

Women Filmmakers
Lecture 5: Feminist Documentary



Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse/The Gleaners and I (Varda 2000)

STRUCTURE OF THE LECTURE

- **Overview of women's filmmaking**
 - *Women's auteur filmmaking*

- **Introduction to Agnès Varda**
 - *Background and relationship to the Nouvelle Vague*
 - *Varda's relationship with feminism*

- ***Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse* as/and (feminist) documentary**

WOMEN'S FILMMAKING

Women and the Arthouse

- **In cinema in the 1970s, 'women's filmmaking'** reflected a schism in feminism itself to be split between 'two types of film work that seemed to be at odds with one another':
 1. one called for immediate documentation for purposes of political activism, consciousness-raising, self-expression, or the search for "positive images" of women;
 2. the other insisted on rigorous, formal work on the medium [...] in order to analyse and disengage the ideological codes of representation.' Teresa de Lauretis, 'Rethinking women's Cinema,' 1987.
- Laura Mulvey (1975) played a key role in the latter trend.



Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'

The presence of woman is an indispensable element of spectacle in a normal narrative film, yet her visual presence tends to work against the development of a story line, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation [...]

[Women's appearance] is coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness.

(Mulvey, Section III.A, 'Woman as Image, Man as Bearer of the Look')



Prescribes a feminist 'cinema of unpleasure' > e.g. *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*

- Comparisons with French context of Continental feminist philosophers such as Cixous, Kristeva and Irigaray e.g. Cixous' call for women to adopt an '*écriture féminine*'.

The French Feminist Tradition of Excluding the Mainstream

‘For Cixous, the heart of *écriture féminine* is a relinquishing of the (masculine) self, and an acceptance and inclusion of the other in ways which will necessarily **call into question the prevailing ideology and its mode of perception and expression**, and hence create a new “order” to replace the patriarchal and capitalist hegemony. Like Julia Kristeva, Cixous sees writing as the locus and means of this revolution; like Irigaray, she gives women the key (though not exclusive) role in bringing this new into being.’

Susan Sellers, ‘Towards an *écriture féminine*.’ In *Language and Sexual Difference: Feminist Writing in France*, p. 139.

French Women Filmmakers

Mid-1990s-mid-2010s: female directors have been responsible for between 14 and 25% of overall production during the period, compared with 7% in Hollywood in 2017, rising to 17/18% in the 2020s*.

More specifically, for France, Carrie Tarr with Brigitte Rollet cite 14% for the 1990s (Tarr with Rollet, 2001. *Cinema and the Second Sex: Women's Filmmaking in France in the 1980s and 1990s*. London and New York: Continuum, p.1);

and Fanny Beuré finds this to rise to a maximum of 25% in subsequent years to 2013 ('Bilan 2004-2013 de la production et du financement des films réalisés ou co réalisés par des femmes,' *Studies in French Cinema* 16:2, pp. 134-151) **but also fairly steady since then** [Number of Women Directors in France Is Increasing, Study Finds | Women and Hollywood](#).

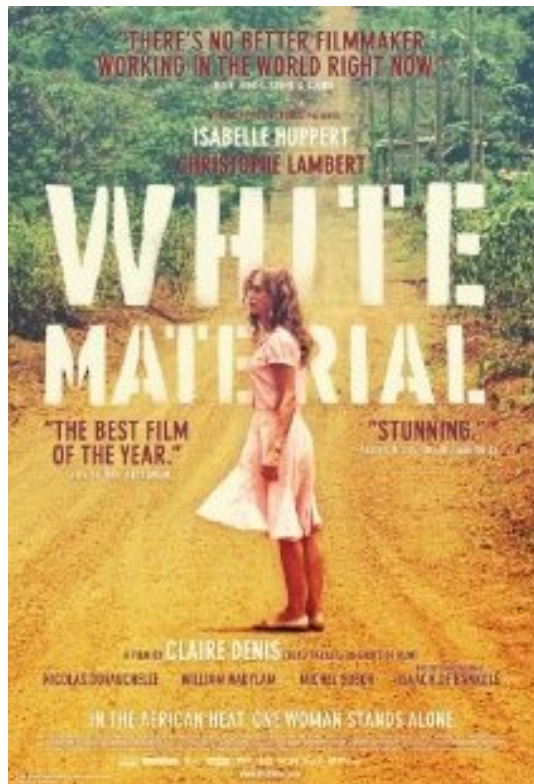
See CNC for detailed French statistics

*For Hollywood, see <https://variety.com/2017/film/news/female-directors-hollywood-diversity-1201958694/>
[Number of Female Directors on Top Hollywood Films Declines in 2021 - Variety](#)

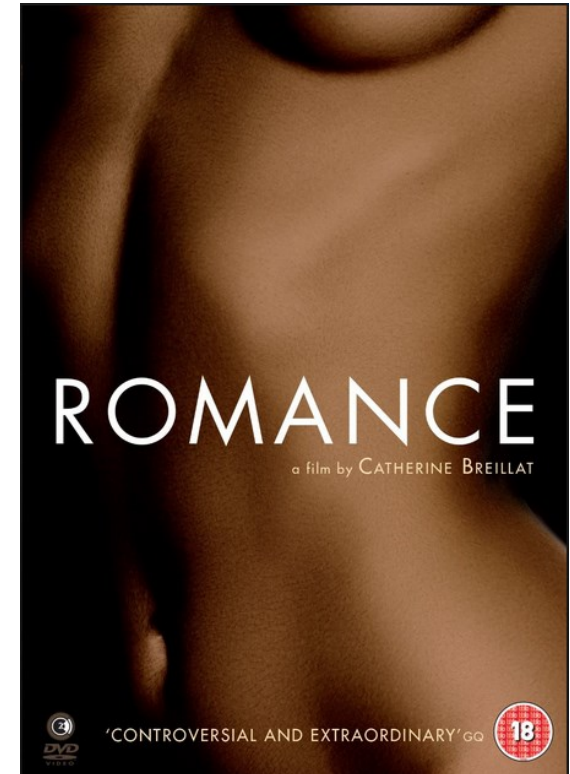
and publications by Melisa Silverstein and/or the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media.

French Women Auteurs

Some prominent names include Varda, Chantal Akerman (who is Belgian), Marion Vernoux, Laetitia Masson, Claire Denis, Catherine Breillat, Céline Sciamma and many more.



Girlhood



- An intellectually elite target audience and market positioning (through publicity materials, festival exhibition, awards, type of cinema run)

What about the Middlebrow?



The Taste of Others,
Agnès Jaoui,
2000



Look at Me, Jaoui, 2004



Pascale Ferran
2006

Or cult successes?



2009

See Ferran's controversial claims about the 'cinéma du milieu' discussed by Vanderschelden (2009)



Sophie Letourneur



2012

Varda at the Oscars



JACQUES DEMY
5 JUN 1931 - 27 OCTOBRE 1990
—
AGNÈS VARDA
30 MAI 1928 - 29 MARS 2019

Miscrogya

Amor



VIVA
VARDA

Agnès Varda, born 1928 (Brussels)



Background in philosophy, history of art and photography

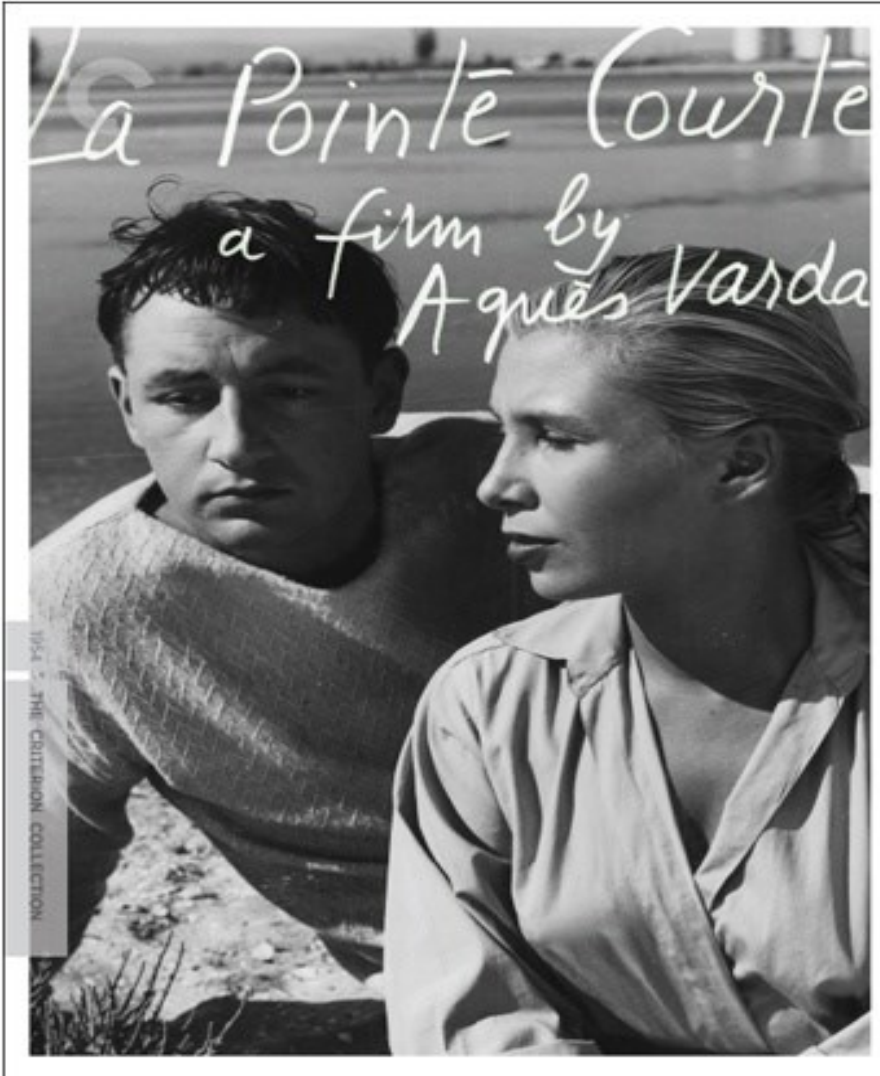
The First Film of the New Wave?

La Nouvelle vague

- Varda linked to more politicised 'Left Bank' strand (cf. Alain Resnais and Chris Marker)

La Pointe courte

- **Structure borrowed from Faulkner's novel *The Wild Palms***
- **Cultural eclecticism:** focus on the realism of the everyday (difficulties faced by fishermen) alongside modernist formal organisation
- **Marginal exhibition and positioning**



1955

Cléo de 5 à 7 (1962): Varda's interest in Gender Politics (cf. Flitterman-Lewis)

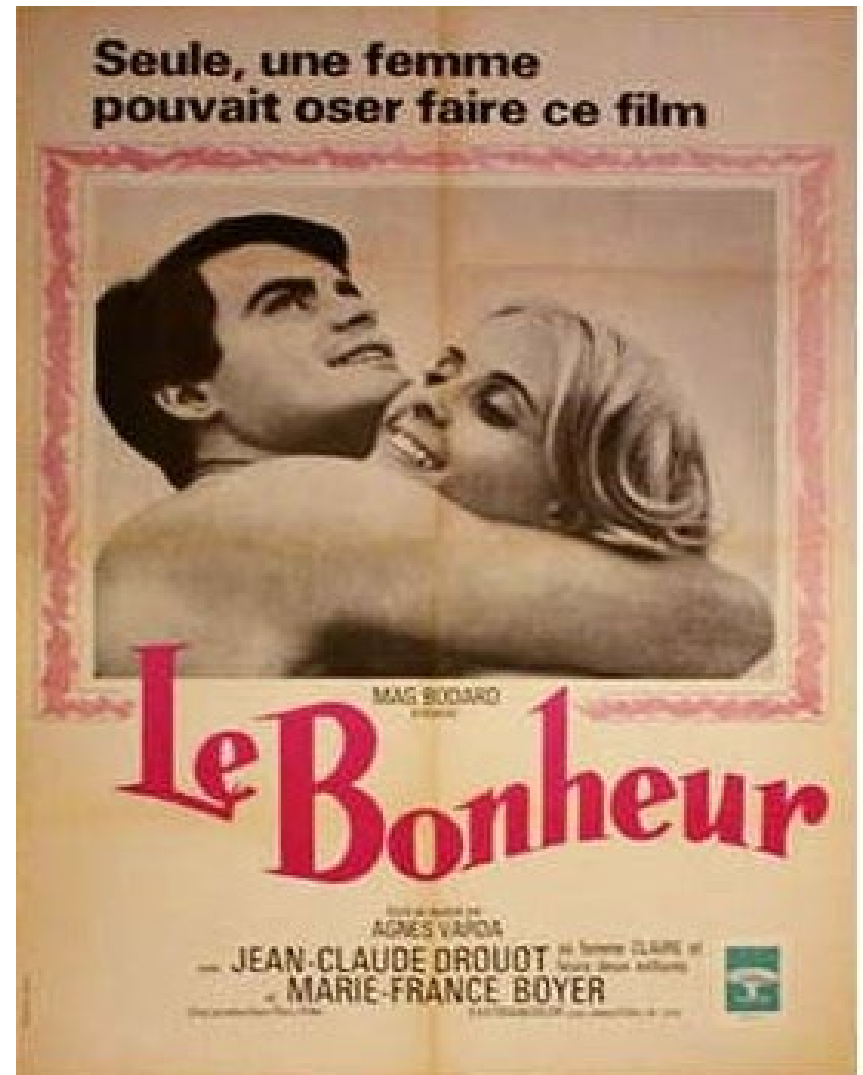


See clip

A 'committed rather than militant' feminist? (Smith 1998: 8)
Films Typified by Apparent Contradiction



1977 – see clip



1965

The Ambivalence of Varda's Mise-en-Scène: *Le Bonheur*



The Focus on Women's Relationships and Experience

Sans toit ni loi (1985)



... and some aesthetic particularities



*La
Pointe
courte*,
1955

*O saisons, ô
châteaux*
(1958,
documentary
short for
Tourist
Board)



Varda and Documentary Aesthetics

- Style characterised by ‘poetry of the everyday’
- ‘*cinécriture*’ = writing directly in images
- **Incorporation of documentary into fiction films:** *Pointe courte*, *Cléo de 5 à 7*, *L’une chante, L’autre continue...*
- **Political documentaries:** *early factual film for French tourist board*, *Salut les Cubains* (1963), *Loin du Vietnam* (1967), *Black Panthers* (1968)
- **Fiction-documentary pairs:** *Mur murs + Documenteur* (1981); *Kung Fu Master + Jane B. par par Agnès V.* (1987)
- **Personal documentaries:** *L’Opéra-Mouffe* (1958), *Daguerréotypes* (1975), *Jacquot de Nantes*, *Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse*, *Les Plages d’Agnès*



Les Glaneurs et le glaneuse

Varda as early ecofeminist?

ECOFEMINISM



- Grown up since the 1970s/80s; key figures Rosi Braidotti, Maria Mies, Vandana Shiva
- Theoretical stream within (especially ‘fourth-wave’) feminism reacting to: **patriarchal control of development planning** in an age of environmental decline
- Underlines resultant **destruction of relationship between community, women and nature**



gleaners still humbly stoop to glean.

The Focus on Women's Relationships and Experience

Sans toit ni loi (1985)



... and some aesthetic particularities



*La
Pointe
courte*,
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Filming the (Ageing) Female Body



L'Une chante, l'autre pas

Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse

'[W]e keep hidden from view the grotesque, fearful and laughable signs of female ageing.'
(Wearing 2007: 290).



Les Glaneurs: Formal Innovation at a Structural Level

- Episodic architecture, akin to Julia Kristeva's 'women's time'.
- Self-reflexivity: Cf. *Jane B par Agnès V* (1988) (, *Jacquot de Nantes* (1991)?), *Les Plages d'Agnès* (2008), *Visages, Villages* (2017)
- Beyond the (male) voiceover.
- Varda reversing Mulvey's well-known description of classical narrative cinema as making woman the bearer, not the maker, of meaning.



Essentialist or Poststructuralist?

ity of a pregnant woman (l'opéra-mouffe) 1958 - short film by agnès varda



Digital images as '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 in King 421)

***Pierrot le fou* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1965)**
**Departing from the conventions of classical
cinema**



- Eschewal of editing
conventions such as
shot-reverse shot
conversation shooting



- The use of different coloured filters
across edits in one space

Pierrot le fou
Departing from the conventions of
classical cinema



Extremely low-key lighting, obscuring vision... followed by bright lighting – and an unmotivated costume change

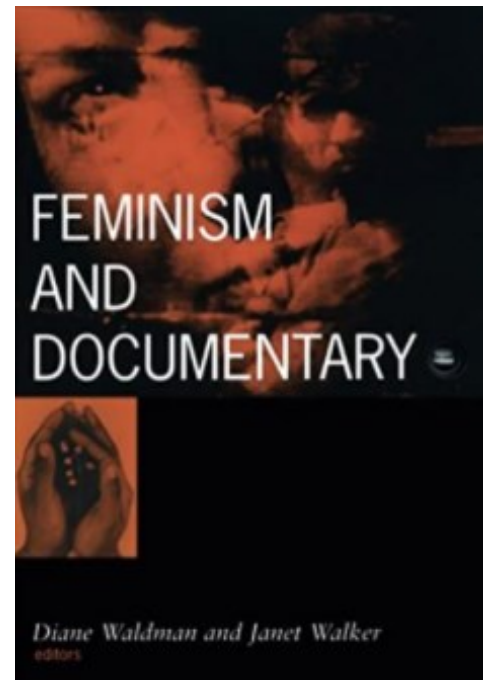
Pierrot le fou
Departing from the
conventions of classical
cinema



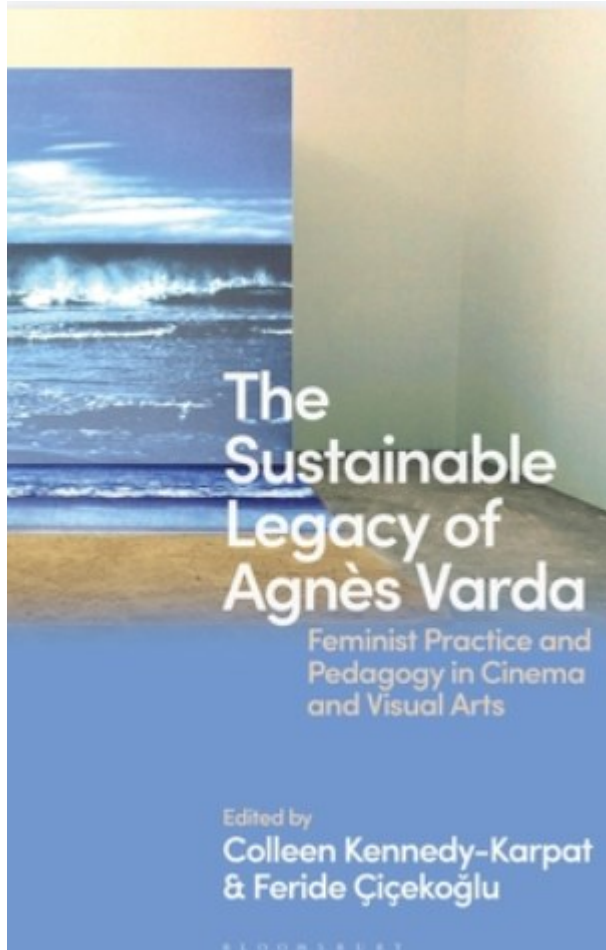
- Framing either off-centre or cutting off parts of the body we would expect to see with this composition

The Personal as Political in Documentary

- Increasing interpenetration of autobiography and other forms – especially in media?
- Likewise, an increasing dispersal of ‘documentary’ into other forms e.g. rise of the docudrama format (see for example Derek Paget, Steven Lipkin).
- Difficult to ignore the role of the subject - as a sentient, emotional and generally embodied being - in shaping narratives.
- Affirming this has a gendered dimension - see also Waldman and Walker (1999, pictured right).



Varda's Legacy



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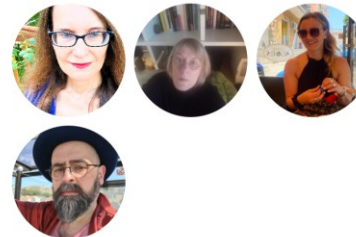


VIVA VARDA !

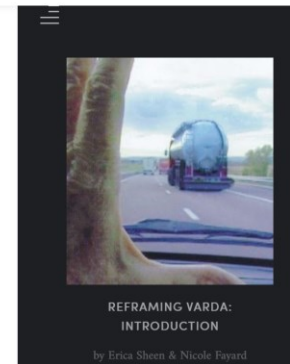
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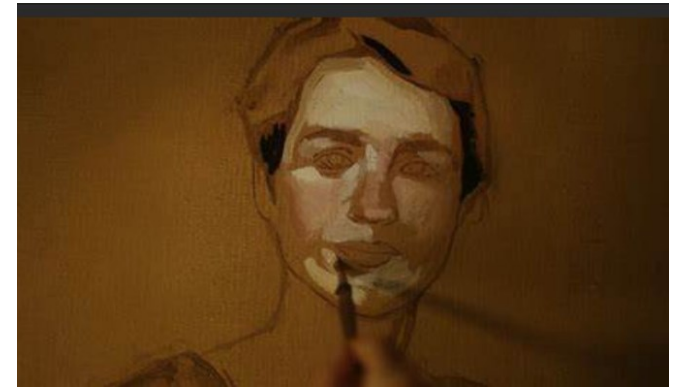
Welcome to MAI 12: Reframing Varda



Varda's Legacy



Sex is Comedy, Catherine Breillat, 2002



Searching for the self in the other and vice versa: Sciamma and Varda

See also films by Claire Denis, Laetitia Masson, Sofia Coppola and Kelly Reichardt

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