

“YOU’VE GOT TO DO IT JUST LIKE THE BOYS”: AGNÈS VARDA AND THE BIRTH OF
THE ATRICE

by

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to all the other women who are also “a little bit much.”

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ABSTRACT

This thesis seeks to establish and develop the concept of the *autrice*, a feminine alternative to the masculinized *auteur* figure in film criticism. The *autrice* refers to a film director who not only expresses a distinctive voice and *auteuristic* level of authorship over their work in conventional *auteur* terms, but also ensures that their feminine perspective is consistently made manifest in some aesthetic, narratological, or thematic way over the course of their filmography. As a case study to help further define the feminine *autrice*, my thesis will focus on Belgian-born filmmaker Agnès Varda and three of her most influential films: *La Pointe Courte* (1955), *Cléo de 5 à 7* (1962), and *Sans toit ni loi* (1985). By examining these films through the lens of feminist *autrice* theory, I will reconceptualize the *auteur* in order to consider a more diverse group of filmmakers than English-speaking *auteur* critics initially envisioned.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The historical exclusion of women's voices from the domain of filmmaking is hardly an unexplored topic in contemporary film criticism. From Molly Haskell's influential considerations of the image of woman on film and Laura Mulvey's identification of the scopophilic film camera gaze in the 1970s, to Carol Clover's reconceptualization of gender in horror film and bell hooks' prioritization of black female spectatorship in more recent decades, countless scholars have contributed to the growing strands of feminist film theory that have emerged since the 1960s. One approach to film studies that has remained oppressively male-dominated, however, is the intermittently popular and notoriously masculinized auteur theory. Coming to widespread celebrity in the 1960s, the concept of the auteur has its origins in *Cahiers du cinéma*, a highly influential film magazine founded in 1951 by several French film critics, most renowned of which was André Bazin, a central figure in the film community of mid-century France. For English-speaking audiences, auteur theory is almost universally associated with New York film critic Andrew Sarris, who helped to popularize auteur theory in the United States and cultivate its association with masculinity through his extensive writing on the subject in publications such as "Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962" and *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions* in 1968.

Unsurprisingly, auteur theory is most commonly applied to the male directors and critics of the French New Wave. Revered filmmakers such as Jean-Luc Godard and Francois Truffaut have remained figureheads of the movement, their penchant for lightning fast productions and deliberate mise-en-scène quickly becoming archetypical characteristics of both the New Wave and the auteur designations. Almost immediately hailed as "*the* reference point for cinema with

artistic aspirations,” the New Wave suffered a rapid decline in the early 1960s (Sellier, *Masculine Singular* 221). Nevertheless, as Sellier notes, the film community over five decades later “is still briskly tearing itself apart on the subject” (1). Indeed, the mere mention of the “New York Herald Tribune!” has sent aquiver the hearts of cinephiles both in and outside of France for generations.

Despite the breadth of literature analyzing the strengths and pitfalls of the auteur approach, as well as the wide range of feminist film scholarship that gives priority to women’s voices, few scholars have examined auteur theory in relation to female filmmakers – and fewer still have argued for a more inclusive, and therefore more meaningful, reconceptualization of the auteur that takes into account the singularity of the female directorial voice. This feminine singularity is encompassed by the concept of the “autrice,” the feminine counterpart to the male auteur, which refers to a director who not only expresses a distinctive voice and auteuristic level of authorship over their work in conventional terms, but also ensures that their feminine perspective is consistently made manifest in some aesthetic, narratological, or thematic way over the course of their filmography. As a case study to help further define this concept and differentiate it from the traditional auteur, my thesis will focus on Belgian-born filmmaker Agnès Varda and three of her most influential films, *La Pointe Courte* (1955), *Cléo de 5 à 7* (1962), and *Sans toit ni loi* (1985). By examining these films through the lens of feminist autrice theory, I will reconceptualize the masculinized auteur in order to consider a more diverse group of filmmakers than Sarris appears to have initially envisioned. Essential to this reconceptualization, writes Geetha Ramanathan, “is the registration of feminist authority, and the delineation of diverse modalities of feminist aesthetics that seek both to confront the limits of the visual and go beyond them” (9). Fleshing out the bones of the auteur approach with the addition of feminist

theory, my thesis argues that Varda's work frequently disrupts the established cinematic aesthetics of femininity, forces the viewer into a position of female subjectivity, and thus authors a distinctly female cinematic voice that deserves a place in its own separate subset of film theory and scholarship. I make this argument in spite of Sarris' apparent ambivalence toward her as an auteur; despite her Los Angeles residence and active participation in the American independent film community of the 1960s, Varda's only appearance in *The American Cinema* is as a footnote in Ida Lupino's entry, with Sarris remarking that, as far as her directorial worth was concerned, "the jury is still out" (216). Furthermore, I argue that Varda's work represents the particular *cinécriture féminine* of the feminine autrice through her refusal to conform to the established conventions of masculine filmmaking; instead, she constructed her cinematic narratives around representations of female physicality, subjectivity, and marginality that were almost completely absent in the work of her contemporaries.

Indeed, throughout her decades-spanning career, which lasted up until her death in 2019 at the age of ninety, Varda refused to quell her femininity in order to replicate the works of men who came before her. On her lack of formal education on feminist theory, she states "I'm not at all a theoretician of feminism, I did all that – my photos, my craft, my film, my life – on my terms, my own terms, and not to do it like a man" (Wakeman 1142). In a separate interview, describing her own childhood hatred of Walt Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* for its titular heroine's servile nature and "ridiculous" level of obedience, Varda insists on her innate feminism: "I think I was a feminist before being born. I had a feminist chromosome somewhere" (Gussow). Despite early feminist critics' ambivalence toward Varda's work, Varda herself publicly identified with the feminist movement on numerous occasions over the course of her career. In 1971, she contributed her signature to *The Manifesto of the 343*, revealing herself to

have undergone an illegal abortion; in addition to expressing her desire for abortion legalization and widespread access to contraception, this act exposed Varda to potential legal ramifications under the French criminal code – especially considering her release of the pro-choice film *One Sings, the Other Doesn't* in 1975 (Jackson 122).

In spite of these forthright articulations of feminist principles, Varda has historically received a mixed reception from feminist critics; her filmography has “been questioned, doubted, and found to be more *feminine* than *feminist*” (Ince 603). However, as I will argue here, it is this inherent femininity that results in the feminist tone of Varda’s work; in a discipline so male-dominated and so structured around the conventions of masculinity as filmmaking – particularly filmmaking during the French New Wave – the prioritization and authentic depiction of femininity is a rebellious act. Varda’s bold and individualistic attitude toward her work makes a distinctly feminist statement that coincides with her personal feminist philosophies, integrating the personality of the filmmaker into the production; her films benefit greatly from the presence and prioritization of the feminine. Varda frequently spotlights her female protagonists, from whose perspective the audience regards the events onscreen, not as objects of desire but as complex agents, as female as they are human. Thus, by analyzing Varda’s films through the lens of *autrice* theory, my thesis will not only prove Varda’s unequivocal feminine *autrice* status but also display the necessity of this theory in order to fully understand and appreciate the cultural, social, and artistic magnitude of her filmography.

Chapter 2: Reconceptualizing Sarris' Auteur

A notably controversial concept from the outset of its North American celebrity, auteur film theory has suffered a sharp decline in support from both popular and academic critics over the course of the last several decades. Following Roland Barthes' "The Death of the Author" in 1968, the "death of the auteur" has become a widely contested topic in both popular and academic considerations of cinema; contemporary critics remark that the theory's exclusionary criteria, as delineated by American film theorist Andrew Sarris, serves only to form a hollow "cult of personality" around an elite, and entirely male, group of especially interesting, artistic, or impressive film directors (Patterson). In *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions*, Sarris introduces his three-fold definition of auteur theory, one that isolates the (elite, male) director as the primary creative force behind a film, writing that

[T]he first premise of the auteur theory is the technical competence of a director as a criterion of value. . . . The second premise . . . is the distinguishable personality of the director as a criterion of value. . . . [And the third] is concerned with interior meaning, the ultimate glory of the cinema as an art. Interior meaning is extrapolated from the tension between a director's personality and his material. ("Notes on the Auteur Theory" 562)

While Sarris acknowledges that the auteur is a rather elusive concept to pin down definitively, his work provides a clear illustration of the specific type of director he has in mind here. In keeping with his affinity for the Hollywood studio system and his regard for filmmakers of a bygone era, Sarris conceptualizes the auteur as a dominant figurehead who utilizes his "big picture" skillset, and even bigger personality, to create "a personal vision of the world. . . . a self-contained world with its own laws and landscapes" (*The American Cinema* 39). Unsurprisingly,

given the always precarious status of women in film, Sarris does not even entertain the notion of a woman occupying the role of auteur. Claire Johnston accuses critics like Sarris of “[deifying] the personality of the (male) director,” before stating that Sarris’s own “derogatory treatment of women in *The American Cinema* gives a clear indication of his sexism” (26). Indeed, his pronouns are aggressively masculine, and his comically dramatic “Pantheon” of truly great film directors mentions not a single woman. In fact, Ida Lupino is the only female director referenced in his ranking of over two hundred filmmakers of varying degrees of “greatness.” Despite being the first woman to direct a film noir and one of the most well-known female directors of the Hollywood studio system due to her concurrent acting career and the controversial subject matter of her films, Lupino is nevertheless situated under the heading “Oddities, One-Shots, and Newcomers” (*The American Cinema* 13). Likewise, her entry is monopolized by a recollection of Lillian Gish’s remark that “directing was no job for a lady,” with Sarris’ only mention of Lupino herself reduced to the conclusion that her “directed films express much of the feeling if little of the skill she has projected so admirably as an actress” (216).

But even if we choose to disregard the exclusive use of masculine pronouns and male case studies throughout Sarris’ work, his definition of auteur theory is still inherently geared toward male filmmakers. Descriptors such as “dominant,” “strong,” and “sublimity of expression” recur throughout Sarris’ work, indicating, in outspoken anti-auteurist critic Pauline Kael’s words, a “peculiar emphasis on virility” (26). By the same token, Sarris explicitly compares directorial authorship to kingship, and therefore directorial authority to monarchic rule, writing “There were (and are) weak and strong directors as there were weak and strong kings, but film history, like royal history, concerns those who merely reign as well as those who actually rule” (*The American Cinema* 31). These linguistic constructs cannot help but remind us

of French feminist philosopher Hélène Cixous' examinations of the perceived binary opposites permeating Western culture; her 1975 essay "Sorties" features a list of commonly conceptualized binaries, highlighting the gendered ways in which we understand such concepts:

Activity/passivity

Sun/Moon

...

Head/Heart

...

Form, convex, step, advance, seed, progress

Matter, concave, ground – which supports the step, receptacle

Man

Woman

"Always the same metaphor:" Cixous writes, "we follow it, it transports us, in all its forms, wherever a discourse is organized" (287). Perpetuating this notion of an intrinsic hierarchical binary both thematically and semantically, Sarris' descriptions of his auteur reinforce cultural associations between masculinity and intelligence, activity, superiority.

Moreover, the highly subjective nature of Sarris' definition of auteur theory points toward one of his fundamental problems. In "Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962," Sarris writes

The corresponding roles of the director may be designated as those of a technician, a stylist, and an *auteur*. There is no prescribed course by which a director passes through these three circles. Godard once remarked that Visconti has evolved from a *metteur en scène* to an *auteur*, whereas Rossellini had evolved from an *auteur* to a *metteur en scène*.

(563)

In the framework Sarris outlines, thus, the predominantly male film community (regularly referred to as a “boy’s club” in both popular and scholarly writings well into the present day) decides which directors possess the artistic *je ne sais quoi* to be considered auteurs. This leads to a prioritization of masculine-coded techniques, aesthetics, perspectives, and stylistic gestures as characteristics of “good” films; this predisposition further leads to the formation of an elitist culture in which celebrations of film ultimately turn into celebrations of masculinity. For instance, Sarris only notes Raoul Walsh’s tendency to display his male protagonists’ vulnerability through depictions of restless sleep and emotional outpouring to remark on the unique incongruity of “one of the screen’s most virile directors [employing] an essentially feminine narrative device” (564) on multiple separate occasions. As a result, this definition of *auteur* as posited by Sarris not only excludes the work of female filmmakers but also espouses an especially masculinist criteria by which to analyze the unique authorship of the film director – one that is diametrically opposite to the feminine. Sarris’ all-male working list of *auteur* directors, which would later be developed into his “Pantheon” in 1968, “is somewhat weighted toward seniority and established reputations,” though he admits that “some of these auteurs will rise, some will fall, and some will be displaced” (563). His refusal to even consider the possibility of a female auteur here, and the implied patrilineal inheritance of film conventions from one auteur to the next over the course of generations (perhaps in order to maintain the “virility” of the designation) calls to mind Cixous’ declaration, “Either the woman is passive; or she doesn’t exist. What is left unthinkable, unthought of. She does not enter into the oppositions, she is not coupled with the father (who is coupled with the son)” (“Sorties” 288).

In the years following his Sarris’ adoption and promotion of auteur theory, the approach garnered significant criticism in English-speaking circles. For instance, Kael took an especially

derisive view of auteur theory over the course of her career, quickly becoming one of Sarris' most vocal critics. Kael's documented love for "trashy movies" opposed Sarris' attempts at intellectualism (once again evoking the "High/Low" dichotomy illustrated by Cixous), leading to a years-long debate over which of the two perspectives would come to define American film criticism. On the masculinism seemingly inherent in Sarris' work, Kael writes, "The *auteur* critics are so enthralled with their narcissistic male fantasies . . . that they seem unable to relinquish their schoolboy notions of human experience" (Kael 26). She goes on to pose a sardonic question about the nature of the English-speaking auteur movement:

Can we conclude that, in England and the United States, the auteur theory is an attempt by adult males to justify staying inside the small range of their boyhood and adolescence – that period when masculinity looked so great and important but art was something talked about by poseurs and phonies and sensitive-feminine types? (26)

Though Kael is dismissed by Sarris in *The American Cinema* as "a lady critic with a lively sense of outrage" (26), a similar level of irritation at the overt masculinization of this perspective – and its concomitant exclusion of femininity – is still shared with many other contemporary critics today. Film writer Melissa Silverstein, who also serves as artistic director of New York's women-centred Athena Film Festival, take particular issue with the theory's prioritization of male artistic vision: "In general," Silverstein writes,

I have minimal interest in the whole discussion of auteurs because it leaves women out. Women are just beginning to create a body of work that lets them into the conversation. And there is a lack of respect for women's work whether it stars men or women because there is a lack of respect for women's visions (qtd. in Farmer)

Other detractors of the auteur theory in general often argue that the inherently collaborative nature of filmmaking renders the auteur classification nonsensical – as surely actors, screenwriters, cinematographers, and editors all make a significant contribution to the final outcome. In *Dictionary of Film Makers* (1972), Georges Sadoul indicates that film authorship should be considered a collective process shared by directors, screenwriters, and producers alike (vi). More recently, in his 2006 manifesto *The Schreiber Theory: A Radical Rewrite of American Film History*, David Kipen asserts that “directing isn’t everything” and specifically terms auteur theory a mistake – one that “too many people have been making . . . for far too long” (24). Kipen instead coins the alternative Schreiber theory so as to highlight the importance of the screenwriter as the true author of a film.

Yet I contend that this stance necessarily invalidates the potential usefulness of auteur theory to examine feminist filmmakers and the influence of the female director over the quality of the finished film. As Hoi Fung Cheu writes, “The fact that film is a collaborative art form does not exclude it from the discourse of authorship” (49). This is particularly true when dealing with the work of female filmmakers, whose authorship is inherently politicized due to their historical alienation from the realm of both literary and cinematic authority. Agnès Varda, who imbues her films with a distinctly feminine voice that privileges her directorial status and makes her influence palpable throughout each of her films, embodies this form of authority. While Sarris’ imposition of masculinity onto his theories creates an imbalance that favours male filmmakers, his concept of the film-author as a distinct and artistically legitimate figure remains an efficient and useful strand of film criticism that, if reconceptualised to include women, would offer female directors the opportunity to assert a level of authorship historically restricted to men. As Johnston writes, auteur theory’s “polemics challenged the entrenched view of Hollywood as

monolithic, and stripped of its normative aspects the classification of films by director has proved an extremely productive way of ordering our experience of the cinema” (26). Thus, it is not so much auteur theory itself – or, in its broadest sense, the analysis of a film through the lens of directorial authorship – that poses a problem for female filmmakers here; it is instead the narrow masculinization of the status of director that excludes female voices and narratives.

This “rigid formula” that had already begun to characterize the American auteur movement in the 1960s led critics such as Kael to argue that Sarris had created a much too inflexible framework for his theories to be theoretically or artistically useful (14). This masculinism inherent in the conventional auteur approach (and therefore also inherent in the very concept of the “film director”) further distinguishes it from my conception of the feminine autrice. In her 2006 book *Feminist Auteurs: Reading Women’s Films*, Geetha Ramanathan elaborates on the qualities of this feminine designation, writing,

Feminist auteurship entails the impression of feminist authority, not necessarily that of the auteur herself, onscreen. What is at stake here is the films’ larger acknowledgement of an informing discourse that is ideological in both form and content. Whether visual, psychoanalytic, aural or narrative, this address transcends the personal; both the place and terms of address are derived from an understanding of the films’ relevance to women. (3-4)

Falling in line with this description, Varda’s specific brand of filmmaking prioritizes female representation and solidifies the concept of the autrice within the context of both feminist and auteur theory. In a 1997 *New York Times* interview, Varda discusses her affinity for auteur theory, stating “I wish to feel somebody behind the film . . . [just as I would like] to feel somebody behind a painting” (Gussow). Here, Varda identifies herself with the theory’s

emphasis on craft and artistic individualism, expressing a desire to re-legitimize the auteur as the visionary driving force behind the production. She says,

Auteurs are much attacked nowadays because people say they are selfish and narcissistic, and that they don't want to listen to anybody. It's true – and so what. I don't think Cassavetes listened to many people and he was a real auteur, and so is Bresson. I like to know that Bresson exists and made a certain kind of film. But we are few. We don't disturb anybody. (Gussow)

Making her directorial debut in 1955, Varda predates many of her male contemporaries and laid the groundwork for the impending French New Wave of the late 1950s and early 1960s. At only thirty years of age, she would be termed the “Grandmother of the French New Wave” by the greater film community, indicating a perceived level of prestige and film mastery that would lead to her later associations with the auteur label. As the only woman in the “boys’ club” of the Left Bank, a subgroup of New Wave directors associated with political leftism and artistic non-conformity, Varda was under immense pressure to conform to the masculine filmic styles of the men in her cohort; upon her recommendation by fellow filmmaker, and Varda’s future husband, Jacques Demy to producer George Beauregard, the latter made no bones about the type of films he wanted to make: “You’ve got to do it just like the boys,” he ordered (Wood). In the 2008 English translation of her book *Masculine Singular: French New Wave Cinema*, Geneviève Sellier states that this all-male coterie of respected filmmakers and *Cahiers du Cinéma* alumni had “[begun] to ‘write’ in the first person singular in a new attempt to take account of lived experience at its most intimate, its most quotidian, and its most contemporary. . . . [These filmmakers] make the decision to say ‘I’” (6). This “I,” however, is implicitly – and at times explicitly – masculine. The cinema of the New Wave is, as Sellier writes,

not simply one expression – among many – of the state of relations between men and women in the new generation. It is also a reaction of young, bourgeois men worried about acceding to the status of the artist and to the privileges traditionally attached to that status, in the face of the destabilizing emergence of the women of their generation into the realm of cultural production (*Masculine Singular* 18)

Sellier goes on to argue that the New Wave movement itself, much like the auteur theory that emerged from it, is characterized by an inherent masculinity – a movement produced by men, for men, in which women exist only as supplementary characters whose presences are always aestheticized within the parameters of heterosexual male desire. Referring to films by French auteurs such as Godard, Truffaut, and Claude Chabrol, Sellier notes that “[f]emale characters in these films are the male hero’s fears and desires made concrete, and the viewer only has access to them through his gaze” (*Masculine Singular* 149). Even some prominent actresses of the New Wave became reduced to muses for their respective auteurs – think Jeanne Moreau and Truffaut, or Anna Karina and Godard – mirroring the ways in which their onscreen characters are “the object of the idealizing gaze of the artist” (*Masculine Singular* 68). Varda, however, rejects this patriarchal mode of female representation, instead choosing to incorporate the lived experiences of women, acknowledging that the male experience is not synonymous with the human experience.

Although Sellier is one of only a handful of scholars to fully delve into the masculinism of the French New Wave, including its social, historical, and cultural contexts, the notion of a cinematic male gaze that places women in submissive, fetishized, or overtly sexualized positions is hardly a new one. The “narcissistic male fantasies” alluded to by Kael become increasingly obvious when considering the reduced status of female characters as little more than objects of

the male gaze in numerous male-audited films, both in France and abroad. In 1975, Laura Mulvey published her oft-cited essay on phallogentrism and feminine subjectivity in film, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” using Freudian psychoanalysis to point out the implied masculine gaze of the camera itself and examining the significance of scopophilia or “pleasure in looking” in audience responses to female representation on film (58). “It is said,” Mulvey writes, “that analyzing pleasure, or beauty, destroys it. That is the intention of this article. The satisfaction and reinforcement of the ego that represent the high point of film history hitherto must be attacked” (“Visual Pleasure” 59). While not explicitly responding to auteur theory in her article, Mulvey nevertheless cites several prominent male filmmakers frequently associated with the auteur label, such as Alfred Hitchcock and Howard Hawks, investigating the ways in which these men position woman “as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium” (“Visual Pleasure” 62). One of the first to delineate and criticize this tendency, Mulvey’s famed contribution helped create a discourse within which scholars could analyze the cinematic visual feminine and its role in articulating and perpetuating the real-world patriarchal constraints over women.

While feminist film criticism has certainly come a long way since the mid-1970s, having moved past the compulsory heterosexuality and dated psychoanalytic framework of Mulvey’s article in order to incorporate race and queer studies, among others, the concept of a cinematic gaze presented in “Visual Pleasure” remains useful in considerations of audice-ship – particularly instances in which a female filmmaker like Varda subverts this trope and uses the heretofore masculine viewpoint of the camera to deaestheticize the female body and further prioritize female agency. As Ince writes, “Although it is undoubtedly subjective, Varda’s feminism is just as unquestionably social, stemming as it does from the collective condition of

female embodiment” (613). Varda’s very position as an autrice is rooted in her fundamental emphasis on femininity and the female experience; rather than embodying the traditional scopophilic male gaze, Varda’s camera often forces the viewer, long accustomed to this mode of masculine spectatorship, into a position of unprecedented identification with the women onscreen. Rather than appreciating these characters as objects of male desire, we instead regard them as agential human beings – women, yes, but first and foremost human.

A quality overwhelmingly denied to female characters in male-authored films, humanity oftentimes becomes synonymous with maleness, reducing femaleness to the status of Other, in discussions of filmic identification. “As the spectator identifies with the main male protagonist” Mulvey asserts, “he projects his look onto that of his like, his screen surrogate, so that the power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look, both giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence” (“Visual Pleasure” 63). This process of identification necessarily excludes women, who are almost never granted this active power in films directed by male auteurs, where “Framing, make-up and lighting stylised the female star, inflecting the way representations of female sexuality slip into 'to-be-looked-at-ness', creating the ultimate screen spectacle” (Mulvey “Visual Pleasure” 59). For instance, on *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, director Hawks explicitly describes his camera’s relationship to the two female leads – both the characters and the actresses who portray them – in voyeuristic terms: “The two girls, Jane Russell and Marilyn Monroe, were so good together that each time I didn’t know what scene to invent, I just had them walk back and forth and everyone adored it; they never tired of watching these two pretty girls walk” (qtd. in Turim 105). Notorious for his “unfailing interest in masculine camaraderie, teasing sexuality, and professional pride,” Hawks embodies not only the

masculine gaze of the auteur but also the reaffirmation of patriarchal authority frequently depicted in male-auteured films (Kipen 24).

While Russell's and Monroe's "exploitation as objects being trotted back and forth, up and down the screen like ducks in a shooting gallery" is made clear throughout Hawks' film, Varda takes an oppositional but equally authoritative view of femininity and the female body in her work (Turim 105). Beginning in *La Pointe Courte*, and continuing throughout her filmography – most notably in *Sans toit ni loi (Vagabond)*, twenty-five years later – one of Varda's favourite images appears to be that of the woman on the move. However, as Ince states, "one of the activities by which we most remember Cléo of *Cléo de 5 à 7* and Mona of *Vagabond* is their dynamic walking through city and countryside respectively, which it seems to me we are invited to view as subjective expression rather than in a 'sex-pervasive' manner" (Ince 607). Varda's camera does not frame these women in terms of the visual erotic. As Ginette Vincendeau writes, Varda's ensuing filmography would "spectacularly [combine] the New Wave methods she pioneered and a unique feminist gaze" ("Pioneer" 30). In the following pages, I will examine three of Varda's most significant directorial endeavours with a particular emphasis on this feminist gaze in order to situate Varda under the *autrice* designation. *La Pointe Courte*, *Cléo de 5 à 7*, and *Sans toit ni loi* each activate this feminine perspective in a different, but nonetheless authorially consistent, way, demonstrating Varda's evident refusal to perpetuate the dominant, masculinized filmic mode.

Chapter 3: Authorship and Cinécriture Féminine in *La Pointe Courte*

In 1954 a young woman with no filmmaking experience, who struggled to remember ever seeing a film other than *Citizen Kane* in her youth, decided to make a movie in the tiny fishing corner of La Pointe Courte. Varda was already very familiar with this area at the time: her family had fled to the south of France during World War II, leaving her with an intense fascination for this curious little quarter and its characterful residents. Indeed, she populates *La Pointe Courte*, her directorial debut, with unpaid local non-actors, who she also credits for their contributions to her script, resulting in a neorealistic, documentary-like film that, in Varda's words, "was nourished by reality and real people" (qtd. in Flitterman-Lewis 225). Varda's literary inspirations – her brand of filmmaking typically incorporating elements of the written novel – are clear from the film's narrative structure, a brand of filmmaking summed up best by her concept of cinécriture, or "film-writing." Building upon this notion of cinécriture, and drawing from Hélène Cixous' oft-discussed concept of écriture féminine in order to create cinécriture féminine, or "women's film-writing," I argue that *La Pointe Courte* exemplifies Varda's specific form of feminine film-writing. This chapter thus focuses on the feminist authorship inherent in the narrative structure and aesthetic visuality of the film; or, in other words, the particular feminist sensibility Varda displays in her depiction of both the local residents and the non-local heroine, highlighting the ways in which this authorship contributes to Varda's status as an autrice.

"Cinécrit par Agnès Varda": this subheading appears during the opening credits of numerous Varda films, from the twenty-two minute *Ulysse* (1982) to the feature-length *Sans toit ni loi* (1985), a stamp of authorial intent that underscores her painstaking influence over the whole of the filmmaking process. Although widely discussed among film critics and scholars,

cinécriture remains a rather ambiguous concept to define. Combining the tenets of literary authorship with the immersive visuality and unique narrative techniques of cinema, the term cinécriture denotes a style of filmmaking that attempts to emulate in visual form the specific – and frequently abstract or non-linear – qualities of literature. As Varda famously elaborates,

A well-written film is also well filmed, the actors are well chosen, so are the locations. The cutting, the movement, the points-of-view, the rhythm of filming and editing have been felt and considered in the way a writer chooses the depth of meaning of sentences, the type of words, number of adverbs, paragraphs, asides, chapters which advance the story or break its flow, etc. In writing, it is called style. In cinema, style is *cinécriture*.
(Varda qtd. in Lee 121)

Varda’s total unfamiliarity with, yet total mastery over, almost every aspect of film production – as Flitterman-Lewis notes, she oversaw each aspect of *La Pointe Courte*’s production, scouting locations and meticulously planning out every detail of the shoot weeks in advance – results in “a peculiar combination of highly polished artistry . . . and a documentary naturalism reminiscent of Italian Neo-Realism” (Flitterman-Lewis 224). Vincendeau draws our attention to the unprecedented nature of this young woman’s unique filmmaking practice, writing that “Varda’s authorial control over both scriptwriting and directing, the exclusive use of location shooting, the mixing of professional and nonprofessional actors – all of this was groundbreaking in early 1950s France” (“*La Pointe Courte*”).

This emphasis on female artistic expression easily lends itself to Hélène Cixous’ model of écriture féminine, first discussed in her seminal 1975 essay “The Laugh of the Medusa.” According to Cixous,

Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies – for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement. (875)

Cixous' philosophy works to dismantle the masculine hegemony that so often manifests itself through writing and creative expression – areas that have remained closed-off to women and other marginalized groups throughout Western history. Cixous goes on to state that “Smug-faced readers, managing editors, and big bosses don't like the true texts of women – female-sexed texts. That kind scares them” (“Medusa” 877). Her argument that “writing has been run by a libidinal and cultural – hence political, typically masculine – economy” can also be applied to the discipline of film – production, writing, criticism, theory (“Medusa” 879). Similarly, Jill Forbes attributes Varda's relative lack of attention from the greater academic film discourse directly to the general marginalization of her sex: “Varda is literally invisible, either because her movies do not find a distributor . . . or more subtly, through a damaging critical silence. . . . Varda's exclusion must be related to the fact that she is a woman” (122). Similarly, Vincendeau asserts that Varda was unnecessarily overshadowed by her male contemporaries, writing that her “role as pioneer (as opposed to the patronising ‘mother’ or ‘grandmother’ label with which she is often tagged) of the New Wave was unjustly ignored both at the time and for decades afterwards, as attention focused on the male ‘Young Turks’” (“Pioneer” 30).

Susan Hayward's discussion of the rather loosely defined “femme-filmécriture” is also a useful one to expand upon here, as Varda's feminist cinécriture falls in line with Hayward's investigation of the “digressive” nature of female film-writing that “[goes] counter to the dominant male film-making practices” (276). Hayward's term appears to differ little from the

notion of cinécriture féminine: both concepts focus heavily on the authorial construction of a film, with feminine cinema coming to signify “counter-cinema” within the traditional authorial/auteurial mode. Claire Johnston’s influential 1973 essay “Women’s Cinema as Counter-Cinema” notes that female Hollywood directors such as Ida Lupino and Dorothy Azner “had little opportunity for real expression within the dominant sexist ideology” that permeated the film community and positioned “woman as ahistoric and eternal” (24-25). While she takes a derisive view of Varda’s feminism, Johnston applies auteur theory to the works of Lupino and Azner, going on to state that films directed by these women necessarily subvert patriarchal expectations of womanhood and help viewers “[develop] the means to interrogate male, bourgeois cinema” (29). Varda’s concept of cinécriture, thus, inherently lends itself to the prioritization of the film author; as a result, cinécriture féminine inherently lends itself to the prioritization of the *autrice*. As Bolton writes, Varda’s notion of cinécriture “enables a discussion of filmmaking that acknowledges that the practice of filmmaking *may* not emerge from a single person, but that it is a practice which is organized around a director, thus enabling the consideration of the woman filmmaker as an auteur” (195).

A film “astonishing in its beauty, social commentary and modernity,” *La Pointe Courte* is a fitting place to begin an analysis of female authorship, not only because it is the first of Varda’s films, but also due to the literary origins of its narrative structure (Vincendeau, “Pioneer” 30). But if Varda herself has been largely neglected by English-speaking feminist critics, *La Pointe Courte* has been utterly ignored. In her 2010 essay “Who Killed Brigitte Bardot? Perspectives on the New Wave at Fifty,” Vanessa Schwartz remarks that the film has been “sent to the morgue” in most contemporary French New Wave film anthologies, citing a preoccupation with maintaining the idealized image of the Great Male Director as a possible explanation: “To

remember [*La Pointe Courte*] would give too much credit, too early, to someone other than Truffaut” she writes (148).

Varda’s cinécriture féminine permeates even her earliest film, demonstrating not only commitment to eschewing convention but also the enduring presence of her authorial voice. In a 2007 interview, Varda explains that she adapted the structure of American writer William Faulkner’s 1939 novel *The Wild Palms* (also known as *If I Forget Thee Jerusalem*), which alternates chapter by chapter between two unrelated stories, to the narrative structure of *La Pointe Courte*, which alternates between the central couple and the residents of the seaside village. In an interview with Criterion Collection, coinciding with its release of *La Pointe Courte* on DVD, she described this move as “very bold, very courageous, to choose such a literary genre, one so radically opposed to the conventions of film and narrative.” Varda spearheaded the amalgamation of the literary and the cinematic that would redefine filmmaking well before the experimentalism characteristic of the New Wave. Accordingly, film historian Georges Sadoul looks back on *La Pointe Courte* as “truly the first film of the New Wave” (qtd. in Vincendeau, “Pioneer” 30). From the outset, however, Varda seemed keenly aware of her outsider status, and this marginalized perspective is one Varda brings to explore in *La Pointe Courte* through the film’s female protagonist, portrayed by theatre actress Silvia Monfort. Credited as “Elle,” or “She,” with her husband, played by Philippe Noiret, similarly known as “Lui,” or “Him,” the female protagonist is introduced in the midst of an existential crisis while on holiday to La Pointe Courte following her husband’s infidelity some time prior. However, the setting has a presence of its own thanks to the sweeping landscapes caressed by Varda’s camera with just as much tenderness it does its human subjects. As Yvette Bíró writes, “The leading roles are played by the wind, the sand, the sea, and the tedium of everyday gestures” (1).

By the same token, these references to literary authorship “[emphasize] personal creation,” harkening back to Sarris’ image of the auteur as a figure fundamentally concerned with individuality and personal worldview (Lee 101). In “Heterotropic Spaces and Nomadic Gazes in Varda,” Phil Powrie evaluates Varda’s authorial presence within her work, stating that “At the center of Varda’s films is often a woman, either gazing or gazed upon, a woman who is an avatar for Varda herself” – in much the same manner that the male auteur identifies with the male protagonist (69). *La Pointe Courte*’s very premise alienates the female half of the central couple, the titular village being the husband’s hometown, a place entirely unfamiliar to his wife. The film visually depicts the heroine’s alienation from the place in which her husband spent half of his life by frequently isolating her in the frame, separating her from the surrounding area. Likewise, Varda’s shot style is much more avant-garde during the Elle/Lui “chapters” or sections of the film, even, as Vincendeau writes, anticipating the kind of geometric, close-up facial orientations Ingmar Bergman would employ in *Persona* (1966) over a decade later (“*La Pointe Courte*”). Varda requested outright that the two lead performers, both of whom had their roots in the high-brow Théâtre National Populaire, were “not to act or express any feelings,” instead urging them “to say their dialogue as if they were reading it” (Varda qtd. in Vincendeau, “*La Pointe Courte*”). As Vincendeau indicates, this stilted and monotonous line delivery sharply contrasts the boisterous colloquialisms of the real-life residents of La Pointe Courte, further underscoring the couple’s alienation from the everyday goings-on of the townsfolk. Coupled with her emphasis on *cinécriture*, this tendency cements Varda’s authorial presence, rather paradoxically by emphasizing her feminine presence.

Financing the film’s meagre \$14,000 budget with a small family inheritance and producing the film under her own small independent production company, Ciné-Tamaris, Varda

would use her tiny production team and lack of studio recognition or funding to her advantage, taking a distinctly ethnographic approach to filmmaking; prior to shooting, she explored the town on her own and integrated herself into the daily goings-on of the locals:

That's how I had all different kinds of encounters, powerful ones, touching ones, even strange ones. . . . At this point it wasn't a question of a film-crew, not even an assistant or a manager. I am a person before I'm a filmmaker, or better yet, a filmmaker who's still a person. In these encounters I didn't even talk about film. I was simply someone speaking to someone else: people told me all sorts of things and, for the most part, these were interesting to me. (Varda qtd. in Flitterman-Lewis 224-225)

Moreover, Emma Jackson affirms that Varda's approach to filmmaking is indicative of her ethnographic eye: "a knack of observation, an attention to detail, a sensitivity – or a sensibility perhaps – towards the complexity of the world and of people" (123). This approach, as Vincendeau writes, "is clearly prompted by her fascination with a place that seems to exist outside of time, a premodern space connected to contemporary France only by the railway line" ("*La Pointe Courte*"). Due to a lack of on-set sound equipment that forced the filmmakers to shoot the film without sound, the local non-actors of this isolated region would later have their voices, and distinct regional dialects, redubbed by Parisian actors who attempted to re-create this unusual accent in post-production – much to the annoyance of the former, according to Varda; however, she maintains that the residents of *La Pointe Courte* have a particular affinity for the film, which she frequently screened in the village decades after its completion. Constantly juxtaposed against the stoic central couple, the townsfolk's unpretentious and naturalistic interactions reaffirm Vincendeau's assertion that "The couple's problem is theater, the villagers' real life" ("*La Pointe Courte*").

Reflecting on the beginnings of her filmmaking career in an early-2000s interview for The Criterion Collection, Varda says

Without a doubt, I opened a door to contemporary film in 1954. It also led the way to the new kind of cinema that would be shot quickly, cheaply, with natural lighting, that became the New Wave. In this new cinema, I was certainly the only woman. I became a model in a way. All those men and one woman! (“Agnès Varda Interview”)

In addition to the restrictions placed upon her by her youth and femininity, Varda’s lack of film knowledge – as well as her lack of demonstrable reverence for the film community at large – further distinguished her from her male contemporaries, like Cinémathèque Française-educated Godard and Truffaut who wore their cinephilia like a badge of honour. However, she appeared to have embraced her marginality, her outsider status, in order to develop and cultivate her singular authorial voice outside the bounds of traditional male cinema. Varda goes on to state, “I’m more interested in trying to find something that forces me to find a new filmic language that continually sets up new relationships between the person who envisions and creates the film and the person who sees it. I’m always thinking of the viewer.” Demonstrating a style of filmmaking that melds the world of the cinematic with the world of the literary, the cinécriture of *La Pointe Courte* not only serves as a constant reminder of Varda’s personal stamp of authorship, but also highlights her marginality by incorporating the autobiographical feminine central to the *autrice*. Thus, this first of Varda’s films embodies the cinécriture feminine that would go on to characterize her entire filmography and restructure the landscape of filmic-writing forever.

Chapter 4: Masquerade, Subjectivity, and the Female Gaze in *Cléo de 5 à 7*

At the midway point of Varda's 1962 film *Cléo de 5 à 7*, the titular protagonist performs a dramatic and emotionally charged rendition of "Cri d'Amour," an uncharacteristically solemn ballad for the heretofore chic and trendy pop singer with a preference for "easy" songs. Later referred to as "Sans toi," or "Without You" after its melancholy refrain, the song describes the psychological weight of loneliness: "I am an empty body / Without you / . . . / Alone, ugly, pale." All the while Varda's sweeping camera slowly isolates Cléo, all blonde hair and white-hot silk, from her musical collaborators, transporting her from the airy brightness of her Parisian apartment to a simple black backdrop against which she remains illuminated for the duration of the song. Cléo stares directly into the camera as the music reaches its crescendo and we watch as she is moved to tears – not for the first time in the film thus far, albeit, but this intimate moment strikes us as markedly dissimilar to any earlier externalized hysteria. Here, Cléo transcends her characteristic childishness and allows herself to be moved by this deeply visceral experience, putting into words the feelings of alienation, objectification, and existential dread that have plagued her for the first half of the film. In a turn of phrase Varda would explore to similar effect some twenty years later with *Vagabond*, or *Sans toit ni loi* (1985), Cléo's repetition of "Without you" coupled with her searing gaze into the camera, and, therefore, *at* the viewer, signifies the beginning of her profound transformation from a pretty pearl to be looked at and fawned over to an active social agent capable of looking back.

Released in the midst of the then well-established New Wave, *Cléo de 5 à 7* is perhaps Varda's most immediately recognizable motion picture, with numerous scholars highlighting this four-minute sequence as the unequivocal turning point of the film, the moment on which all

previous and ensuing events hinge. The Cléo who finishes “Sans toi” is not the same Cléo who started it, separating the film into two distinct halves as she finally undergoes the “complete transformation of [her] whole being” foreshadowed by a tarot card reader in the film’s opening scenes. Lead actress Corinne Marchand’s iconic searing-yet-wide-eyed gaze would go on to distinguish her turn as the enigmatic Cléo and has since become an emblem of mid-century French cinema; her face has not only graced the bulk of *Cléo*’s promotional material, from original posters to modern digital and DVD issues, but also seemingly become synonymous with Varda’s overall body of work for some contemporary film scholars.¹ But how does Varda get us to this moment? Where does she take us from here? What is the significance of Cléo’s transformation, and, given the film’s borderline hostile reception from second-wave feminist critics who viewed its central figure as nothing short of a misogynistic caricature, what does this depiction of femininity say about Varda’s position as an autrice? Drawing once again from Laura Mulvey’s work on the phallic voyeurism inherent in cinematic representations of women in “Visual Pleasure” and *Fetishism and Curiosity* (1996), in addition to Janice Mouton’s analysis of the feminine *flâneuse*, I argue that *Cléo de 5 à 7* interrogates prior male-auteured representations of femininity by visually juxtaposing Cléo’s superficial feminine masquerade with her ultimate realization of an authentic feminine identity. By the same token, Varda’s emphasis on Cléo as a passive object turned active subject, made clear through the stark difference in cinematography and character between the film’s first and final halves, not only prioritizes the underrepresented female gaze and challenges the limitations of the scopophilic male gaze, but also validates Varda’s as a crucial voice in the representation of multifaceted feminine aesthetics on film.

¹ As Lee points out, *Cléo*’s ubiquity is particularly clear from the front cover of Geetha Ramanathan’s *Feminist Auteurs: Reading Women’s Films*, which features a close-up shot of Cléo, despite the film’s total absence from her analysis of Varda’s directorial style.

Considered an unequivocal feminist work by most twenty-first-century film scholars, a film which, according to Kate Ince, “anticipates by fourteen years most of the questions and concepts Laura Mulvey would explore and deploy in ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’” (603), *Cléo de 5 à 7* nevertheless endured harsh criticisms from feminist critics of the 1960s and 1970s. In “Women’s Cinema as Counter-Cinema” (1973), Claire Johnston describes Varda’s filmography as “a particularly good example of an *oeuvre* which celebrates bourgeois myths of women . . . [and marks] a retrograde step in women’s cinema” (30); two years later, Naome Gilbert would refer to *Cléo* as a film in which “the female image was characteristically oppressed and the roles were stereotypes” (qtd. in Lee 62-63). A superficial reading of the film appears to confirm these suspicions, as Varda takes great pains to frame her protagonist as an archetype of feminine performance. The film follows Cléo – short for Cléopâtre, itself a show biz stand-in for her less captivating birth name, Florence – for approximately two hours as she awaits the results of a biopsy that may lead to a diagnosis of stomach cancer. Introduced as a beautiful and spoiled young woman suffocating under the weight of patriarchal conformity, Cléo exists inside a cocoon of feminine pleasures and aesthetics that the potential monstrosity of illness and death threaten to completely destroy. “Being ugly, that’s what death is,” Cléo tells herself. “As long as I’m beautiful, I’m alive.” Aided by her fussy but well-meaning maid Angèle, Cléo constructs a protective feminine fantasy that is wholly interested in pleasing the men in her life. She adorns herself with expensive clothing and constantly fixes her appearance in passing windows and mirrors; even in the midst of an existential anxiety attack at a café, she attempts to smile winsomely through her tears at the two men who stop to console her. Likewise, Angèle fills a maternal role in Cléo’s life, embodying societal pressure to conform to a brand of femininity specifically geared toward the male gaze in order to ensure one’s safety, happiness,

and financial security as a woman. Not unlike the mothers identified by Simone de Beauvoir in a televised 1970s interview entitled “Pourquoi je suis féministe,” mothers who enforce male-prescribed femininity onto their daughters in an attempt to protect them from men and “think that a woman who isn’t like them is a monster,” Angèle helps Cléo maintain her feminine masquerade (Servan-Schreiber et al). She quickly laughs off the raucous cat-calls Cléo receives from a carful of men, dresses her like a child in an opulent silk robe, and instructs Cléo not to tell her promising new lover, José, about her potential illness: “Men hate that,” Angèle contends.

Throughout this half of the film, Varda’s camera remains largely omniscient, not only favouring a highly aestheticized portrayal of Cléo herself, but also showing the audience images that remain hidden from Cléo’s view, who is, in these early scenes, too distracted with the task of maintaining her feminine masquerade to realize the absence of her own independent identity. This omniscience initially presents as a rather commonplace objectification of the female body, standard fare among the other New Wave auteurs, with Varda’s camera mirroring the sort of masculinized cinematic gaze with which Mulveyan critics frequently took issue. Cléo fetishizes her own body by surrounding herself with symbols of sumptuous and often infantilizing forms of femininity, yet Varda also contributes to her heroine’s masquerade by maintaining a spectatorial viewpoint that implicitly identifies her directorial presence with the role of onlooker – or filmgoer. In a brilliant sequence at the height of Cléo’s vanity, the world inside the hat shop, where she finds herself intoxicated by her own beauty, is separated from the outside world in a tracking shot that reflects in the store window the comings and goings of Parisian city life against Cléo’s aimless shopping. In this moment, Cléo takes comfort in her adherence to traditional femininity as a source of acceptance, pleasure, and safety, symbolically distancing her from the reality of her life. Similarly, another early scene features shots of several African tribal masks in

a shop window that go unnoticed by Cléo, foreshadowing her impending transition from object to subject by highlighting the artificiality of performance devoid of subjectivity. As Janice Mouton writes,

With their prominent eyes and mouths (one in particular with abundant strawlike hair is shown in close-up), these striking masks are also fetishes. Once, in their original context, they represented elements in a belief system; now, like Cléo, they are simply objects on display – beautiful but devoid of a life or meaning on their own. Cléo, not yet having begun her process of transformation, does not see the masks. Varda, however, like the tarot reader, foretells the future. (6)

Here, Mouton's description of the exaggerated, caricature-like aesthetic of these African masks, produced for consumption by non-African Parisian society, mirrors Cléo's exaggerated performance of femininity for consumption by masculine society. This comparison is reinforced by Elizabeth Ezra's claim that these masks "can be viewed as a comment on Cléo's mask-like persona" (178). Ezra goes on to state that Cléo's complete acceptance of "the trappings of femininity, complete with blonde wig, makeup, spike heels, and a dress with a swishing skirt and tightly-cinched waist that emphasizes her hourglass figure, [makes] her look like nothing so much as a drag queen," an embellished object created with the purpose of being looked *at* but never looking *back* (178).

Set design and mise-en-scène throughout these early scenes also emphasize the decadence and superficiality of the environment in which Cléo spends her life. Her luxurious yet strangely bare apartment mirrors her own artificial outward appearance; the two have been carefully and expertly crafted by Cléo, and to some extent Angèle, in order to present an illusion of idyllic femininity that appeals to – and, therefore, endears Cléo to – the men in her life, from

her buffoonish music collaborators, Bob and Maurice, to her would-be lover, José. Cléo's male-focused construction of feminine beauty, Mouton states, "is reflected in one mirror after another as she moves about the room – allowing her form to play over the framed surfaces – shiny, empty, and waiting" (6). Not unlike the mewling kittens that frolic in the background of her apartment, charming symbols of naïveté, childishness, and vulnerability, Cléo finds herself reduced to something cute and passive and naturally fawned over by others. As Mouton contends, "[s]he becomes the woman she is not – a fantasy, a fetishized object, someone to be looked at, reassuring rather than dangerous" (4).

However, following Cléo's performance of "Cri d'Amour," both the film and its protagonist undergo a palpable transformation – one that went largely unrecognized by feminist critics in the English-speaking world until well into the 1990s. As recently as 2010, Sellier described *Cléo* as one of the only films of the 1960s to "construct female characters as an example of consciousness, as subject, and not as object of the story" (150). With regard to this shift in *Cléo*'s reception, Lee asserts "that the dismissal of Varda by early feminist film critics is partly due to their relative neglect of the importance of textual politics and of the need for resistance to dominant film language" (Lee 10). "Cri d'Amour," suggested by Bob and Maurice as a potential new hit for Cléo to record, triggers a display of emotional authenticity she could not have otherwise experienced within the confines of her feminine masquerade. At the end of her performance, a highly agitated Cléo chastises the two men for presenting her with such grim lyrics that emphasize the ugliness in death that she so fears and storms out of the room. But the damage has been done; her illusion of perfect femininity has been shattered at this conscious and externalized recognition of her own mortality – her human ugliness that is intrinsically at odds with her illusion of feminine perfection.

Stripping off her wig and changing from her sumptuous white affair to a simple black dress, Cléo thus sheds her misogynistic view of feminine beauty “and her doll’s face takes on the anguished expression of a woman’s face, tired and fearful” (Bíró 3). She then takes to the streets, walking through downtown Paris with a newfound agency, no longer interested in appeasing those around her with artificial femininity. Mouton identifies Cléo’s transition with the French notion of “flânerie” or “street walking,” an activity historically reserved for male-passing individuals who could walk alone in public without fear of harassment from other men. Mouton states that the second half of the film sees Cléo integrating herself into the bustling Parisian community and looking back at those she encounters from a position of newfound subjectivity. She writes “The changes she makes in her appearance are significant. George Sand *assumed* the disguise of a man to become a *flâneur*, Cléo *removes* the disguise of a spectacle woman to become a woman walker. In both cases, the purpose is the same: to look without being looked at” (8).

Significantly, however, Cléo does not dress like a man in order to walk the streets without being objectified; she still projects a distinct air of femininity that remains attractive to passers-by – but she also now recognizes her own identity as an active female subject capable of observing all who observe her. Indeed, Cléo always maintains an adherence to conventional femininity as she undergoes this transformation. Underneath her chic blonde wig is an almost identical chic blonde haircut; her white feathers and shimmering silks are replaced not by the androgynous silhouette of the New Woman or the modest tweed of the classic “respectable” film heroine of a bygone era, but instead by a fashionable black shift dress that still underscores her femininity. Thus, the true Cléo clearly still identifies with conventional feminine aesthetics, but only now does Varda allow Cléo to see past her preoccupation with male approval and explore

what this visualized femininity means to *her*. As a result, Varda suggests that it is not individual aspects of the feminine aesthetic that are themselves inherently misogynistic; Cléo does not have to perform masculinity, or even androgyny, in order to undergo her transformation from object to subject. It is instead the exhibition and performance of these feminized qualities for the express purpose of satisfying the male gaze or evoking male desire that leads to Cléo's loss of identity, and it is the recuperation of imperfect femininity – a mussed bob haircut, a black dress that Angèle would surely think too dark for summer – for her own comfort, satisfaction, and enjoyment that leads to Cléo's occupation of an active female perspective.

By the same token, Varda's shift in cinematography during the second half of the film makes manifest Cléo's transition from object to subject, frequently occupying her point of view and underscoring Cléo's ability to look as well as be looked at. Here Varda toys with the voyeuristic nature of film itself and, as contemporary feminist critics would later point out, makes an unquestionably feminist statement by destabilizing the aesthetic conventions of *le cinéma de papa*. "When the spectacle woman," Mouton writes, "who has always been only looked at, claims the right to look for herself, she experiences a form of transgression" (8). Moreover, Varda herself espoused a similar viewpoint in 2000, stating that "the first feminist gesture is to say right, OK, I'm being looked at, but I'm looking too . . . it is the act of deciding to look, and that the world is defined by how I look and not how I'm looked at" (qtd. in Ince 613). Although Mouton argues that Varda's camera portrays "an alternative model of spectatorship not defined by a strict subject/object dichotomy," the film's cinematographic relationship to the viewer in its second half actually appears to invert the traditional masculinized perspective of the male auteur (9). While the audience has heretofore viewed Cléo as an aesthetic object, Varda now turns her camera back onto the viewer, shifting her directorial perspective to

one that tangibly identifies with Cléo as an active subject and forcing filmgoers to assume the role of the observed as Cléo begins to gaze back at the surrounding world – including all that which has gazed upon her. As Cléo walks down a crowded Paris street, the camera takes on her first-person perspective to suggest that the audience instead is being scrutinized by the male gaze in the form of fellow pedestrians who stop to ogle her. Instead of the flattering awe and simpering desire we saw in Cléo’s earlier male acquaintances, these later encounters on the street strike the viewer as disconcerting and even rather threatening. Now aware of herself as a sentient person rather than a passive object, Cléo begins to recognize outside approval of her beauty and male desire for her body as uncomfortably objectifying. Therefore, in compelling the viewer to occupy the traditionally masculinized perspective of voyeur for the first half of the film, Varda renders Cléo’s ultimate transformation an inversion of the conventional cinematic gaze in the second half.

In addition, Cléo’s interactions with other characters following her epiphany help to underscore her transformation. After escaping the confines of her apartment, Cléo visits her old friend Dorothée, who works as a nude model for a sculpture class. As Dorothée poses for an audience of several artists, the atmosphere in the studio upon Cléo’s arrival is immediately more comfortable than the ominous leers experienced by Cléo on the streets – due in large part to Dorothée’s demonstrated control over her femininity and self-identity. Blithe and sociable, Dorothée “contrasts directly with Cleo through her ability to distance herself from her physical impact on others” (Peters 41). Her identity as a woman is entirely separate from how her body is perceived: “My body makes me happy not proud,” she tells Cléo. “They’re looking at more than just me. A shape, an idea. It’s as if I wasn’t there. Like I was asleep.” Unconcerned with outside viewers finding fault with her body, Dorothée exemplifies a transgressive femininity that

prioritizes her own perception of her inner self over the superficial judgments of onlookers. After confiding in a sympathetic Dorothée about her potential ill-health, Cléo sees her reflection in a broken compact mirror and panics at this perceived “bad omen.” Up until this point, mirrors have held significant symbolic meaning in *Cléo*, serving as visual reaffirmations of the heroine’s successful feminine masquerade. Now, however, the image of a broken mirror and a fragmented reflection ultimately forces Cléo to acknowledge her multifaceted identity – highlighted by Dorothée’s attempts to “[rationalize] Cléo’s superstitious reaction” and assure her friend that her identity as a person is not contingent on her outward beauty. Centring her 2010 analysis of Varda’s treatment of gender issues around these same fragmented shots in *Cléo*, Lindsay Peters argues that “Varda aestheticizes a pluralistic female experience, an approach which promotes the collective individuality of each woman” (20). She further contends that Varda’s depiction of Cléo’s developing identity should be viewed as a feminist act resulting from the growing need for more complex, nuanced, and realistic representations of women in film.

Finally, Cléo’s relationship towards men in the film’s second half not only reinforces her independence but also results in the intimate human connection Cléo craves. While the opening sequences saw Cléo prioritizing physical attractiveness over her own emotional well being, she now displays a reluctance to play along with men’s dull and uninspired advances. This anti-coquettishness leads to a more meaningful interaction with Antoine, a young French soldier on leave from the ongoing Algerian War, with whom she spends the film’s final moments. Her brusqueness causes Antoine to abandon his commonplace pickup routine and engage in a deeper conversation about love, mortality, and the nature of happiness; both characters eschew conventional gender dynamics in order to discuss these genderless human experiences that transcend the superficiality of male-female interactions within the limited confines of a

patriarchal society. As Mouton writes, “When she tells Antoine, ‘Today everything amazes me,’ she is speaking as a woman who has learned to look” (13). This realization drives Cléo to go against Angèle’s advice and discuss her illness with Antoine, who expresses a similar existential dread at the prospect of his impending deployment. Here there is neither a pursuer nor a pursued. Intrigued more by Cléo’s complex character and nuanced views on life and death than by her physical beauty, Antoine is able to – literally – see eye to eye with Cléo, who experiences a genuine connection with a man for the first time in the film due to his own recognition of these same emotions; in the final scene on a city bus, the two new friends gaze into one another’s eyes, each looking and being looked at by the other.

Centrally concerned with representations of the feminine and deeply engaged with contemporary patriarchal politics, this most iconic of Varda’s films ensures her position as a feminist autrice. At the beginning of the film, Cléo’s is a world entirely rooted in outward appearances, and, as Mouton’s work suggests, she is incapable of formulating an authentic feminine identity within the constraints of this outwardly-projected masquerade. Prior to her epiphany, “[h]er intact, fetishized beauty – her feminine masquerade assures her that she is healthy and alive and wards off her anxiety about being fragmented and mutilated and her dread of annihilation and nothingness” (Mouton 5). Following this transformation, Cléo allows herself freedom to confront and accept her mortality; now an active participant in the vibrant goings-on of Parisian city life, Cléo no longer feels compelled to constantly reassure herself of her own existence by gazing at her reflection and is instead content with her own inwardly-focused selfhood, humanized by the illness that disrupts her idealized performance of perfect feminine vitality. Varda’s camera traces Cléo’s journey from object to subject through intricate cinematography that foregrounds the active female gaze and, perhaps even more importantly,

female self-perception independent of feminine masquerade. Infused with Varda's presence both as a director and as a woman, *Cléo* offers a remarkable depiction of feminine subjectivity that is rarely represented onscreen – no less by a heroine who serves as an archetype of conventional femininity for the first half of the film and even retains an affinity for feminine aesthetics up until the final shot.

Chapter 5: Deaestheticizing the Feminine in *Sans toit ni loi*

No investigation of Varda's status as an autrice would be complete without discussing *Sans toit ni loi* (1985), a film widely considered to be her greatest work and frequently cited as the primary reason for her re-evaluation and gradual acceptance by feminist film critics in the 1990s. Centred on the final days of young drifter Mona Bergeron – the *Vagabond* of the film's English title – as she trudges across the Languedoc-Roussillon countryside shortly before her body is discovered frozen to death in a ditch, *Sans toit ni loi* upsets male-dominated modes of female representation, “[bringing] to bear a distinctly feminine authorial voice in exploring the social articulations of vision and (feminine) identity” (Flitterman-Lewis 243). In this chapter, I analyze the narrative significance of filth and femininity, of Varda's claim that, through *Sans toit ni loi*, she wished “to film what freedom and dirt meant” (qtd. in Darke). Focusing on Varda's signature cinematography as a visual manifestation of the female gaze, as well as her disruption of conventional feminine aesthetics in the physical presence of the film's unkempt heroine through an unabashed portrayal of Mona's many feminine transgressions, from her poor hygiene to her unsympathetic nature, I argue that *Sans toit ni loi* replaces the domineering masculinist perspective employed by male auteurs with the more nuanced feminist perspective of the autrice.

The feminine gaze of Varda's camera is evident in the very technical composition of *Sans toit ni loi*, in which the filmmaker's trademark *cinécriture* allows her influence to be felt in every picture, every sequence, every tracking shot that lingers on Mona as she trudges along the roadside but never crowds or objectifies her. Armed with little more than the filthy clothes on her back and a rucksack emblazoned with an “M” – she carries her life, her identity, with her at all times – Mona often blends in with the morose greys and browns of her surroundings. Wide angle

shots rarely place her in the foreground, instead passing over her as though she were part of the natural landscape and allowing her to meander in and out of the frame with the casual grace of a wild animal. Indeed, Varda approaches the visual telling of Mona's story like a documentarian recording the comings and goings of wildlife. She maintains a respectful, unobtrusive distance; at times, Varda's camera appears to have come across the young woman accidentally, Mona wandering into a frame that had only intended to capture the seemingly endless horizon. Foreshadowing her later work with economically marginalized people in *The Gleaners and I* (2000), Varda's camera treats Mona with a degree of tenderness and respect not often afforded to such characters, panning away from her as she trudges through fields and roadsides. As Ramanathan writes, "Varda maintains her curiosity and the viewer's, but complicates both the narrative and the pleasures of the traveling eye by introducing a radical process of deaestheticisation that averts the traveling eye, and substitutes the voyeuristic rendition of the narrative for the feminist" (40).

Varda's own roots in documentary filmmaking become even more apparent as *Sans toit ni loi* progresses; the film is punctuated by secondary characters who frequently break the fourth wall to address the camera and offer conflicting impressions of Mona through interview-like cut-away scenes that highlight Mona's enigmatic nature. As Chris Darke writes, these interview scenes ultimately "[reveal] more about the people who talk about her than about Mona herself, who remains ungraspable." Darke further points out that the original title for the film had been *À saisir*, meaning both "to take hold of" and "to understand." Given the conflicting testimonies presented by those who encountered Mona prior to her death, it is clear that her enigmatic nature has left her forever incomprehensible to others, her life "a jigsaw puzzle that is inevitably incomplete" (Varda qtd. in Darke). Comprised of a series of flashbacks, the film's narrative

structure emulates this fragmentary quality as Varda's camera drifts away from the focal point of action in order to linger on the nearby plane trees or the withered countryside. "We cannot fix the film any more than we can fix Mona," Susan Hayward writes, "and it is in this de-fetishization of the text as well as the body-female that Varda asserts her own brand of feminist film-making practices" (278).

Building upon, and often contrasting, themes introduced in *Cléo de 5 à 7*, *Sans toit ni loi* positions its central character and her "body-female" as a source of revulsion rather than pleasure for both the viewer and the other characters Mona encounters throughout her story. Her filth, her stink, and her abrasive personality serve as constant reminders of her inherent feminine transgression. While many critics have discussed Mona's status as an outsider – her frank rudeness, her lack of self-consciousness, her strange and often aimless actions – few have analyzed the significance of her status as a woman or examined her character through the lens of conventional "womanliness" as it relates to Varda's constant presence as an autrice. Hayward is one such critic, describing the film as "feminist in its conception and message," political by virtue of its feminism (269). "Mona assumes her filth just as she assumes her marginality," Hayward continues, "she answers to no one and thanks no one. In doing so, she creates her own image and simultaneously destroys 'the Image of Woman'" (271). Other contemporary critics present similar arguments that *Sans toit ni loi* "disrupts the patriarchal logic of vision by reconceiving the voyeuristic gaze," positioning the vulnerable female body as repulsive rather than attractive, with male characters commenting that Mona's body is "scary" and "revolting" (Ramanathan 41). The film's original French title translates to "without roof or law," a reference not only to the main character's nomadic lifestyle, but also to her complete upheaval of the societal norms that govern conventional femininity and her ultimate liberation from these

constraints through death. Additionally, the phonetic pronunciation of this title also serves as a play on the similar sounding French phrase *sans toi* or “without you” – a phrase equally significant for Cléo and her realization of agency. For Mona, this “you” may refer to both the viewer in addition to everyone and everything outside of herself, further underscoring her routine abandonment of new acquaintances and repeated attempts at total independence from others.

Significantly, the character of Mona was inspired by Varda’s own encounters with the unprecedented wave of young female drifters crisscrossing their way through France in the 1980s. “They were not lost,” Varda contends, “but had decided to live out their freedom in a wild and solitary way” (qtd. in Darke). One such woman, Setina Arhab, contributed her own lived experiences to Mona’s character and even plays a small role in the film herself, credited as *Lazarde* or “the slum-dweller.” Arhab’s stories of her life on the road, during which time she met and briefly traveled with Varda, inform the film’s insistence on Mona’s revolting stench. Numerous characters verbally comment on her lack of hygiene: on the roadside, a sex worker asks that Mona move to a different location as she fears her stink will drive away potential customers. Near the film’s midway point, Mme. Landier, a sophisticated academic researching foreign tree fungus in the south of France, is visibly disgusted by Mona’s scent upon their first meeting. As Varda states, “[Setina] knew that it was the vagrants’ smell, more than their poverty, that set them apart from a society that values cleanliness” (qtd. in Darke). For women in particular, cleanliness also carries connotations of sexual purity as well as moral goodness, with several male characters interpreting Mona’s dishevelled vagabond status as an indicator of sexual promiscuity, and, therefore, fundamental degeneracy. “Female drifters are all alike –” remarks one man, “loafers and men-chasers.” In a brief and violent scene of implied rape, Mona’s anonymous attacker refutes her screams of protest with a cruel implication that she secretly

desires this abuse. Although rape is hardly an experience exclusive to female drifters, her vulnerable status and filthy appearance paradoxically distinguish her body as violable and repugnant to the men around her. In typical fashion, Varda's camera trails away from the attack and returns to a still wandering Mona in the following scene, highlighting her endurance of, and even suggested invulnerability to, patriarchal violence by virtue of her complete rejection of the objectification of women.

This combination of un-self-conscious filthiness and aggressive independence contributes to Mona's inability to be understood or "taken hold of" by the individuals she encounters. Since she does not follow the socially prescribed aesthetics or behaviours associated with traditional femininity, she leaves her acquaintances all at once baffled, intrigued, and infuriated. Klein writes that Mona "is so uncodifiable, so unmatriced, so without roof or law, that she is entirely alien and unconsumable." This unconsumability in particular makes Varda's prioritization of the female gaze all the more apparent. While Mona quickly disrupts the viewer's expectations surrounding femininity and womanliness, her status as a woman is unquestionable – even emphasized – over the course of the film. Yet Varda's is not a masculine camera. Her shots do not frame Mona within the typical, often sexualized, conceits male filmmakers reserve for female characters. Varda instead portrays her protagonist as psychologically unravishable – and, therefore, inherently threatening to the men around her. The handsome young academic Jean-Pierre comments on this tendency, stating "She scares me because she revolts me." Wistful young maidservant Yolande's idealization of Mona – "She was free – she goes where she likes" – runs parallel to this aversion. Likewise, the elderly Lydie displays an immediate world-weary respect for Mona's female rebellion: "Marry the wrong man and you're stuck for life. I liked that hippie," she says. This distinction signifies that the alien space Mona occupies is a source of

frustration for men and fascination for women. The chosen tagline for the film not only alludes to this phenomenon but also forces the audience to consider their own cultural expectations of femininity in relation to their regard for human life: “She’s cute, she stinks, and she won’t say thank you. Would you offer her a lift?”

In the film’s opening sequence, Mona is picked up by a male driver who clearly expects her to embody typical feminine subservience to perceived masculine authority. However, she rebuffs his sexualized comments with a combination of boredom and revulsion. Therefore, Mona evades his attempts to objectify her body by regarding his thinly veiled remarks as precisely what they are: evidence that she will not receive a “free ride” from this man. She refuses to be forced into coy submission by playing along with his colloquial innuendos for fear of masculine violence, instead belittling the condition of his vehicle and its lack of a radio, and ultimately finding herself dropped off at the next stop as a result. By reflecting the man’s own repulsive – but, in his case, socially tolerated – behaviour back at him, Mona acts as a mirror for the oppressive masculine gaze.

Conversely, the feminine gaze of Mme. Landier allows her to see nuance in Mona’s blunt character that moves past patriarchal constructs. While Mona is just as rude and abrasive to Mme. Landier as she had been to the earlier male driver, even making a similar remark about the radio and fiddling with the channels in an uncomfortably forward gesture, the older woman regards Mona with a mixture of scientific interest and maternal affection. She expresses a developing fondness for Mona over the course of the film, traveling with her for a time, bringing her food and champagne from an academic conference, and even sending her colleague, Jean-Pierre, to check on her following their reluctant final separation. It is through Mona’s interactions with Mme. Landier that we get a sense of her backstory – the series of events that

led to her nomadic lifestyle and the freewheeling attitude that allows her to maintain it. Upon discovering that Mona is indeed educated and had once held a job as a secretary, Mme. Landier asks why the young drifter has not put her studies to practical use in an academic setting. Mona jokes that she could “if only I had the right *look*” [emphasis mine], indicating that she does not mourn the freedom she has attained through her abandonment of social constructs. “Champagne tastes better on the road,” she concludes. While the university-man-turned-shepherd Mona briefly camps with is frustrated by her apparent lack of motivation, taking a characteristically philosophical view of her situation and asserting that she “chose total freedom and got total loneliness,” his analysis stems from a position of inherent male freedom with which Mona could not hope to identify; the box within which society confines young women with vague typing degrees is much narrower than that of a university-educated man. By adhering to the decision to live her life on the road, Mona goes from an unfulfilled secretary who must constantly perform a respectable level of femininity to an independent drifter, a wild thing whose only drives are for food, shelter, and forward progression.

Many critics have interpreted Mona’s death as a grim reminder that bad women – that is, women who are bad at performing “woman” – will never prevail in a society that so fiercely protects and promotes a specific ideal of acceptable femininity. As Amy Taubin writes “although [Mona is] young, strong and willing to work, her refusal to accommodate anyone else’s standards or desires – she doesn’t bathe, she’s demanding, she’ll fuck for a joint and take off without a thank-you – guarantees she won’t survive” (qtd. in Ramanathan 43). However, Mona’s death actually represents freedom from, and, indeed, triumph over, the constraints of femininity. She continues to exist outside these prescribed boundaries as corpse, the recurring image of her frozen body serving as a source of abjection and disgust for both the viewer and the characters in

the film. Even in death, she remains, as Varda terms, “a survivor” (qtd. in Ramanathan 43). Bookending the film in its first and final shots, Mona’s deceased body serves as both a visual emblem of her alienation from a society that cannot, or will not, accept her conventionally unfeminine identity as well as a symbolic visual recuperation of her physical body back into the natural world. The characters who discover her body describe Mona as having died “a natural death,” noting that there are “no marks on her.” Mona manages to remain unencumbered by the weight of conventional femininity and leaves behind a filthy but otherwise unblemished corpse that visually merges with the mud and winter brown grass of the ditch in which she dies. In the film’s opening and closing scenes, Mona’s aesthetic presence becomes one with the natural world.

Throughout *Sans toit ni loi*, Mona leaves traces of herself wherever she goes, from dirt to cigarette ash to the lingering scent of her unwashed body. Juxtaposed with the static, often female characters found in films produced by male auteurs, Varda’s cinematography prioritizes constant forward movement over feminine aestheticism. In fact, as Ramanathan asserts, “Varda forces the eye to look at the unpleasant, the unaesthetic as a way of impeding access to the pleasurable visual feminine” (Ramanathan 11). The ugliness of death that Cléo so fears is completely accepted by Mona even in life; and when Mona is the subject of masculine desire and sexualized violence, she maintains her will to continue pressing onward. When asked how she endures the harshness of a life on the road, Mona responds “I don’t care. I move.” Thus, Varda forces her audience to regard her heroine not only as a woman, but also as a primal human being, wild and dirty – a right rarely granted to female characters in male-directed films. Here, however, Mona’s humanity is not governed by how well she performs the role of woman but by how determinedly she struggles to survive in an unforgiving world. Klein affirms that “As a

figure of enigma who reveals others, who is a cipher of their fears and desires, and against whom they define only themselves, Mona's opacity survives the film unchallenged, untamed, unfetishized, untragic.” This vagabond’s story, therefore, is not one of a woman’s defeat in death but one of a woman’s transcendence in life.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

On March 29, 2019, Agnès Varda died in Paris at the age of ninety. With a career spanning over sixty years and an oeuvre of over forty films, including features and shorts, fictions and documentaries, as well as an honorary Palme d'Or, an honorary Academy Award, and a Golden Lion from the 42nd Venice International Film Festival, Varda leaves behind a legacy of independence and tenacity, set against the backdrop of her ever-present feminine viewpoint. Her final film, *Varda par Agnès*, was released in 2019 to critical and popular acclaim, cementing her status as one of the most successful and prolific filmmakers of the French New Wave.

Situated within the patriarchal framework of auteur filmmakers that characterized the movement, Varda stands out as not only the sole woman but also the sole director whose work prioritizes the feminine and features unabashed depictions of authentic female experiences, leading to her designation as an *autrice*. Calling to mind Sarris' emphasis on the personality of the male auteur, Varda's public persona and personal philosophies often aligned with feminist theories, and her "films are consistently concerned with the question of feminine identity and a desire to create an alternative film language that challenges established conventions" (Lee 125). In doing so, she destabilizes the male-dominated semantics surrounding creative expression. As Emma Jackson writes

Varda's pursuit of her own artistic vision, turning down Hollywood in favour of keeping her autonomy, marks her out as a true auteur. But there is also a vulnerability, thoroughness and a sense of responsibility to the subject that comes out in her work that anyone engaged in making representations of the social world could learn from. (126)

Indeed, over the course of her filmography, Varda demonstrates an exceptional ability to depict characters who are not only female and human but *feminine* and human – whose experiences are always informed by but never limited to their social position as women. In much the same manner, Varda’s autobiographical and documentarian tendencies emphasize her *own* humanity and femininity in relation to the female characters onscreen; her work, thus, “constitutes a decisive contribution to feminism” (Bénézet 10).

In her later years, Varda expressed a more and more pronounced desire for women to pursue filmmaking as a profession. In a late-2000s interview, she attests to her enduring advocacy, stating, “I begged women, ‘Train to be film technicians, sound engineers, camera operators, directors.’ I really encouraged women. I never thought men were better.” Likewise, the director’s lifetime achievement award acceptance speech at the 2014 European Film Awards openly expressed a desire for more female filmmakers to be accepted within the film community:

What I have noticed is that it is very sweet to receive this award but when I see the nominees here, I feel there are not enough women. I think more women should be included. I know a lot of very good female directors and women editors and I would like them [to] be more represented and helped by the European film academy. (Ellis-Petersen)

Fittingly, Varda herself has become a figurehead of women’s filmmaking. As English-speaking feminist critics have begun to embrace Varda’s work over the past several decades, her status as an icon has become increasingly apparent both in and outside of France. In fact, British playwright Rebecca Lenkiewicz specifically cites Varda as a pioneer of bold, unmistakably female-authored cinema:

Traditionally it has been a man’s world but I think there is a wave of exciting change. Not that we must stop fighting, we must keep the fight up because there is inequality in many

areas and sexism rife throughout the industry. But I do think there is a certain energy, force and intelligence that is proclaiming “the women are coming and have been here for many years,” as Agnès Varda is a testament. (Ellis-Petersen)

Overall, Varda’s work further legitimizes Cixous’ claim that “Women’s imaginary is inexhaustible, like music, painting, writing; their stream of phantasms is incredible” (“Medusa” 876). In defining and investigating this concept of the feminist *autrice*, I hope to help carve out a place in literary and film criticism for these phantasms, where future generations of female filmmakers can give a name to their unique cinematic expressions of feminist authorship, and thereby allowing *autrice* filmmakers to experience the stimulating satisfaction of being able to situate oneself within a greater artistic tradition that has so long been denied them.

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