

2007

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## Custom Citation

King, Homay. "Matter, Time, and the Digital: Varda's *The Gleaners and I*." *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 24, no. 5 (2007): 421-429, doi: 10.1080/10509200500536322.

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Homay King, "Matter, Time, and the Digital: Varda's *The Gleaners and I*," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* v. 24, n. 5 (Fall 2007): 421-429.

Matter, Time, and the Digital: Varda's *The Gleaners and I*

Homay King

## 1. Digitality and Matter

Agnès Varda's *The Gleaners and I* (2000) introduces us to all manner of people who gather the world's leftovers for reasons of survival, ethics, or simply pleasure. We meet homeless laborers, a chef who collects his own herbs, artists who sculpt from salvaged materials, a literacy instructor who lives off discarded produce at the outdoor market. Varda's subjects pick and collect a treasure-trove of under-utilized objects: unharvested wheat and figs, lost buttons, broken dolls, day-old loaves of bread, refrigerators, and odd-shaped fruit and vegetables. Varda in turn counts herself among these gleaners, but what she collects are images, not things, using her digital camera as receptacle.

*The Gleaners and I* is a digital film about salvaging: a film in an ultra contemporary format that is concerned with the expired and out of date. This is the first of many paradoxes the film embodies. For *The Gleaners and I* is also a profoundly materialist film, that is, a film about the conservation of tangible resources — yet it is made in the least material of available image formats, digital video. D. N. Rodowick has noted that the digital arts have come to be associated with the "abstract," the "ephemeral," and the "desubstantialized" (Rodowick, 212). Lev Manovich likewise lists "numerical representation" and "mathematical manipulability" as the primary defining elements of new media (Manovich, 28). Rodowick has also rightfully suggested that the digital arts are

the most radical instance yet of an old Cartesian dream: [that] the best representations are the most immaterial ones, because they seem to free the mind from the body and the world of substance (Rodowick, 39).

Digital images are matter-free in several ways. First, at the level of recording: they lack the photograph's indexical tie to their referents, as celebrated by André Bazin and Roland Barthes. As we know, Bazin says that the photographic image is "a kind of decal or transfer" (Bazin, 14); Roland Barthes says that "the photograph is literally an emanation of the referent" (Barthes, 80). At the level of media storage the two media also differ: digital images are stored numerically, as data in binary code. Unlike a photograph they do not exist in material form, even a negative one, until generated in hard copy. The digital could thus in many ways be said to realize the dream of a disembodied, timeless, and transcendent form of representation.

The Gleaners and I, however, is a film that denies the digital this divorce from the tangible and time-bound. It uses digitality in ways antithetical to the Cartesian dream of immateriality, in ways opposed to the fantasy of freedom from the body and the suspicion of the senses. Varda's film counters transcendence with immanence. It insists on matter, body, and duration, despite being made in a medium that is the logical outgrowth of the desire to overcome these things. With The Gleaners and I, Varda crafts a digital cinema that is materialist, feminist, phenomenological, and political. A materialist cinema: Varda is concerned about the fate of material objects, and she practices what Siegfried Kracauer names "the redemption of physical reality." A feminist cinema: at the start of her film, Varda reminds us that once upon a time, there were only female *glâneuses*, not male *glâneurs*, because gathering society's leftovers was considered women's labor — but this is a type of labor with which Varda proudly identifies her own filmmaking. A phenomenological cinema: the film is about the world of concrete, everyday

things experienced through the senses, not a timeless world of abstract Platonic ideals. And finally, a political cinema: Varda and her gleaners are enmeshed in what Hannah Arendt calls "the web of human relations" — in networks of individuals who help each other to think, create, and survive, and who are in fact defined by these reciprocal acts (Arendt, 183).

The project of identifying aspects and examples of the digital arts that provide an antidote to Cartesianism (to adopt Rodowick's use of the term as a shorthand for dematerialized, disembodied forms of representation) is an extraordinarily important one. We are fortunate to have The Gleaners and I in this respect, for it is such an example, and reveals many such aspects. This project has stakes not only, as I mention above, for a materialist, feminist, phenomenological, or political digital cinema, but also for what kinds of subjectivity are to be available in a digital era. In The Human Condition, Arendt suggest that modern alienation can be traced to what she identifies as a "flight from earth to universe, and from world to self" (Arendt, 6). New media is poised to become the culmination of this flight. But it need not be, if we look to examples of digital imagery that posit embodied, immanent, and particular subjects — rather than the disembodied, transcendent, and universal subject supposed within certain ways of narrating the evolution of digital media.

The images which make up The Gleaners and I may be based in numerical digits: numbers, the system par excellence of transcendent universalism. But on screen, we see not equations, but hands and fingers. We see the dirt-caked hands of Claude, a former truck driver who lives in a trailer park; we see the clean-scrubbed hands of school children making decorations from yogurt containers; we see rows of blue rubber gloves hanging in a shack near oyster beds at seaside. The filmmaker's own hands also appear more often in this film than is customary. Varda's hand appears not only as authoring agent, but as subject matter. The hand is

both a container and a content: it picks potatoes and sorts postcards while offering itself up for a portrait. Varda's hand frequently appears against the earth, engaged in what she calls the "modest gesture of the gleaner," a pun on the expression "the majestic gesture of the sower." Stooping down to gather, the hand becomes an agent of linking, a connector to things of the earth.

Emphasizing the hands and body of the filmmakers, The Gleaners and I challenges not only the logic of digital media, but the conventions of documentary: as Anne Rutherford rightly comments, the film explores "embodied thought" and "embodied affect" and questions their exclusion from traditional documentary modes (Rutherford, 127).

Heart-shaped potatoes — dumped in a field, because they have been deemed unmarketable by grocery standards — are the first items we see Varda's hand glean in an early segment of the film. Later, in a sequel to The Gleaners and I entitled Two Years Later (2002), she tells us that they have become the film's trademark, and her trademark as well. The potato is a rhizome, a root with underground circuits and radial offshoots. The rhizome suggests a constant source rather than an end product, and a solid foundation rather than an ethereal superstructure. It is thus a supreme emblem of the earth-bound. Deleuze and Guattari proposed this symbol in A Thousand Plateaux of 1987, as a way of describing non-linear, horizontal, and de-centered structures (Deleuze and Guattari, 27). They offer the rhizome as an alternative to the tree, for whose generational seeds and offspring it substitutes associative sprouts. And the rhizome has also been adopted as a symbol of new media, most notably by Rhizome.org, founded in 1996, for whom the term also describes the grassroots, open-access, and collaborative potentials of electronic arts. A rhizomatic structure suggests interactivity, a Deleuzian dispersal of subjectivity. These multiple significances of the rhizome suggest that electronic media need

not be antithetical to materialist or ecological politics. The electronic image is not just a flash of ones and zeros, but a root spreading in the ground.

I have been describing some of the ways that Varda uses digital images against their tendency toward a Cartesian dematerialization. But I have also suggested that the digital arts, broadly conceived, already implicitly contain a critique of that Cartesian dream. Manovich reveals another, unexpected way that the digital arts return us to the tangible, when he says that the manual construction of images in digital cinema represents a return to the pro-cinematic practices of the nineteenth century, when images were hand-painted and hand-animated...Consequently, cinema can no longer be clearly distinguished from animation. It is no longer an indexical media technology but, rather, a subgenre of painting (Manovich, 295).

Thomas Elsaesser and Kay Hoffman make a similar observation in their preface to Cinema Futures: Cain, Abel, Or Cable? The Screen Arts in the Digital Age, when they call attention to the digital arts' "curious melding of the very old and the brand-new" that occurs when "skills of draftsmanship and modeling dating back a century or more are 'rediscovered'" (Elsaesser and Hoffman, 16). Of course, this is not literally the case in The Gleaners: Varda does not draw robots into her image like George Lucas. On only a few occasions does she manipulate individual frames with a computer: in one notable departure from her realist aesthetic, she experiments with composite images of pixilated mirrors and paintings, which she calls "stroboscopic" and "hyper-realistic." But even if Varda does not "paint" this film, the idea of manual creation is clearly thematized. Paintings, sculpture, and other artworks made by hand are on view, and they are discretely analogized to her own filmmaking. The gesture of the filmmaker is modestly analogized to grand gesture of the painter. Varda's use of hand-held camera at times

evokes the swipe of a painter's brush stroke. This camera movement ceases to be a marker of liveness or urgency, the way it commonly signifies, for example, in television news footage. The little digital camera becomes like a brush or marker; an implement of what Varda calls "cinécriture," her portmanteau word for cinematic writing.

We see Varda's hand near the ground gleaning heart-shaped potatoes that have been discarded as worthless. We also see her hand framed against the sky, gleaning trucks, which for all we know may be transporting perfectly oval-shaped potatoes from the very same fields. During segments of the film shot on the road, Varda clasps her fingers around the images of trucks passing along the highway. Ernest Callenbach has noted that "the trucks are in fact a key element of the hugely wasteful system to which gleaning is a response" (Callenbach, 48). Indeed, trucks, unlike electronic modes of transport, waste quantities of fuel moving objects that could be produced and consumed in the same place. Here, Varda shows us real commodities inside a real truck grasped by a real hand, all of which are stored in a digital container. But they are no less tangible for so being, and this is a key trope of Varda's film. Moreover, she tells us that she gleans them not to preserve that which passes, but to play.

## 2. Digitality and Duration

This leads us to another key element of Varda's cinema: the kind of temporality it expresses, an insistence on the time-bound. That which is bounded in time has both a beginning and an end: it is ephemeral and destined to expire, but also potential, beginning and becoming. Varda makes explicit reference to the time of her own film. She tells us that she started it at the turn of the century, on New Year's day of the year 2000, and that she completed filming on May first. In so doing, she dates her film, grounding it in a specific historical era — this is a Varda

trademark of sorts, a gesture she also makes in One Sings, the Other Doesn't (1977). The Gleaners and I reminds us of the time in many ways; it is full of clocks and schedules. The artist Hervé uses a trash collection schedule to plan his salvaging expeditions. The oyster gatherers use a tide table to plan the optimal harvest time. There are less obvious kinds of clocks as well. There are outdoor farms and orchards which reveal the time of year through foliage, weather, and quality of light. There are guests at the Musée D'Orsay who parade before Millet's gleaners in time-lapse photography. And there are potatoes in Varda's home, displayed in varying stages of rot, thus letting us know how much time has passed since her visit to the potato field.

We know that the numeric coding of digital film allows for a non-linear approach to time, both at the editing or post-production stage, and at the stage of viewing or reception. With non-linear editing, an image can quickly be taken out of sequence and placed elsewhere. With DVD players, as the truism holds, we can access images randomly — we are not constrained to a fixed viewing time, we may create new sequences without even having to wait for a fast-forward. On the one hand, these features are part of what align the digital text with Cartesianism — with the urge to overcome the given spatial and temporal constraints of the phenomenal world. On the other hand, Varda shows that the digital text can embrace many types of time. It can take flight from real-time, then touch back down into it. A digital database of images may indeed exist all at once, as a paradigm without an obligatory sequence. But each separate encounter with it participates in some kind of temporal order or syntagm.

In her essay "Designing a Database Cinema," Marsha Kinder helps to further undo the binary opposition between "database" and "narrative," noting that they may in fact be understood as compatible and co-existing in various kinds of texts (Kinder, 349). We have come to understand the database as a-temporal, synchronic or existing all at once, in opposition to

narrative, which we understand as diachronic, existing in time and in a particular order. But databases surely invite us to construct chains of segments and narratives from their contents; in turn, all narratives are to some extent constructed, as Kinder notes, "by selecting items from databases (that usually remain hidden) and then combining these items to create a particular story" (Kinder, 348-9). Kinder provides examples of database-narrative cinema ranging from Luis Buñuel and the French New Wave to contemporary films like Run Lola Run (Tykwer, 1998) and Y tu Mamá También (Cuarón, 2001). She counts The Gleaners and I among this set: "Varda proves to be the most accomplished gleaner of all, especially as she recycles techniques and issues that have preoccupied her from La Pointe courte (1954) to Vagabond (1985)" (350).

To return to The Gleaners and I: Varda's linked episodes may or may not have taken place in chronological order. It doesn't matter, for we know the basic interval during which they were filmed. As in Cléo from 5 to 7 (1961) — a film about an actress' wait for the results of a biopsy — we are grounded in real time, but with a sense of a subjective experience of duration. As in Cinévardaphoto (2004), a trio of essay films about still photographs, a deep attention to history is expressed without reliance on strict linear time (Cinévardaphoto's three pieces unspool in reverse chronological order). In Varda's cinema, we see conflicts and collaborations between generations of human beings. Witness the scene in The Gleaners about a group of teenagers who argue with a supermarket proprietor about stealing from his dumpster, or the episode showing the alliance of an elderly Vietnamese immigrant with his young African roommate. All of these indices of time — these ways of acknowledging its structuring effects — are accommodated by the film.

The Gleaners and I may be set during the resolutely linear, teleological progression of the twentieth century toward its finale. But it shows us other kinds of time as well: the midnight

ritual of dumpster-diving, the cyclical intervals of the tides, the too-late timing of overripe fruit, the meandering time of a vagabond's walk through fields, and the anticipatory time of a painting's unveiling. These scenes are edited together not according to strict narrative chronology, but with associative matches: as in One Hundred and One Nights (1995), Varda often uses a visual rhyme, metonymic link, or verbal pun as her means of connecting one segment to the next. From the "crazy dance" of a lens cap, we cut to a town called "La Folie;" from a legal lesson on gleaning in a cabbage field, we cut to Varda filming purple cabbages and other lacey vegetables. This editing technique suggests a potentially limitless movement of connectivity. As Deleuze and Guattari put it, "A rhizome ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles" (Deleuze and Guattari, 7).

The French word for "digital" is "numérique," as in "horloge numérique," a digital clock. On a night-time trash collecting expedition, Varda gleans a lucite clock with no hands, which she takes home and installs on her mantle. She says that this handless clock will help her to forget the passage of time, to paper it over, and forget her increasing age. But Varda's gesture is a mixed one, for we could instead say that it is the *hands* of a clock that distract us from the passage of time, because they avoid subjective time, its raw experience. As Jean Baudrillard observes in The System of Objects, the clock "makes us feel safe when it substantializes time and cuts it into slices like an object of consumption" (Baudrillard, 24). Clock hands create the illusion — and it is indeed an illusion — that we know how much time we have left, and can control it. The handless clock, according to this way of thinking, is a more radical reminder of time, because it lacks the means of measuring and manipulating it.

In one sequence, returning home after a trip to Japan, Varda notices the growth of familiar mold stains on the ceiling. And once again, we see hands: she shows us her aging fingers in close-up. This scene forms one of the film's hearts. Varda films as she unpacks her souvenirs, and pauses with some postcards of a Rembrandt self-portrait that she found on the top floor of a department store in Tokyo. Here, the souvenir — in French, literally "the remembering" — becomes an occasion for self-reflection in the film's present. Varda's self portrait comes to her from afar, by way of both the seventeenth century Netherlands of Rembrandt, and contemporary Japan. The ethics of gleaning, this scene helps us to understand, is not limited to ecology and environmentalism, although these are obviously important aspects of it. Gleaning is not simply about saving objects (or ourselves) from the onslaught of time. Neither is it a straightforward preservation of beauty for history or posterity. Varda and her gleaners recover, save and collect things, not in order to embalm them, but to use them, in the sense of putting them into practice and circulation — be they comestibles, tools, or pictures. Gleaning involves a recognition of transience, not a denial of it. Like a flâneuse with a portable camera, the gleaner embodies a transitional, peripatetic mode of subjectivity.

The penultimate scene of Two Years Later, Varda's follow-up piece to The Gleaners and I, is a confession scene, where Varda tells us something she has realized about a scene from her earlier film. Seated at a table in front of the thrift store gleaners painting, with her cat and a heart-shaped potato nearby, she tells us that she has filmed her hands and hair in the same way that she filmed her late husband, Jacques Demy, in the film Jacquôt de Nantes (1991), a tribute to him that she made in 1991. But she adds that she forgot the scene from Jacquôt and failed to note the similarity until it was drawn to her attention by a friend. The history of the French New

Wave, the present tense of cinema, and the future of digital imagery are all encapsulated in this image, present and coincident, linked and rooted to one another.

### 3. The "New" in New Media

These scenes where Varda reflects on her old age, the waning century, loss, and the ephemerality of objects, are important aspects of this late film in Varda's career. But it would be a mistake to let their melancholic aspects distract us from an equally important note the film sounds, which has to do with beginnings, becoming, and the possibility of the new. All of these are suggested by what Hannah Arendt calls "natality." The opening sequence of The Gleaners and I emblemizes this faculty of initiation, and the emergence of new things in the world. The film begins with a dictionary definition of the word "glâneuse," and Varda's dictionary is an illustrated one, with nineteenth-century pictures of gleaners by François Millet and Jules Breton. Soon, we cut to an image of Varda in front of the original Breton painting in the Musée D'Arras, where she poses cheekily with a bale of wheat over her shoulder, then drops it to pick up her digital camera. In so doing, she aligns herself with both Breton and his proud gleaner. But she does so with a new, twenty-first-century twist: her digital camera, which has emerged in the place of both wheat and paintbrush. Her pose, though, does not so much declare a triumph of the sign over the object, or the digital over the analog, as simply remark upon the fact of change.

The ending of the film brings us full circle, with Varda making a pilgrimage to view yet another painting of gleaners, Hédouin's "Gleaners Fleeing the Storm." The painting's canvas buckles in the wind as Varda films it propped against a wall after it is removed from storage. In storage, the painting is preserved from damage, sheltered from literal and figurative storms. In this sense, storage is opposed to waste; it would seem to be an ecologically sound strategy. And

yet, an object in storage remains invisible, untouched and out of circulation. Taking an image out of storage is a way of putting it back into circulation — of giving it a new start. Hence Varda's glee at seeing this valuable painting exposed to the elements, for its emergence from the warehouse represents a kind of rebirth into the world.

In his treatise on new media, Manovich lists several principles that are hallmarks of this form, that we might also describe as participating in an ethic of natality. The one which is most important for now is the principle of variability. Literally, this refers to the use of variables in mathematical equations, but more generally, to the notion that the digital text allows for a play of substitutions in a series. Variability expresses the possibility of endless permutation and transformation, where there is never a final or definitive version of the text. It offers a remedy to what Hollis Frampton has called "the new stone age" of the visual arts: the tendency toward stasis and an illusion of permanence (as quoted in Manovich, 133). Of course, the idea of endless variability might be seen as fostering an illusion of permanence or immortality in another way, insofar as it strives toward the infinite. But, the concept of variability also invites us to appreciate transitional objects in their own right: mutable things, test-versions, tentative beta forms in the process of becoming.

The political implications of this principle of variability cannot be underestimated, for it implicitly invites us to valorize *progressive* states of being. We see these political implications most clearly exemplified in The Gleaners and I in the segment about Alain, a man who lives off discarded produce and bread that he gleanes from the outdoor market, and who volunteers his time to teach literacy classes to immigrants who live in a housing project on the outskirts of Paris. The arrival of newcomers to the city, the acquisition of a new language — these are inaugural, revitalizing sorts of events. Varda celebrates these people, and she suggests that their

actions and ways of living have ramifications not only for the conservation of natural resources, but for a much larger set of socio-political conditions.

Varda also follows through on the promise of progressive movements and new variations with her sequel, Two Years Later. It contains footage shot at an anti-fascist march which took place in Paris on the first of May, 2000, the time when the original film was completed. We also get a segment showing the response to the first film: the many prizes and awards it garnered, the massive amount of fan mail it generated, letters containing gleaned gifts written on recycled paper, including one sent inside a train ticket envelope. But the circuit of exchange does not stop there, for Varda packs up her camera and goes to visit the senders of this letter. The remainder of Two Years Later consists of episodes with gleaners old and new: follow-up conversations with some of the original characters, plus more interviews with people whom she has met through channels opened by the first film. This is an extraordinarily generative structure, and one which mimics the prolific quality of certain electronic modes of communication. The response to the film becomes a springboard for further imagistic gleaning. In fact, we might even go as far as to say that Varda's 2004 Ydessa, the Bears, and Etc. — the first of the three shorts in Cinévardaphoto — comprises yet another variation on the theme, as this documentary's subject is also a gleaner of sorts: a collector of World War II-era photographs featuring teddy bears. We see yet again how digital video could be said to provide a model of renewability and sustainability.

One of the characters Varda revisits in Two Years Later is the psychoanalyst Jean Laplanche. He is featured in the first film not as an analyst, but as a winemaker and grower of grapes. A trained master vintner, Laplanche took over his father's estate in Pommard, and now resides there with his wife Nadine. Varda, presenting herself as unaware of Laplanche's renown

as an analyst and theorist, gives him the same treatment she does the other figures in the film. She asks him and Nadine about their wine-making methods, and inquires about whether anyone has come to pick the leftover grapes. Affable and modest, Laplanche answers her obligingly, and even quotes from a poem by Du Bellay: "We would see the gleaner, tramping along, gathering the relics / Of that which is falling / Behind the reaper."

In the second film, both filmmaker and interviewee note that they have made an omission in failing to note that psychoanalysis is also a form of gleaning. As Laplanche puts it, psychoanalysts "pay attention to things that no one else does...to what falls from discourse, what is dropped." Like the filmmaker's look, the analyst's listening is a kind of gleaning, an attunement to the under-remarked and to what at first glance seems insignificant or without value. It can in turn be a way to help the analysand reclaim words which he or she has disowned, to pluck unharvested fruit, or to venture in search of an unexplored field. Like a juicy bunch of grapes hanging just out of reach, the topic of psychoanalysis had itself gone unnoticed in the first film; Varda returns with her camera to pick it the second time around.

Laplanche is a post-Lacanian theorist who is known for his theory of "enigmatic signifiers." Laplanche offers his clearest description of this concept in his Kent Seminar of May 1990, where he explains that enigmatic signifiers are messages that are clearly addressed to us, but that we cannot understand and cannot decode. In Laplanche's account, the enigmatic signifier becomes traumatic, and hence eroticized, a Sphinxian riddle without answer. Enigmatic signifiers are like psychical junk, unintelligible messages which are tossed like garbage into the unconscious where they may fester and continue to cry out for us to decode them. On the one hand, Laplanche tells us, these messages are by definition irrecoverable and beyond decipherment, opaque "alike to sender and recipient" (Laplanche 1999, 169). On the other hand,

they are a potentially infinite source of transformation and reformation. In this way, enigmatic signifiers are like digital base objects from which multiple versions of text may sprout. They are like templates that prompt a never-ending series of sequels, signs that may be recycled many times over without ever being used up.

Laplanche's enigmatic signifier may be a catalyst for new variations; it participates in the logic of variability that Manovich has attributed to new media. This concept thus serves as a helpful reminder that a feature like variability is not an innovation of digital media. It is, rather, a basic element of signification — a representational and aesthetic possibility that artists have relied upon in textual forms ranging from classical music to narrative cinema. In this way, variability is akin to another catchword of new media: interactivity, which Marsha Kinder notes, "did not begin in cyberspace," but can be found in forms ranging from eighteenth-century novels to Jim Sharman's 1975 *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (Kinder, 351). Yet, while these features are nothing new in themselves, their aesthetic principles are surely facilitated or encouraged anew by the digital format. New forms of image-making are not definitive breaks with the old, nor are they simply its filial offspring. They are its gleaned remnants, and its non-linear outgrowths.

NOTE:

The idea for this essay began with a review I wrote for *The Philadelphia Interpreter* in Spring 2003; a second version was delivered as a talk at the Society for Cinema and Media Studies conference at the University of London Institute of Education in March 2005. I am indebted to Catherine Conybeare for conversations on the topics of natality, embodiment, and time, as well

as to the students in our graduate seminar "Birth and Becoming," Spring 2005, Bryn Mawr College.

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