonstrates how beaches and the sea are constant forces in Varda's work and are key to her "rich, outward looking exploration of the self" (p. 128). Drawing on her 2014 monograph on the shore in French film, Handyside also highlights previous analysis by Phil Powrie on the paradoxical centrality of heterotopic "off-center" spaces in Varda's work (p. 130).^[5] She convincingly stresses the importance of marginalia such as Varda's DVD boni or other apparently peripheral artefacts and images. Principally though, Handyside shows how the liminal site of the beach and the vast, ever-changing nature of the sea bring together questions of myth and mourning; commerce, work, and leisure; privilege and poverty; home and family; marginality and centrality; technology and staging; art and history; the collective and the personal.

Shirley Jordan's study of photographs and photography in Varda's late work is beautifully written and full of depth. Her striking concept of the photograph as scar highlights the bodily quality of much of Varda's work. As Jordan memorably puts it, Varda's photographic objects are often "a thickening in the skin of time, memory and emotion" (p. 147). Jordan also shows how Varda "seeks to release the still image from its moorings" (p. 142) even while stilling the moving image to provoke reflection. Varda frequently provides an intimate, homely note in order for this to happen. Of particular note for the latter aspect is Jordan's analysis of how the domestic object of the framed photograph richly interacts with film and space in Varda's 2007 commissioned installation for the Pantheon ceremony to honor those in France who helped Jews during the Second World War: "Hommage de la nation aux Justes de France" (Homage by the Nation to the Righteous of France).

There are two analyses of *Cléo de 5 à 7*. Emma Wilson focuses in lyrical detail on the beauty of the body of Cléo's female counterweight, Dorothée, both in this film and in *L'Opéra-mouffe*. Momentarily including Jane Birkin in the analysis, she describes Varda's approach to the corporeal beauty of Dorothée and Jane as "a living, electrifying, moving presence" (p. 13). Outlining the clear contrast between Cléo and Dorothée (suggesting that Dorothée, with her lack of self-absorption and lightness of being, is what Cléo might become), Wilson also highlights the experimental nature of the framing and angles used in the sequence of the enmeshed bodies of Dorothée and her lover in *L'Opéra-mouffe*.

Francesca Hardy's piece on *Cléo de 5 à 7* includes a discussion of what she calls "film theory's recent *bodily* turn" (p. 31, author's emphasis). The aim of the essay is to explore what Hardy terms "the black textile triptych" in the film (p. 28). The piece would have been clearer with an earlier focus on this aim and on what constitutes the panels of this "triptych." Yet there is merit in Hardy's discussion of the tactile nature of the playing cards and the carpet (or mat covering the table) in the color opening sequence of the film and some useful analysis of the presence of black textiles.

Hardy notes that Valerie Orpen stresses Cléo's blondeness as harking back to the *cinema de papa*, and that Orpen sees the blondeness of Cléo as an exception in New Wave models of femininity (Orpen, cited by Hardy, p. 28).^[6] Although this point is interesting, I can think of the iconic Jeanne Moreau and Jean Seberg to counter this. For me, the more important point is that Cléo's blondeness serves to emphasize her status as *femme-enfant* (as does the doll-like blondeness of Anna Karina in the film-within-a-film, as Karina was usually dark-haired). Its connotations of immature helplessness (people are often blonder as children than as adults) are just as important as the black clothing Cléo comes to favour. Indeed, her blonde hair contrasts with the adult sophistication (and link with death) of the black textiles while also cohabiting with it. We should remember that Cléo's childishness is disparaged in the film but that her nascent *childlikeness* is celebrated by Varda. By this I mean the emotional nakedness, luminous quality, and curiosity often possessed by children (and possessed already by Dorothée and Antoine in the film), along with the promise of self-development, implying a death of one self and the birth of another.^[7]

Gill Perry and Marie-Claire Barnet provide informative and thought-provoking essays on Varda's recent art installations. Perry turns her attention to Varda's huts in an intriguing essay that links back to Varda's very first film, *La Pointe Courte*. Perry shows how Varda appropriates these cabin spaces,

noting that in the collective artistic imagination they have “predominantly masculine identities (fishermen, hermits, writers)” despite the fact that “women and mothers are often the most visible occupants of primitive huts” (p. 159). Highlighting Varda’s practice of literal and metaphorical *récup* (recycling), and her self-referentiality, Perry also stresses that Varda’s huts are “public spaces to be entered and experienced. Thus *chez soi* is re-conceived as *chez nous*, a participatory strategy that is at the heart of modern installation art” (p. 159).

Barnet suggests that the “‘broken’ and split structure” of many of the artefacts and portraits in Varda’s recent installations link back to the “complicated community” she has created through the different facets of her work (p. 189). It is indeed a complicated community, created by a multi-faceted creative artist. Barnet is to be commended for the initiative of this volume and for its high quality, as well as for the face-to-face events that preceded it (an international conference and film sessions), the informative preface, and for securing responses to the questions she put to Corinne Marchand and Varda herself. Marchand—the heroine of *Cléo de 5 à 7*—responded in a series of beautiful acrostic poems on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the film’s year of release.

It would have been good to see a piece on *Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse*, which is one of Varda’s key works since the new millennium, and perhaps a contemporary take on *Sans toit ni loi*. I would have also liked more attention paid to the importance of *L’Opéra-mouffe*. There are a few inconsistencies or confusing elements. The image entitled “Marie, Varda’s real daughter” suggests that Varda has a daughter called Marie, which she does not. In fact, this image is of Rosalie, Varda’s real daughter, who plays Marie in *L’Une chante, l’autre pas* (p. 62). Two dates (ten years apart) are given for the “Femme piquée par un serpent” sculpture (pp. 121-122). Also, some essays include films in the bibliography and others have separate sections for film. In one chapter there is no bibliography, with references incorporated into endnotes. Despite these small quibbles, this is an inspiring and valuable volume.

I was particularly struck by the repeated references to tactility in the essays. Varda does indeed seem to invite us to touch her work and to be touched by it. Powrie notes her surrealist approach to the object (p. 56), which makes me think of the photograph of the bronze glove in André Breton’s *Nadja* (1928), where the flimsiness of the photograph combines uncannily with the suggestion of weighty and touchable materiality. Tactility in Varda’s work is related to viewer participation, from the framed photographs in the Panthéon, which—as Jordan points out—make us want to pick them up (p. 152), to the viewer-activated drawers Handyside describes on one of her digital images for an installation (p. 135). In 2014, while visiting her “Triptyques Atypiques” exhibition at the Nathalie Obadia gallery in Paris, I picked up and read some of the pieces of paper with cryptic quotations that had been left for this purpose beside the Lautréamont inspired surrealist art-piece with an umbrella and sewing machine. For me, these scraps of paper and the act of reading them encapsulate the significance of the fragment in Varda’s work, the potential centrality of what is small, the key role of the viewer as interpreter, and the democratic nature of Varda’s creations.

LIST OF ESSAYS

Emma Wilson, “Cléo and Dorotheé”

Francesca Minnie Hardy, “*Cléo de 5 à 7*: A Triptych of the Textile”

Phil Powrie, “*L’Une chante, l’autre pas*: Music, Movement and the Utopian Community”

Hannah Mowat, “*Lara Croft dans un champ de patates*: A Ludomusicological Approach to Agnès Varda”

Mark Lee, “Reviewing Varda’s *Le Bonheur* (1964): Accident? Suicide? Or the Natural Order? That is the Question”

Catherine Dousteysier-Khoze, "Mise en abyme, Irony and Visual Cliché in Agnès Varda's *Le Bonheur* (1964)"

Isabelle McNeill, "Ways of Seeing in Agnès Varda's *Les Dites Cariatides* (1984)"

Fiona Handyside, "La mer, la mer, toujours recommencée: A Centrifugal Reading of the Beach in the Work of Agnès Varda".

Shirley Jordan, "Still Varda: Photographs and Photography in Agnès Varda's Late Work"

Gill Perry, "Les Cabanes d'Agnès"

Marie-Claire Barnet, "Out of sites: Art Matters, Contemporary Activism, and Public Encounters with Agnès Varda"

Corinne Marchand, "Appendix 1: Cléo's 50th Birthday: Questions-Answers"

Agnès Varda, "Appendix 2: Agnès Varda's Interview: Verbal Ping-Pong and Matching Points"

NOTES

[1] Claudia Gorbman, "Places and Play in Agnès Varda's Cinécriture," Public Broadcasting Service, June 23, 2010, <http://www.pbs.org/pov/beachesofagnes/places-and-play/> (accessed February 8, 2018).

[2] Marie-Claire Barnet and Shirley Ann Jordan, "Introduction," in Marie-Claire Barnet and Shirley Ann Jordan, eds., "Watch this Space: Women's Conceptualisations of Space in Contemporary French Film and Visual Art," *L'Esprit Créateur* 51.1 (2011): 1-11, p. 9.

[3] Delphine Bénézet, *The Cinema of Agnès Varda: Resistance and Eclecticism* (New York: Wallflower Press, 2014); Rebecca DeRoo, *Agnès Varda, between Film, Photography, and Art* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017); Antoine Fiant, Roxane Hamery, and Eric Thouvenel, eds., *Agnès Varda: Le cinéma et au-delà* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2009); Alison Smith, *Agnès Varda* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998).

[4] Rebecca DeRoo, "Unhappily Ever After: Visual Irony and Feminist Strategy in Agnès Varda's *Le Bonheur*," *Studies in French Cinema* 8.2 (2008): 189-209, p. 189.

[5] Fiona Handyside, *Cinema at the Shore: The Beach in French Film* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2014).

[6] Valerie Orpen, *Cléo de 5 à 7* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2007).

[7] In a 2006 essay comparing Cléo with Cédric Klapisch's Chloé in his 1996 film *Chacun cherche son chat*, I highlight the *femme-enfant* aspect of both heroines. Dervila Cooke, "Cléo and Chloé on the Margins of Parisian Flânerie: Questions of Self and Other in *Cléo de 5 à 7* and *Chacun cherche son chat*," *Irish Journal of French Studies* 6 (2006): 67-85.

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