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Introduction: Future Varda

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Future Varda

A special issue of *Camera Obscura*

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Introduction

Homay King and Rebecca J. DeRoo

Agnès Varda achieved success with award-winning films spanning a directorial career of more than six decades; in the last years of her life she became a major public figure in the global press and on social media. Retrospectives following her death in March 2019 have further sparked interest and acclaim across generations. Her final film, *Varda by Agnès (Varda par Agnès, France, 2019)*, continues to be screened globally. Varda has attracted important scholarly and critical attention for not only her prolific cinematic career but also for her work across visual media, from photography to installation art. Moreover, people view her as someone who surmounted obstacles—creating her own production company and making work largely outside the mainstream industry—and who also confronted those obstacles on behalf of others, participating in women’s demonstrations and public activism into the final years of her life. Now is a moment when everyone is discovering or looking anew at Varda.

We contend that this is also the time to look at what is most extreme, innovative, and challenging in Varda’s work, at what speaks to the future. Building on generations of important scholarship about Varda and her work, we continue the dialogue across disciplines and focus on some key areas of Varda’s corpus. As well as appreciating underconsidered parts of her oeuvre, “Future Varda” offers a reflection on the living issues her work illuminates. Our aim is not to offer a comprehensive survey, or a final word. Rather, we pursue concerns her work raises that

challenge us now and that are relevant for the future of feminism, film and media studies, and Varda's own legacy. Varda was engaged with these issues of feminist filmmaking until the last. We believe it is especially fitting to do so in *Camera Obscura*, with its history of commitment to these concerns and early attention to Varda's oeuvre.¹

The articles in this special issue trace diverse strands in Varda's work that we identify as central to understanding her feminist vision for the future: her work across artistic media; her radical portraiture and self-portraiture that rethinks the relation of self and world; her taboo-breaking examination of maternity and eroticism; her symbolic engagement with politics and historical trauma; her development of her own production company, Ciné-Tamaris; her recent political activism at Cannes and importance to contemporary feminism; and her innovative marketing bridging international film festivals and social media. We have organized this issue into two sections, using terms that, as she states in *Varda by Agnès*, served as Varda's own guiding principles: *inspiration/creation* and *partage* (sharing).

Inspiration, Creation

In "Floating Roots: Agnès Varda's *Uncle Yanco*," Hoday King traces one source of Agnès Varda's artistic inspiration to Jean "Yanco" Varda, the subject of her 1967 short film *Uncle Yanco*. Jean Varda was a peripatetic artist who lived on a houseboat and was part of a bohemian circle that included Henry Miller, Anaïs Nin, Alan Watts, and other luminaries of the San

¹ Agnès Varda is mentioned in *Camera Obscura*'s inaugural issue in 1976, in an interview with Yvonne Rainer conducted by Janet Bergstrom and signed by the editorial collective. "Yvonne Rainer: Interview," *Camera Obscura*, no. 1 (1976): 96. In a piece describing the journal's beginnings, the collective mentions a Varda retrospective at the Pacific Film Archive as a key factor that prompted the formation of the Camera Obscura collective in December 1974. "Chronology: *The Camera Obscura Collective*," *Camera Obscura*, nos. 3–4 (1979): 6.

Francisco counterculture. Both Vardas were gleaners and artists. King argues that both saw the imagination as a place where matter and spirit were reconciled. The article builds on previous work about Varda's *The Gleaners and I* (*Les glaneurs et la glaneuse*, France, 2000), exploring Varda's materialist feminism and her use of earthly and tactile materials. "Floating Roots" focuses not only on matter but also on the imagination and the intangible images, colors, and forms that are prominent in her oeuvre, arguing that Yanco served as a muse to his niece.

Emma Wilson turns to another less studied film from earlier in Varda's career, *Kung-fu Master!* (*Le petit amour*, France, 1988). She draws on the work of Adriana Cavarero to analyze the feminist ethics of Varda's taboo-breaking representation of maternal eroticism, which has been long understudied in Varda's corpus. In "Agnès Varda, Jane Birkin, and *Kung-fu Master!*," Wilson analyzes how the film arose from Varda's collaboration with actress Jane Birkin and starred both Birkin's and Varda's children. She eloquently illuminates how Varda uses a fairytale motif to depict a complex story of a relationship between a teenage boy and an adult mother, framing the film as part of Varda's larger investigations of the imaginative and emotional worlds of women and children.

In "She Listened: Vardian Self-Portraiture and Autorefrains of Sea, Wind, and Sand," Nadine Boljkovac examines (self-)portraiture in *The Beaches of Agnès* (*Les plages d'Agnès*, France, 2008), *Agnès Varda: From Here to There* (*Agnès de ci de là Varda*, France, 2011), and *Faces, Places* (*Visages, Villages*, France, 2017)—and the process of intertwining the individual and the world, the detail and the environment, the visual and sensual. These intertwining take shape in the recurring motifs of sand, sea, and wind in *The Beaches of Agnès*, as well as in Varda's late films and installations in general. Boljkovac helpfully turns to the audio register of Varda's work to explore these refrains.

A number of articles in “Future Varda” address important yet previously underexplored feminist ethics in Varda’s films and artwork, as well as in her public actions, models for engaged filmmakers today and going forward. In “Passion, Commitment, Compassion: *Les Justes au Panthéon* by Agnès Varda,” Sandy Flitterman-Lewis carefully documents and insightfully analyzes Varda’s 2007 multimedia installation *Les Justes*, honoring the “Righteous,” individuals who protected Jewish children during World War II. She analyzes how Varda moves between cinematic reconstruction and physical photographs, immortalizing the ephemeral. By addressing the Occupation as a woman artist in the French monument the Pantheon, where so few women have been honored, Varda also opens questions of national reflection on gender and historical commemoration.

Partage

Varda was not only a brilliant creator but also a shrewd businesswoman who made most of her work outside the mainstream film industry. In “Varda as Producer,” Kelley Conway analyzes Varda as both artist and entrepreneur who found creative ways to make, finance, and later restore her films. From forming a cooperative of artists and technicians to make her first film, *La Pointe Courte* (France, 1995), to founding the production company Tamaris Films, which would come to be Ciné-Tamaris, Varda created films prolifically with limited resources. Drawing on material from the Ciné-Tamaris archive and conducting new interviews with producers at Ciné-Tamaris, Conway expands our knowledge of how Varda ran her company.

Varda’s work in production and distribution is in many ways inseparable from her feminist politics. In “Agnès Varda and Le Collectif 50/50 en 2020: Power and Protest at the Cannes Film Festival,” Rebecca J. DeRoo provides a new analysis of Varda’s late career activism. Weaving together recent documents, including an interview with Varda, DeRoo shows

how Varda used honorary award speeches at the Cannes festival and then joined with the feminist collective 50/50 en 2020 to suggest that retrospective tributes obscure the career obstacles she encountered and the underrepresentation of women directors at Cannes more broadly. DeRoo shows that Varda was willing to use her platform to advocate for others; together with 50/50 en 2020, Varda made broader calls for parity and equity in the festival and film industry.

In “From Cannes to Cardboard: The Circulation and Promotion of *Faces, Places* and the Auteur on Instagram,” Matt St. John offers original research on Varda’s strategies for presenting and publicizing her film *Faces, Places*, leading up to its Oscar nomination for best documentary and other awards. Varda screened the film at film festivals, fundraised with the crowd-sourcing platform KissKissBankBank, and publicized on Instagram. He presents this publicity as a twenty-first-century extension of Varda’s filmmaking practice, which combines her own presence on the screen, her characteristic humor, and details of her working process. *Faces, Places* also reflects on its own making, beginning with the meeting of the two artists and portraying their adventures traveling across France to interview locals and create photographic murals. St. John shows how Varda continually adapted her creative strategies to new media technologies and platforms, up to the end of her career.

Varda was an artist with many lives, as she put it, working in and across film, video, photography, and installation art. Such crossovers among media are common in contemporary art and filmmaking, though Varda began doing so in the 1950s. Although she documented much of her work across visual media herself, for many years this documentation was inaccessible, fragmentary, or overlooked. Dominique Bluher, who has curated exhibitions of Varda’s work, illuminates what Varda termed her “third life,” or move to create multimedia art in the twenty-

first century at age seventy-five. Blucher draws important connections between Varda's cinema and artwork: "Her movies were already invitations to posing questions; her photographic and videographic installations further these invitations to a voyage of personal reflections, emotional responses, or active reveries." Blucher examines these exhibitions as personal and emotional, both for the creator and for the spectators who experience the installations' multimodal means of address in a range of physical spaces.

"Future Varda" concludes with two short "In Practice" pieces, the first of which continues the work of attending to Varda's archival documentation of her practice across media. In "Agnès Varda: Photography and Early Creative Process," Rebecca J. DeRoo brings to light primary sources from Varda's archives to explore how she used photography to develop her first film, *La Pointe Courte*, and her 1958 short film *L'Opéra Mouffe*. Photography, DeRoo demonstrates, provided a creative way of drawing on her training and work as a photographer and was also economically beneficial, when working with minimal budgets. DeRoo's article also challenges long-held myths of Varda as inexperienced at the beginning of her directorial career, showing the extent of Varda's careful use of photography to plan cinematic shots and deliberate aesthetics in her early work, opening avenues for future research and creative work.

The second and final "In Practice" piece looks toward another aspect of the future: virtual presence and remote intimacy. Colleen Kennedy-Karpat co-organized a symposium originally titled "Gender Equality and Sustainability: Agnès Varda's Sustaining Legacy," which was to take place at Bilgi University in Istanbul in March 2020. Due to the coronavirus pandemic, it was retitled "Virtual Varda" and hosted via Zoom teleconference. In "Virtual Varda: Sustainable Legacies, Digital Communities, and Scholarly Postcards," Kennedy-Karpat reflects on the appropriateness of online scholarly presentations to Varda and her work, noting that Varda

herself moved between media, fostered interpersonal and international connections, and created engaged global work. Varda's own example supports the conditions of scholarly work on her oeuvre in the present and helps us generate productive models of future scholarly collaboration.

This journal issue brings together Varda scholars of different generations, building on earlier scholarly insights, analyzing underacknowledged aspects of Varda's work in activism, art, film, and media, and opening avenues for the feminist future she worked to make possible. Varda was a renaissance woman who produced complex creative work within economic arrangements that she herself innovated, who was consistently feminist in her life and work, moving among aesthetic forms and modalities, incorporating new technologies, and reflecting on the poetics and politics of visual art. Here is an incredible example for the present and future, as so many female and feminist directors are working to make inroads. Her range truly is stunning—and it is still being understood.

Rebecca J. DeRoo is associate professor in the School of Communication at the Rochester Institute of Technology. She cocurated the 2016 retrospective *Agnès Varda: (Self-)Portraits Facts and Fiction* at the George Eastman Museum. Her book *Agnès Varda between Film, Photography, and Art* (2018) was a finalist for the Kraszna-Krausz Book Award. This research was supported by grants from the American Association of University Women, the American Philosophical Society, and the National Endowment for the Humanities. Her first book, *The Museum Establishment and Contemporary Art* (0000), {Au: date of publication?} received the Laurence Wylie Prize in French Cultural Studies.

Homay King is professor and Eugenia Chase Guild Chair in the Humanities in the Department of History of Art at Bryn Mawr College, where she cofounded the Program in Film Studies. She is the author of *Virtual Memory: Time-Based Art and the Dream of Digitality* (2015) and *Lost in Translation: Orientalism, Cinema, and the Enigmatic Signifier* (2010). Her work has appeared in *Afterall*, *Discourse*, *Film Quarterly*, *October*, and edited collections, including the exhibition catalog for the Metropolitan Museum of Art's *China: Through the Looking Glass*. She is a member of the *Camera Obscura* editorial collective.