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Agnès Varda's Late Style: Autobiography and Melancholy of Ageing

Abstract: This article examines the distinctive trajectory of late-career creativity in Agnès Varda's films, situating her final works within a broader inquiry into ageing, autobiography, and self-reflexivity in the French New Wave generation. Departing from canonical models of "old age style" characterized by serenity and mastery, Varda forged a unique, ironic mode of "gay melancholy" over her final two decades. Through a close analysis of key works—*The Gleaners and I* (2000), *The Beaches of Agnès* (2008), *Faces Places* (2017), and *Varda by Agnès* (2019)—the article argues that Varda developed an innovative grammar of ageing, an allegorical and autobiographical aesthetic that formally inscribes the experience of time. Central to this is her methodology of "gleaning," a practice that fuses the salvaging of marginal objects and images with the recycling of her own filmic and personal past. Utilizing digital intimacy and digressive narrative, Varda transforms the melancholic gaze into a generative practice, balancing mourning and vitality, absence and presence. Through gestures of collecting, reusing, and reanimating fragments—whether objects, film clips, or memories—she creates a cinematic practice that unites the ageing body with the image, and everyday life with artistic form. Her work thus offers a sovereign, provisional model of late creativity, one that personally inhabits history and transforms autobiography into a cinematic form. This model stands in contrast to the more impersonal and cinema-historical late projects of a peer like Jean-Luc Godard, highlighting Varda's distinctive contribution: a dynamic interplay of allegory, self-reflection, and a gleaning aesthetic that resists narratives of decline, opening instead a creative season in late career aesthetic.

Keywords: Agnès Varda, ageing and cinema, French New Wave, autobiography, gay melancholy, allegory.

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EKPHRASIS, 2/2025

Age and Ageing
in European and World Cinema(s)
pp. 11–23

DOI: 10.24193/ekphrasis.34.2
Published First Online: December 30, 2025

Introduction

Regarding the artistic career, old age is often associated with a certain maturity and mastery of style. As Henri Agel discusses, the artistic trajectories of legendary directors such as Buñuel, Renoir, Lang, Ford, and Chaplin, suggest a distinct phase of creative evolution in their later years. Their late work embodies a posture of detachment, moving away from the intense, often turbulent explorations that characterized their younger days toward a more contemplative and pacified worldview. As Agel writes, "Perhaps it is the same with great filmmakers as with great painters, great musicians—and naturally great poets like Hugo, who have expressed this accord and reconciliation. This does not mean that one must wait for old age to adhere to the totality of creation, nor that old age is necessarily a source of serenity" (Agel, EPUB 260). The case has been quite different for New Wave filmmakers, given their historical point of departure, the technological and historical developments of cinema, and the unfolding of their own personal trajectories. The New Wave generation experienced what Godard calls "the exhilaration of the possible" (Godard). In retrospect, they arrived at a moment that was neither too late nor too early. In other words, the historical and temporal specificity, combined with the fact that they were cinephiles before becoming filmmakers, endowed them with a unique possibility: not only to make films but also, as children of cinema, to conceive of cinema as a whole—to think something like the history of cinema. This whole is not to be understood as a synthesis or a container encompassing all details, but rather as something that exists beyond and prior to individual films: an artistic entity that cannot be reduced to a mere collection of movies or to the simple sum of the films produced within it. Consequently, as Deleuze puts it, the New Wave "broke with the form of the true to replace it by the powers of life" (Deleuze 135), and in their work, cinema became intertwined with life in two primary ways. On the one hand, it merged with life in the autobiographical and deeply personal films of many New Wave and, especially, post-New Wave filmmakers. On the other hand, this interplay manifested in the work of those who reflected on the history of cinema or on cinema's capacity for self-reflection. Among these figures, Godard—who was the most deeply engaged with this question—brought this trajectory to its culmination with his *Histoire(s) du cinéma* project. Cinema was no longer merely about making films; it was simultaneously about thinking cinema and pushing the limits of what could be understood as cinema. In this sense, it became an ongoing response to André Bazin's fundamental and perpetually renewed question: *What is cinema?*

In his book *Le cinéma français-Une cartographie* (2023), Vincent Amiel offers an overall view of the landscape of personal autofiction, or first-person cinema, in the history of French cinema. He traces this tendency back to figures such as Renoir and Guitry; it was later taken up by New Wave filmmakers and fully developed with the advent of digital cameras. Amiel writes: "The advent of what was once called 'small cameras' in the 1990s, followed by the all-

digital revolution a decade later, would exponentially increase these effects. This allowed for a physical appropriation of the technology, a flexibility in shooting, and an attention to the moment which had previously been lacking, at least in part, for such projects" (Amiel 94; my translation). Amiel describes this tendency in French cinema as what he calls the "moralist tradition" (Amiel 97). It is significant that two of the filmmakers he names from the 1990s were directly or indirectly connected to the New Wave, namely Agnès Varda and Alain Cavalier. Having been part of the New Wave at a younger age while later experimenting, in the 1990s, with new technological possibilities, these filmmakers occupy a historically distinctive position within the history of cinema. Varda's case is particularly distinctive and differs, for example, from that of her contemporary Alain Cavalier. Whereas Cavalier turned toward diary films, Varda set out to construct a complex synthesis that brings together an autobiography of ageing, documentary, visual arts, photography, and other forms.

Varda, like many New Wave figures, seeks her own past not primarily in the lived experiences of her childhood and adolescence but within the history of cinema itself. However, unlike many others—especially Godard, Truffaut, and, to some extent, Chris Marker—she does not search for this past within the history of cinema at large, but rather within the history of her own films. This gesture serves to foreground both the autobiographical dimension of her cinema and the cinematic dimension of her life. Referring to the real, documentary, and spontaneous moments that punctuate Varda's films, as well as the pervasive sense of time running out that marks her late career, Susannah Gruder writes: "Varda's cinema is full of small moments like these, moments that she doesn't want to see vanish with the changing tides. It's hard to admit, yet there is a sense of anxiety in her final film, the same one that appeared in *The Beaches of Agnès*. That film, she says here, arose out of a 'panic' at age 80, and an urge to tell her life story" (Gruder). This article examines how Varda realized this project in her late career, beginning with *The Gleaners and I* (2000). It focuses on the implications of works that fuse an ageing filmmaker's autobiography with a broader vision of the world.

The Leftover and the Bygone

In the self-reflexive documentary, *The Gleaners and I,* Varda travels through rural and urban France to encounter people who "glean"—gathering left-over crops, discarded produce or objects—and she parallels their practice with her own process of filmmaking. She deploys a handheld digital camera, captures incidental and chance footage, and emphasizes her presence/absence as both observer and participant. The film thus becomes a meditation on waste, reuse, art, ageing and socio-economic margins. As a follow-up to the latter, *The Gleaners and I: Two Years Later* (2002), revisits some of the same people and themes two years on. It continues Varda's interest in the gleaning metaphor and in her own role as gleaner

of images and lives, deepening the reflection on what is retrieved, what remains, and how the off-screen space—the after-image, the leftover existence of people or objects—figures in her cinema. When Varda turned eighty, she made the autobiographical essay-documentary, *The Beaches of Agnès* (2008), in which she revisits beaches, memories, friendships, past films and places from her life. Through collage, still-images, found objects, footage of her earlier films, mirrors, and her own presence and voice she reflects on her career, on time, on how cinema and life intertwine. The film functions as an exercise in what it means to have an idea about or in cinema, for Varda at a late stage, drawing attention to her self-reflexive signature as a filmmaker. The road-documentary *Faces Places* (2017), co-directed with the street artist JR, sees Varda and JR travelling through villages in France, meeting ordinary people and creating large-scale photographic portraits of them on buildings. The film emphasizes encounter, community, memory, inter-generational collaboration, and the materiality of image and place, as well as Varda's own ageing and her gradual loss of sight which are quietly present. And finally, her last film, *Varda by Agnès* (2019) is a playful auto-documentary in which she appears on stage, watching her own clips, speaking about her work, and reflecting on cinema and her career. It serves as both retrospective and creative manifesto: she returns to her recurring interests (memory, image, materiality, community) and invites the viewer into her process.

These films—which, of course, do not include all of her late works—are the main focus of this article as in each of them two highly significant characteristics for Varda, become especially prominent. Both originate in her first film of this period, *The Gleaners and I*, as they effectively outline the direction her later work would take: the use of the digital camera, whose lightness, personal, and intimate qualities allowed her, as she states, to film her own body and liver spots (Varda 2001), although she rarely used it in her later films, and the notion of gleaning, which initially emerged from a chance encounter but soon evolved into a methodology in her practice. In fact, Varda synthesizes these two elements in order to arrive at a distinctive grammar of narrative and ageing. In other words, as Mireille Rosello notes, she conducts a search "for new visual and narrative grammars of old age" (Rosello 34). The latter is not merely limited to gleaning images of the others and the world, but also, from *The Beaches* onward, picking fragments of her own filmography which account for and make up the autobiographical side of her films. As Kelly Conway writes,

> "Varda used another conceptual tool in planning *The Beaches*: the database. In many interviews, she states that she thought of her entire filmography as a vast database she could use in her autobiographical film. Accordingly, she accesses her 'database' of clips with great liberty and agility to narrate her professional and personal trajectory. Such a conception leads to a heterogeneous, fractured film, edited with careful attention to graphic matches and associative logic." (Conway 118)

As scholars have noted before, Varda's attempt at telling her life story along with presenting excerpts of her filmography with stories behind them is not only an act of summing up one's career and a retrospective on them out of the urge of the old age and the proximity of the end, but has another side to it which, in Rebecca Deroo's words, is an act of expanding her cinematic view by conflating her career and life. As she writes: "In *The Beaches*, she presents a range of personal materials and work that had not been widely known to that point, while she simultaneously deploys qualities pejoratively associated with old age (such as nostalgia and forgetfulness) to destabilize the documentary. I believe that Varda asserts control over her legacy with her latest work" (Deroo 16). Varda invents a formal strategy, that of recycling, to unify the ageing body and matter with more abstract entities of ideas, memories, feelings, films, and souvenirs. She figuratively superimposes the ageing, imperfect body—her own—on imperfect fruits and vegetables so that the content of the image becomes the technique itself, a method for remaking value from what culture discards. The practice of gleaning in *The Gleaners and I* and the months-long cultivation of sprouting potatoes for her installation *Patatutopia* (2003) are two sides of the same aesthetic: both salvage and reanimate leftover matter, and both operate as a recycling of objects, memories and filmic fragments. By foregrounding a "wrinkled and ageing yet still curious and capable Varda," the films compel us "to look again at what we tend to reject and reconsider its value" (Conway 79). At the level of production this is literal—Varda explains how she "put them in [her] cellar... and, starting in March, [she] was able to see the result of nature and germination," because the work was "an organic, not intellectual" engagement with time. Germination here acts as metaphor and method: it "reconnects us to old, rotten, useless, inedible things," and in that reconnection Varda recycles not only potatoes but also bygone lives, discarded footage and remembered scenes into a renewed cinematic aesthetic and economy of attention and care (Conway 93–94).

In fact, Varda creates a kind of fusion between the two. This fusion is most clearly embodied in the scene from *The Gleaners and I* where a gleaner discovers a heart-shaped potato, and Varda instantly reacts with delight and reaches for it, eager to claim this curious object. This heart-shaped potato is both a food item and an image—a piece of edible matter that takes the form of a heart. It allows Varda to combine the two: art as something edible, and food as a form of art. It is at once a separation and a merging, a dissolving of one into the other. In Rosello's words

> "The increasingly gloomy atmosphere of the scenes filmed around the heap of potatoes is temporarily lifted by an episode where Varda takes over as gleaner, becomes 'la glaneuse', and invites the spectator to share the luxurious pleasure of gleaning images and visions rather than food. It is an interesting moment of discontinuity where the parallel between the director's artistic work and the gleaners' labour is explored." (Rosello 31)

Rosello underscores precisely this fusion Varda stages: the overlap between gleaned food and gleaned images, between survival and aesthetics.

Mirrors of Melancholy

Autobiographical gesture entails a self-regarding gaze, a reflection of one's own image. In Varda's work, this manifests both in the intimate self-portraits she records using a small digital camera and in the recurring images of reflective surfaces—mirrors (literally) and seas (figuratively)—that proliferate across her films. The mirror becomes a key figure in her cinema: in the opening sequence of *The Beaches of Agnès*, for example, she films members of the crew reflected in a mirror and then directly with the camera, staging self-reflection as both a visual and relational act. Similarly, the enlarged photographs in *Faces Places*, pasted on the houses and workplaces of ordinary people, point to the importance of self-reconsideration and visibility, a gesture that resonates with Baudelaire's notion of the mirror and its melancholic associations, as well as his idea of the sea as the reflection of the soul. On the importance of mirror in the iconological tradition of melancholy, Jean Starobinski writes:

> "That the mirror was a requisite accessory of coquetry and an emblem of truth should not lead us to believe that it is any less adequately employed when placed before the eyes of the melancholic. From this multivalence results a reinforced motivation. Coquetry, in the mirror of truth, is frivolity, a perishable reflection. And there is no melancholy more 'profound' than that which arises, facing the mirror, before the evidence of precarity, the lack of depth, and the irredeemable Vanity." (Starobinski 21; my translation)

Yet, the commonplace idea that in old age the past outweighs the future—that memories exceed expectations—becomes somewhat problematic in Varda's work. Moreover, in *The Gleaners and I*, Varda explicitly evokes the role of the mirrors in the work of great painters—Rembrandt in particular—as a tool for self-portraiture. She resists this idea of melancholy even as she repeatedly performs it. Her continual return to her earlier films, the revisiting of her life with Jacques Demy (her late husband) and his subsequent death, interviews with her children in the present, and the re-use of images of them as children or adolescents (shot either by herself, Demy, or others) all point to, as Starobinski observes, a compressed coexistence of fragments of discontinuous and out-of-sync temporality common in melancholic perception (61–64). It is well-known that according to the four temperament doctrine (at least in the new doctrine relied upon by Albrecht Dürer), old age is associated with the melancholic temper and with winter in terms of the seasons of life and temporal

categorization (Klibansky, Panofsky, and Saxl 279–281). However, this is not precisely the case with Varda, who stands at a considerable distance from the concerns expressed by, for instance, Baudelaire in his well-known poem *Man and the Sea*, particularly regarding mirrors and the reflection of the soul. As he writes:

> *Free man! the sea is to thee ever dear!*
> *The sea is thy mirror, thou regardest thy soul*
> *In its mighteous waves that unendingly roll,*
> *And thy spirit is yet not a chasm less drear.* (Scott 17)

In fact, Varda approaches self-reflection with a markedly playful and ironic sensibility, particularly in her depiction of her famous beaches and the sea. She treats the beaches as a kind of playground—much like children—but employs entirely different, inventive means to do so. Although mourning the death of Demy is one of the motifs that Varda sporadically is caught up in throughout her late career films and is reflected particularly in her exhibition and documentary *Some Widows of Noirmoutier* (2006), the grief associated with that experience of loss is not an act of self-punishing and decline as described in melancholic experiences. As Deroo notes,

> "For Varda, however, this integration of the deceased into the widows' identity is a sign not of pathology but of transformation. Grief is not a condition that we either hold on to or let go of; rather, grief inhabits and transforms the subject. In this way, Varda participates in a broader, feminist rethinking of mourning and melancholy. Whereas Freud's essay associated melancholy with a self-punishing inability to mourn properly, Varda recasts melancholy as a more common (and not dysfunctional) condition, an experience that, while painful, can produce strength and new life." (Deroo 128)

In this light, one can talk about a certain type of melancholy in her work as ironic or even gay melancholy. The recurring image of Varda confronting her own ageing body and face—whether through the intimate, autobiographical act of filming herself or through actual mirrors that appear throughout her films—invokes a long history of the mirror as a site of self-reflection and self-scrutiny. In particular, it resonates with Francisco de Goya's etching *Hasta la muerte* (1799), in which an elderly woman admires herself in a mirror while young women around her mock her gesture, as well as his drawing *The Old Woman with a Mirror* (1825–1828), which similarly stages an ageing body engaged in a solitary contemplation of its own image. These works emphasize an uneasy tension between self and self-reflection, body and image, and between desire and decline. This tension is amplified by Baudelaire's evocation of Goya's art, described by Starobinski as "a 'nightmare full of unknown things' —and among these, 'old women at the mirror.' A scene of macabre coquetry, betrayed by

an indiscreet gaze" (Starobinski 82). And yet, whereas Goya and Baudelaire emphasize the grotesque or tragic aspects of such reflection, Varda turns the mirror into a site of ironic melancholy. The pleasures she seeks in the melancholic gaze in the mirror, looking through the scattered fragments of films and memories, and self-reflection of an ageing body is not far from what Walter Benjamin describes as allegory. As he writes: "The only pleasure the melancholic permits himself, and it is a powerful one, is allegory" (Benjamin 185). In the context of representation, allegory functions as a structure of doubling, where meaning is both multiplied and displaced. As Starobinski observes,

> "Allegory, in Baudelaire's use of it, manifests itself in a double manner. On the one hand, it consists (to put it briefly) of the possibility of attributing a 'spiritual' meaning to an ordinary, everyday scene, to an apparently banal encounter in its contingent literalness; on the other hand, following the inverse path, it confers upon 'abstract' entities a materialized, incarnated, quasi-visible figure." (Starobinski 73–4)

This dual movement, oscillating between the spiritualization of the concrete and the incarnation of the abstract, suggests that allegory sustains itself through the tension between presence and absence, expression and withdrawal. Richard Stamelman develops this dialectical character further, describing allegory as "the trope of death, the language of fragmentation, decay, and erosion that death speaks or writes," in which "an absent and unrecoverable meaning is joined to an excessive and overdetermined language." More importantly, he argues that allegory is defined by its fundamental inability to resolve contradiction. Unlike the symbol, which strives for a unified whole, allegory maintains a state of irresolution, holding opposing forces in a perpetual tension. It is, as Stamelman writes "compelled to present contraries in the full force of their dialectic reality" (Stamelman 392–3). Allegory, then, is not a reconciliatory or synthetic form but a site where contrary meanings, figures, and images appear only through their own deferral and incompletion. Varda's play with mirrors on the beach offers a striking instance of allegorical melancholy. It evokes a double vision —at once a superabundance of images and reflections, and a sense of their absence. By filling the empty beach with mirrors, she resists its void through an act of visual multiplication, transforming lack into reflection. This gesture mirrors the broader structure of *The Beaches of Agnès*, where the profusion of film excerpts and cinematic memories contrasts with the scarcity of childhood recollections she evokes at the beginning of the film. The heart-shaped potatoes are another embodiment of allegory in her work, where a banal, everyday object suddenly acquires a spiritual meaning. A similar gesture appears in *The Gleaners and I*, when Varda playfully encircles the large trucks on the road with one hand while filming them with the other. The idea that allegory cannot totalize but instead preserves opposing forces in their full intensity finds a vivid expression in Varda's gay melancholy. Her films often sustain this tension—between the delight of holding a digital camera and the sorrow of confronting the

lost time and lives (Demy and other friends). It also appears in the figurative juxtaposition of nineteenth-century paintings with digital cameras, both in *The Gleaners and I* and *The Beaches of Agnès*, and the instant printing of large photographs in *Faces Places*. The same logic is condensed into a single image in *The Gleaners and I*, where the figure of a gleaner carrying a bundle of wheat on her shoulder, played by Varda herself, transforms into that of a filmmaker carrying a small digital camera.

Varda's ironic melancholy arises from this coexistence of contradictions—a life that is both lost and still being lived. Her later works turn this tension into a cinematic gesture, as her own body becomes both a site of mourning and of vitality. As Jenny Chamarette observes, "At times this body – her body – aligns itself with a life now over: the life of Jacques Demy [...] At other moments in these films, the presence of Varda's body and its movements commemorate and celebrate a life not yet over, one which may both be cinematically and self-reflexively replayed and reformulated in the lived world: her own life" (Chamarette 34). Varda thus transforms mourning into a living practice, the melancholy into irony, where remembrance and renewal, absence and presence, coexist in a delicate balance. Conway sees Demy's death and Varda's widowhood as inseparable from the experimental drive of her late work. As she writes, "Even her later installation work, such as *Les Veuves de Noirmoutier* (*The Widows of Noirmoutier*, 2005) and her autobiographical documentary *The Beaches of Agnès*, resonate with identification in shared loss and isolation" (Conway 72). Varda herself repeatedly returns to the experience of widowhood and the death of Jacques Demy with a striking poignancy. In *The Beaches of Agnès*, she recalls with regret that, after their reunion in the late 1980s, they had planned to grow old together. The figure of widow, as Stamelman interprets it in Baudelaire, is "a peripatetic sign, a poem in motion, for she expresses in the form of her person and her dress what the poet seeks to reveal about loss in and through the form of his words: namely, that it is a memory occurring within a world beset by forgetfulness; that it is a past resurrected within the narrow limits of an obliterating, uncaring present" (Stamelman 395). Varda's own presence in her films may be seen as this very figure of a poem in motion—an allegory par excellence embodying two contrary forces: the cinematic enactment of mourning a loss that persists in life, carrying the memory of what is irretrievably gone.

Allegorical Narratives

Varda, in fact, invented a distinctive form of narrative to produce this melancholic fusion. In *The Gleaners and I*, for example, there is a clear overarching line concerning the film's subject, accompanied by numerous side stories that emerge from encounters along the way. The narrative does not follow a strict cause-and-effect logic; rather, it unfolds through

chance and encounter. For instance, a winemaker unexpectedly becomes a psychoanalytic theorist, a farmer leads the film toward Edward Muybridge and his experiments with moving images due to family connections, and encountering a heart-shaped potato brings Varda, through the word "heart" (*Cœur* in French), into contact with a charity restaurant, *Restos du Cœur*, shifting the narrative in a new direction. The roads that link most of the chapters emphasize this element of serendipity. In both this film and, more specifically, in *The Beaches of Agnès*, everything Varda encounters has a dual dimension: an actual one and a virtual one, the memories or associations that these objects, words, or images evoke. In this way, a double movement runs through the narrative, giving it the qualities of an allegorical narrative, where each encounter sets further events in train. As Stamelman explains, "Allegorical signs are fragments of a lost wholeness. Abandoned like derelict ships, they wander on uncharted seas, always in movement, always in search of an elusive, easily effaced meaning. The allegorical process of signification is arbitrary and plural. 'Any person, any object, any relationship,' writes Benjamin, 'can mean absolutely anything else'" (Stamelman 400). Beyond the fact that Varda's actual home, where she lived with Demy, plays a central role in her later films and to which she occasionally returns, the narratives of her films also follow a comparable pattern. After extended detours from the main narrative—which at times feel like digressions—the films always manage to return to the original line, much like Varda herself, who repeatedly returns to her home. In her analysis of Varda's narratives, Conway distinguishes between her early documentaries and later fiction films such as *One Sings, the Other Doesn't* (1977) and *Vagabond* (1985), describing the former as resembling travelogues and the latter as road films. As she observes,

> "Her films from the past decade, *The Gleaners and I*, *The Beaches*, and *Agnès Varda Here and There* are structured explicitly around Varda's travels and the fortuitous encounters they engendered. Regardless of whether Varda draws upon the travelogue or the road film, her films continue to emphasize the specificity of 'place' and to introduce an array of intriguing and often marginalized people." (Conway 109)

The allegorical function of narrative allows Varda to leave her home—or the main line of her narratives—and wander through digressive routes and topics, only to return home in the end. In this sense, she fuses two principal figures in the history of art and representation: Abraham and Achilles. Like Abraham, she leaves home to wander through the world; yet, like Achilles, she always manages to find her way back. This tension between home and elsewhere, self and others, departure and arrival is made explicit in the opening scene of *The Beaches of Agnès*, where she appears walking on a beach toward the camera and says: "I'm playing the role of a little old lady, pleasantly plump and talkative, telling her life story. And yet it's others I'm interested in, others I like to film. Others who intrigue me, motivate me,

make me ask questions, disconcert me, fascinate me." These are the two lines of force that structure Varda's narratives: both an autobiography and a documentary on other people; at once a circle and a line, which together form a spiral—one that allows her to revisit people, objects, memories, and places again and again, but each time on a different level.

Although many scholars have rightly noted Varda's resistance to established cinematic values associated with female beauty, and her questioning of "both the cultural definition of female beauty and the cultural imperative that makes beauty mandatory in our representational universe" (Rosello 34), the films discussed here are not only about old age and its vital resistance against social exclusion, but, more importantly, are films made in old age, which succeed in inscribing the experience of living in that period into the very aesthetic, narrative, and structure of the works. Deroo identifies four strategies through which Varda shapes this aesthetic: emphasizing subjective memory and rejecting traditional notions of objectivity, withholding the overarching framework typical of documentary films, and adopting a present-tense perspective in place of the complete chronological histories conventionally narrated in these films. As she writes: "Varda illustrates the fraught project of trying to create a historical reconstruction of one's life, by emphasizing the uncertainty of her memory and her increasing forgetfulness. She captures the uncertainty of memory visually" (Deroo 145). It is in this sense—amid old age, the proximity of death, the inevitability of remembrance, the growing forgetfulness, and the urge to recount one's life—that one can speak of an ironic melancholy, one that could be called a second youth, or, as Rosello puts it, a new season of life. She writes: "In *Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse* she invents a season, a moment that we could call 'the season of gleaning' and which establishes a powerful – albeit untold connection, between death and gleaning. [...] *Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse* is a film about a season that does not exist, an after-season" (Rosello 35–6). Varda shows that ironic melancholy opens an additional, though provisional, time and space in which one attains a kind of freedom—to establish new forms that are neither a resistance to death, a mourning of lost time, nor a summing up of past works and memories. It is more like playing a serious game with words, evocations, things, and images, as if, momentarily, there were a possibility of overcoming death and reliving the past, even though memories persist and occasionally compel forms and narratives to confront the actuality and gravity of situations. Deleuze and Guattari describe this as a sovereign freedom, writing: "There are times when old age produces not eternal youth but a sovereign freedom, a pure necessity in which one enjoys a moment of grace between life and death, and in which all the parts of the machine come together to send into the future a feature that cuts across all ages: Titian, Turner, Monet." (Deleuze and Guattari 1–2)

Near the end of *Faces Places*, Varda and JR set out to visit Jean-Luc Godard at his home in Rohn, Switzerland. To their surprise, Godard doesn't open the door—or perhaps he is not at home—but has left a small note for Varda written on the glass of the entrance. The note

refers both to a place where they once spent time with Jacques Demy and to a film title by Varda herself. This playful gesture moves Varda so deeply that she bursts into tears, creating a moment of profound poignancy. The scene encapsulates the contrasting approaches of the two New Wave filmmakers to personal and collective history. Godard, whose unique vision is built from words and images, evokes the past through montage, superimposes two events, two names, and two memories as he often does in *Histoires du cinéma*. Varda, whose work revolves around revisiting faces, places, things, and souvenirs, experiences this indirect recall as piercing, since her late films insist on a direct, lived engagement with memory. Godard situates his own films within a larger history of cinema, at times as a moment within that history (as in *Histoires du cinema*) and at others as a capsule containing it (as in his film, *New Wave* [1990]), while Varda does not directly engage with the history of cinema; instead, she envisions a personal history that emerges from the New Wave and the people around it, absorbing that collective history into her own intimate narrative: an autobiographical incarnation and evocation of history. In any case, this exchange between the two filmmakers crystallizes the interplay between memory and cinema: Godard archives history, while Varda inhabits it, reminding us that cinema is a home as much as it is what retains *Histoires*.

Conclusion

Varda's late films demonstrate how ageing can become not a limit but a generative framework for artistic reinvention. By integrating the lightness of digital tools, the practice of gleaning, and an allegorical mode grounded in everyday objects and reflective surfaces, she transforms autobiography into an open-ended dialogue with cinema itself. Her work departs from traditional associations between old age and serenity, decline, or purely retrospective summation; instead, it reveals an aesthetics of recycling and renewal in which images, memories, and bodies are continually reconfigured. Through her ironic melancholy, her playful self-reflections, and her commitment to salvaging what is overlooked, Varda expands both her own cinematic legacy and the possibilities of first-person filmmaking. Ultimately, her late style offers a model of how the ageing artist can reimagine the relation between life and cinema—turning the remnants of experience into a fertile ground for new ways of seeing, remembering, and creating.

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