

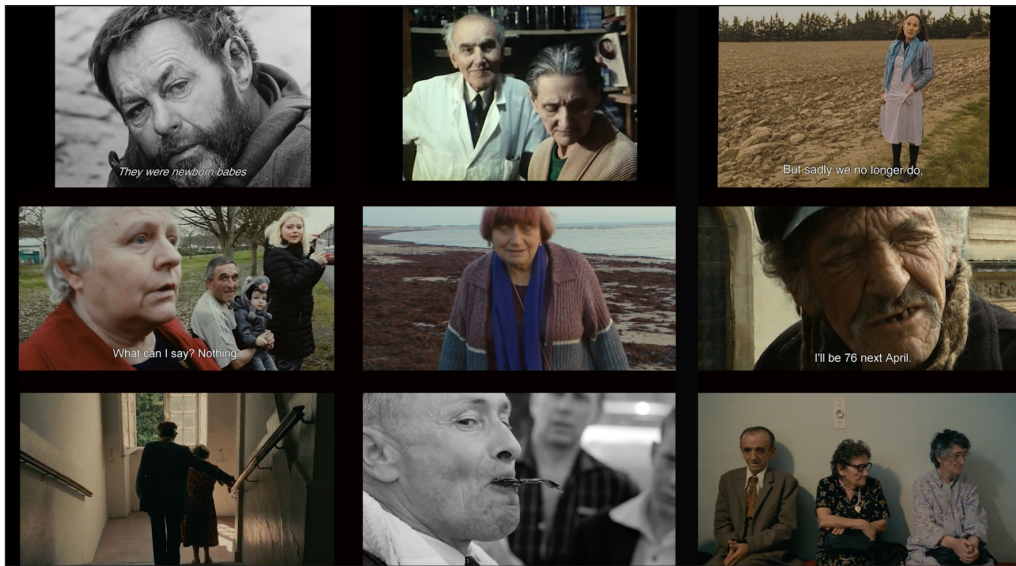


Aging, Empathy, and Cinematic Metamorphosis: Through the Lens of Agnès Varda

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This video essay examines Agnès Varda's intricate portrayal of aging, resonating with Simone de Beauvoir's call to break the silence on this subject. Composed exclusively of Varda's film clips, it highlights her enduring engagement with aging and invites viewers to see it as a space of freedom and creative expression.





Creator's Statement

Conceived during the Scholarship in Sound and Image Workshop in Videographic Criticism at Middlebury College in the summer of 2023, my methodology evolved from workshop exercises that imposed stringent formal constraints on selection and treatment of material. Extending this parametric approach, I focused exclusively on clips from Varda's films, allowing her oeuvre to speak for itself. My goals in adopting this approach were twofold: first, to effectively spotlight Varda's conscious portrayal of old individuals throughout her career; and second, to create an interactive space in which viewers can derive their own interpretations of her work, particularly her depiction of old age as a domain of freedom and creative innovation.

This video essay expands upon the research from my dissertation on Agnès Varda, in which I closely analyzed her films through the lens of French feminism, with a particular focus on its concept of "*écriture féminine*" (feminine writing). I identified three key characteristics of this notion as they pertain to cinema: narrative subversion, the inscription of the body, and the attention to the Other. Varda's films, with their distinctive cinematic language, consistently defy and redefine the marginalization of the Other. This video essay unveils Varda's exploration of aging not just as a recurring motif but as a profound exhibition of the transformative potential of feminine writing. It mirrors her own life's stand against the conventional portrayal—or lack thereof—of aging women, embodying the "*écriture féminine*" in both form and content.

Varda's later works have garnered significant scholarly and critical acclaim for their radical portrayal of the aging female body;¹ however, her empathetic lens on older individuals has been a defining trait throughout her filmmaking career. Even her earliest works, such as the 1958 documentary *L'Opéra-mouffe* (*Diary of a Pregnant Woman*),² included many scenes featuring elderly people in her neighborhood. This video essay, thus, is driven by my desire to shed light on Varda's lifelong engagement with the topic of aging, offering visibility to a demographic often marginalized and ignored by mainstream media. The essay seeks to reveal how Varda's films serve to "break the silence" on old age, echoing Simone de Beauvoir's own intention in writing *The Coming of Age* (*La Vieillesse*) in 1970 at the age of sixty-two. This thematic link is underscored by an opening epigraph from Beauvoir.

My conception of the video essay's structure began with a striking image from Varda's 1984 short film *7 p., cuis., s. de b.,... (à saisir)* (*Seven Rooms, Kitchen, Bathroom, [for Sale]*). I chose this opening image—an old woman framed within an iris, enveloped by white feathers—to signify life's transience and the fluid nature of perception. This image served as a visual motif throughout my essay, culminating in a final scene of the same woman basking in a shower of feathers, an embodiment of joyful freedom.

This central motif, alongside Varda's filming her own aging body, led me to organize the video essay in three primary sections: "Aging," "Empathy," and "Cinematic Metamorphosis." I designed each to contextualize Varda's filmmaking as a mode of political and visual activism, challenging the stigmatization of old age. Following the opening epigraph from Beauvoir, I interpret Varda's consistent interest in depicting "very old people" as a direct response to Beauvoir's call to address aging. This lays the groundwork for viewing Varda's body of work as a conscious act of defiance against the patriarchal norms that deny women "the right to grow old" and render older women "invisible."

The "Aging" section highlights Varda's self-reflexive playfulness as she engages with the stereotype of the "plump and talkative old woman." This intentional act serves

¹ Some of the scholarly study on Varda and aging include: Shirley Jordan, "Ageing and Care in Agnès Varda," *French Studies*, 77(4), October 2023, 602–613; Neasa Fitzpatrick & Desmond O'Neil, "Vitality, gender and ageing in *Faces Places* by Agnès Varda," *Geriatric Medical Classics*, Vol. 13, October 2022, 1493–1494; Maryann De Julio, "Ageing and Memory in Agnès Varda's *Les plages d'Agnès*," *Senses of Cinema*, Issue 67, July 2013; and Rona Murray, "Je joue le rôle d'une petite vieille, rondouillarde et bavarde, qui raconte sa vie... ['I am playing the role of a little old lady, pleasantly plump and talkative, who is telling the story of her life...']: The Significance of Agnès Varda's Old Lady Onscreen," in *Women, Celebrity and Cultures of Ageing: Freeze Frame*, eds. Deborah Jermyn, Su Holmes, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, 77–96.

² Film titles in this statement reflect the English versions released in English-speaking regions (theaters, DVD, or Blu-ray). Where the original French title has been retained in these regions, the English translation is provided in parentheses for clarity.

to amplify her defiance, as a multiscreen display showcases scene of her own aging body from her films *The Gleaners and I* (2000) and *Faces Places* (2017). The “Empathy” section further elaborates Varda’s ongoing fascination with the old people through multi-screen collages that show a diverse array of scenes featuring old individuals from her filmography. This paves the way for the concluding section, “Cinematic Metamorphosis,” which opposes the common narrative that associate aging with decline, decay, or “shipwreck.” Instead, Varda’s films suggest that aging and death signal freedom, rebirth, and artistic invention, illustrated by sprouting buds emerging from withering potatoes and her whimsical video art featuring heart-shaped potatoes. Her body of work is a testament to defiance and playfulness, offering a transformative view on aging that goes beyond social stigmas discussed by Beauvoir.

Varda’s own life and career mirror the defiant spirit captured through her lens. Her seven-decade career, from *La Pointe Courte* (1954) to *Varda by Agnès* (2019), showcases a remarkable defiance of the limitations often associated with aging. Her career longevity is especially noteworthy for a woman director—a rarity in itself. Yet what is even more remarkable is that the pinnacle of her career arrived later in her life. She gained broader global recognition in her seventies, with the release of the critically acclaimed *The Gleaners and I* in 2000. Varda, at seventy-two, shattered the prevailing notion that a filmmaker’s relevance diminishes with age. Instead, she embraced the use of a small digital camera, enabling her the freedom to film with unprecedented intimacy, filming “one hand with the other.” This was a milestone in her thematic focus on aging; for the first time, Varda featured her own aging body and explored her personal experience of growing older. This thematic pursuit extended into her subsequent feature-length documentaries such as *The Beaches of Agnès* (2008) and *Faces Places* (2017). Varda’s later films not only defy conventional narratives of decay, but also celebrate old age as a canvas for artistic transformation and an exploration of mortality.

Works Cited

de Beauvoir, Simone. *Coming of Age*, trans. Patrick O’Brian. W.W. Norton & Company, 1996. [*La vieillesse*. Gallimard 1970]

Biography

Nam Lee is Associate Professor of Film and Media Studies at Dodge College of Film and Media Arts, Chapman University. Holding a Ph.D. in Critical Studies from the School of Cinematic Arts at the University of Southern California, her doctoral dissertation explored French director Agnès Varda’s films in the context of French feminism’s

notion of “*écriture féminine*” (feminine writing). Prior to her academic tenure, she was a film critic and journalist in Seoul, South Korea. She is the author of *The Films of Bong Joon Ho* (Rutgers University Press, 2020) and numerous articles and book chapters on contemporary Korean cinema. Her current research focuses on women’s narratives in global cinema, with particular attention to themes of aging and motherhood.

Review by David E. James, University of Southern California

Though manifold, the definitions of the essay nevertheless commonly combine the communication of factual information with the personal voice of the writer, features already prominent in the late sixteenth century *Essais* of Michel de Montaigne that gave the genre its name. Once solely literary, it has grown to include photographic, filmic, and now video forms. Like its precedents, the video essay brings the personal perspective of the critic/creator to bear on the evidence of its subject matter.

Despite its French origins, the literary essay flourished especially in early nineteenth century England; but the film essay had an emphatic center of gravity in France in the 1950s and 1960s with Chris Marker, Jean-Luc Godard, and especially Agnès Varda, their compatriot across the emergence of the Nouvelle Vague from the Rive Gauche cinema movement. Though as disparate as *Black Panthers* (1968) and *Les glaneurs et la glaneuse* (*The Gleaners and I*, 2000), Varda’s specifically “essay films” are as pure examples of the radically impure genre as may be found. But the mode’s intrinsic interplay of subjectivity and objectivity is ubiquitous across her entire oeuvre in her eclectic combinations of documentary and fiction, avant-garde and narrative, shorts and features. Indeed, cinécriture (or “cinematic writing”), her coinage that distinguishes the informing principles of her work within the era of caméra-stylo generally, itself combines the iconicity of photography with literature’s discursivity.

Nam Lee’s “Aging, Empathy, and Cinematic Metamorphosis: Through the Lens of Agnès Varda” assimilates Varda’s unrivalled innovations in considering another instance of her maverick originality: her interest in the aged. The imminence of death informed some of Varda’s best-known films, including *Cléo de 5 à 7* (*Cléo from 5 to 7*, 1962) and *Jacquot de Nantes* (*Jacquot of Nantes*, 1991). But Lee reveals that more general resonances of growing old are everywhere. Apart from an initial quotation from Simone de Beauvoir, Lee allows Varda to speak both as herself directly to the camera and through many other voices that she has retrieved from her films. Her essay is introduced by the iconic image of Varda from *Les glaneurs et la glaneuse* marking her transition from film to digital media by reflexively turning her new video camera on both herself and the spectator. It is quickly followed by an enormously plangent sequence of the aged filmmaker, self-described as a “plump and talkative” old lady, walking backwards on a

deserted beach talking about her lifelong interest in people. They contrast jarringly with sequences from her films of men's cruelty to older women. These full screen images are subsequently interspersed with multi-screen clips in which the artist is surrounded by a cacophony of voices from nine of her films from 1958 to 2017. A sequence celebrating the heart-shaped potatoes she cherished—even while they were rotting—follows, Varda identifying herself with them by donning a potato costume. And it ends with another full screen shot of Varda in a wheelchair frenetically rushed through an art museum—an image that, in her seniority, ironically recalls the ambition of her youth, that of being a museum curator.

Lee, herself a consummate gleaner who has foraged through nearly sixty years of Varda's work for her evidence, has curated this panoply of reflections sensitively and with an understated elegance. But her own woman's writing is unmistakably present. Dedicated to her mother who died the year before Lee wrote it, Lee's essay speaks of Varda, but also of herself. The poignant dialogue among the clips she selected and the subtle rhythms of her editing inscribe her voice in Varda's. The subjectivities of the filmmaker-as-essayist and the film historian-as-video-artist are woven into a multi-vocal commonality, meditating on the fate—perhaps even harder for women than for men—we all must share.

Review by Jan M. Osborn, Chapman University

Nam Lee's video essay "Aging, Empathy, and Cinematic Metamorphosis: Through the Lens of Agnès Varda" compels the viewer to see older women, to see them in the center of the lens, to see them as Varda depicted them. Lee includes scenes from nine Varda films. She opens with a scene from Varda's *7 p., cuis., s. de b.,... (à saisir)* (*Seven Rooms, Kitchen, Bathroom, [for Sale]*), a scene depicting an elderly woman with white hair surrounded by an iris of white feathers, immediately followed by lines from Simone de Beauvoir's *The Coming of Age*, de Beauvoir arguing that "Society looks upon old age as a kind of shameful secret that it is unnecessary to mention," that "this silence has to be shattered." Lee's essay shatters this silence with image, compelling us to see old age through the lens of Agnès Varda; and just as de Beauvoir says, "I shall compel readers to hear them," Lee, through Varda, compels us to see them. With Varda's camera pointed toward us—the audience for Lee's film—we may also see ourselves and consider our conceptualization of aging, particularly women aging, as we interpret Varda's portrayals and Lee's selection in an interactive space of contemplation, the haunting music of Blue Dot's "Slow Line Stomp" the soundtrack for our meditation. Including three parts—Aging, Empathy, and Metamorphosis—Lee's work highlights Varda's negotiating the unavoidable reality of living. Following scenes of naked women,

montages of older men and women, scenes of wrinkled potatoes sprouting, and even Varda as a potato, the feathers return—those feathers—only this time, the woman with a halo of white hair is laughing, relishing the shower of feathers, white feather, the possibility of joy within the aperture of age. Lee’s video essay invites us to dare to see old age as a kind of freedom rather than a shameful secret unnecessary to mention, a silencing. Lee compels us to see Varda’s breaking of the silence.

