

Reflected Reflexivity in Jane B. par Agnès V.

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Abstract:

Very little critical attention has been paid to *Jane B. par Agnès V.* (1987), the first of Agnès Varda's films in which she renders representation, the artistic process, and the artist apparent and observable by incorporating her own body in the film.¹ By underscoring her role as the filmmaker, she shows how she films: she reveals her camera, sometimes the sets of the film, and explains why she makes certain artistic decisions. Varda enacts the way she works for the spectator, which in turn gives visibility to female creativity. The inclusion of her own body and reflection on the craft of filmmaking in 1987 is particularly significant, since this film precedes contemporary digital versions of this phenomenon, including her own *Les glaneurs et la glaneuse* in 2000.²

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Very little critical attention has been paid to *Jane B. par Agnès V.* (1987), the first of Agnès Varda's films in which she renders representation, the artistic process, and the artist apparent and observable by incorporating her own body in the film.¹ By underscoring her role as the filmmaker, she shows how she films: she reveals her camera, sometimes the sets of the film, and explains why she makes certain artistic decisions. Varda enacts the way she works for the spectator, which in turn gives visibility to female creativity. The inclusion of her own body and reflection on the craft of filmmaking in 1987 is particularly significant, since this film precedes contemporary digital versions of this phenomenon, including her own *Les glaneurs et la glaneuse* in 2000.²

While later iterations of the self-portrait with new technology are significant, not enough attention has been given to Varda's first attempt at the filmic portrait and self-portrait in *Jane B. par Agnès V.* By explicitly featuring herself in *Jane B. par Agnès V.*, a highly reflexive dialogue between the filmmaker and her subject, Jane Birkin, Varda is able to examine notions of the self-portrait, the relationship to the model, and the role of the artist. I will argue that bodily visibility is the key element of the reflexivity of this film—Varda needs her body, and that of Jane Birkin, to contemplate and reveal her creative process and that of her subject, which in turn creates a theoretical foothold for the female artist and provides examples of women outside of the stereotypical role as objects of male desire. Through the transformation of old forms of

representation to new esthetic means, the film produces both women as social and artistic subjects.

In *Jane B. par Agnès V.*, Varda spins out a very complex interplay between a portrait of actress and singer Jane Birkin and a portrait of herself, between other and self, between sexualized body and non-sexualized body, and between distortion and reflexivity. As Mireille Rosello has noted, the film “can . . . be described as a portrait of Jane Birkin, a portrait of Agnès Varda, a portrait of a director making a portrait, and a portrait of a model being represented.”³ It is this very layering of portraiture and subject matter that makes the film so intriguing. I will use Varda's denotation of Jane Birkin as “Jane” when discussion of her pertains to the film and will call her “Birkin” when speaking of her in context outside of the film. Varda makes her presence and agency as the filmmaker explicit from the title, *Jane B. par Agnès V.* Even though Varda presents her first name in the title to create symmetry with Jane B., I will call her Varda to emphasize her status as a filmmaker.

The format of the film alternates between Jane playing different characters and Jane as herself commenting on and critiquing the roles in dialogue with the director. Varda presents many scenarios featuring Jane without any clear transition between them; only a free associative connection or passing reference links them. During the first few minutes of the film, Varda lays out the significant themes that she will develop throughout the film. She moves from an enactment of a Titian painting to a conversation with Jane in a café. Their discussion of the camera leads to shots of mirrors; a framed Baroque one and a fun house mirror reveal different images of Jane. Varda returns to the Titian painting, featuring Jane as the female nude, and then moves to a series of vignettes intercut with Jane's comments and reflections. *Jane B. par Agnès V.*, as an avant-garde film, defies genre categorization and combines both documentary and fiction form; the close relationship between form and content allows Varda to experiment with the form and in turn change meaning traditionally associated with the female body. I would like to suggest that representation of a new female social subject depends on new forms for representation.

In *Jane B. par Agnès V.*, Varda puts formalist and feminist perspectives in conversation to subversive ends. In an interview she explains that: “I wanted to invent a form that, with my imagination, I would pass off Jane with a lot of fictions and of deformations until at the end we find her. People ask me: ‘You are filming with Jane.’ I replied: No, I film what's around her.”⁴ There is an important play on words in the original French with “tourner” meaning both to film and turn about. The second meaning of “Non, je tourne autour de Jane” is “No, I turn around her.” Filming Jane is not a straightforward process for Varda and entails many detours and approximate encounters with Jane. The goal is to invent Jane and not to create a psychological understanding of her.⁵ The film presents a tension between distortion on the part of the filmmaker and a gesture toward an authentic filmic subject. By turning around the connotations of Jane Birkin, the film is able to create a subject at the end, one that has been invented through the process of filmmaking and the creation of new forms. It is Varda's clear engagement with doing and undoing that allows the subject of Jane Birkin to emerge through the film.

As Varda shows in *Jane B. par Agnès V.*, it is through the exploration of the creative act, the subject of study (Jane Birkin and Agnès Varda), and the body that we come to understand female creativity in new ways. Through this film, we apprehend the significance of being a creative subject with a renowned career. Initial feminist claims pertaining to female artistic creation centered on asserting artistic authority. What does the female artist do with the female body once her own authority, career, and extensive artistic corpus are established? I consider this

moment as one in which the female artist tries to come to terms with her artistic authority after it has been well established, a post-authority moment, so to speak. Varda, who is regarded as either the mother or grandmother of the French New Wave, has thirty years of filmmaking experience when she makes *Jane B. par Agnès V.* and Birkin is in an important transitional point in her career. Comprehension of both women's careers and development as creative subjects is key to understanding the stakes of *Jane B. par Agnès V.* for both Varda and Birkin, namely the use of artistic authority to change meaning associated with the female body through self-representation and bodily visibility. Although I will argue that the film produces Varda and Birkin as creative subjects, it is precisely the fact that both have established careers when they make this film that makes the stakes of female creativity so high.

Varda's entire body of work, the general development of her films, and the various genres she has used all provide a roadmap of her growth as a filmmaker. As Alan Williams argues:

Varda's films, documentary and fiction alike, have been a form of intellectual autobiography. In them one can follow both her personal and political issues—in particular, the development of her feminism—and her formal and aesthetic interests (generally derived not from mainstream cinema but from literature, theatre, photography, and painting).⁶

The following films punctuate her career: *La Pointe courte*, *Cléo de 5 à 7* (1961), *Le Bonheur* (1964), *Sans toit ni loi* (1985), *Jacquot de Nantes* (1990), and *Les glaneurs et la glaneuse* (2000) to the list. Although *L'une chante et l'autre pas* (1976) was not a success, it remains an important film, since it is her only full-length film that explicitly treats a feminist topic, in this case, the Women's Movement.⁷

Birkin initially contacted Varda in a letter saying how touched she was by *Sans toit ni loi*. They eventually decided to work together on a film and agreed to shoot this film only in between Birkin's other projects. They shot the film over the course of a year and a half, which gave Varda time to think and rethink the project: “[she] was finally able to make, obligated by Jane, a film in several spaced out steps. A portrait of yesteryear, taking one's time ... in any case fighting against this incredible constraint which consists of filming for six weeks, eight weeks, ten weeks continuously.”⁸ By filming in spaced segments, she could see the portrait gradually take shape and enjoyed the luxury of working slowly, like a painter or a writer. The shooting schedule of the film coupled with Varda's artistic vision produces an unusual form, which importantly allows for experimentation of content and representation.

In *Jane B. par Agnès V.*, Varda modifies the form of the portrait by introducing the form of the self-portrait as a way to change representational modes. In voiceover, she announces her method for this project: “Actually, it is as if I am going to film your self-portrait, but you will not be alone in the mirror. There will be the camera which is a little bit of me and too bad if I appear in the mirror or in the shot.”⁹ What might at first appear as a contradiction, the notion of filming another's self-portrait is a complicated one that suggests that one's self-portrait is just as constructed as a portrait of another, so that an artist may in fact fabricate the self-portrait of her subject. Just as Rembrandt wore different period costumes in his self-portraits, the artist fashions the image she wants to project to others. Likewise, the artist may construct another's portrait from the sitter's perspective. Varda's claim that she will create Jane's self-portrait and not just a portrait of her underscores Jane's participation in the process. The two together, filmmaker and

subject, will create Jane's self-portrait. This dialectical relationship between artist and sitter alters a traditional implicit status of the artist as “knower.”

Varda invokes a vast and rich tradition of portraiture, since the genre of portraiture has rendered the likeness of its sitters for centuries. The goal has never been simply to capture the exact likeness of the sitter for posterity, but also the essence of the subject. She changes the form, however, by permitting Jane to reveal her thoughts and perceptions about herself and career. Even though Varda draws a parallel between the traditional artist, the painter, and herself as a filmmaker by using the methodology of portrait painters to a certain extent, she acknowledges that she does not literally paint a picture of Jane in the film. By creating the background to the portrait just as the painter fills in the background or the scenery to the portrait, Varda engages with the material of the film and reveals what interests her.¹⁰

It is noteworthy that Varda chooses Jane Birkin, a famous actress and singer, as her model for a portrait and a way to investigate the creative act, and her own role as a filmmaker in the process, since Birkin is publicly known. Her star persona and public image, including a sexualized version of her, already holds connotations for a French audience. Varda anticipates the spectator's curiosity by asking Jane in the second scene of the film why she thought that Varda wanted to make a film about her.¹¹ Varda's flippant rhetorical response to her own question, “Because you are beautiful?” alludes to Jane's celebrity status in France.¹²

Varda weaves both Jane's personal life and career together and focuses on the intersections between the two throughout the film. Towards the beginning of the film, Varda includes a slide-show summary of Jane's career narrated by the star in question.¹³ A medium-shot of Jane places her in front of a screen. Jane's body as an extension of the screen alters the images projected on her, since the image conforms to her body. Varda thus establishes Jane as a blank screen—a potential site of new female creativity and visibility that becomes more apparent as the film progresses. A range of images of Jane is projected on the screen and therefore on Jane, since she is standing in front of it, including photos of her as a baby, a girl in boarding school, and a sample of sexualized images taken of her early in her career. Jane explains that her appearance in Antonioni's Palme d'Or award-winning film, *Blow Up* (1966), created a scandal in London because of a twenty-second scene in which she was naked.

After the birth of her daughter Kate in 1967 from her first marriage, she moved to France. She fell in love with singer and musician, Serge Gainsbourg, her costar in the movie *Slogan* (1969). Jane says that she appeared in photos with Gainsbourg so that he would be proud of her. One photo in particular literally enacts Gainsbourg's symbolic dominance: Jane, dressed all in silver, wearing high-heeled stilettos, sits on the floor. Gainsbourg is standing over her with his hands on his hips as Jane sits positioned between his legs looking up at him. Just as he fashioned her voice, he also forged the early part of her career, and she let him do so to please him.

In the film, Varda does not overstate the connection between Birkin and Gainsbourg, since their relationship would be well known to a French audience. He composed for her and helped form her trademark voice; he “shaped her according to his desires.”¹⁴ During her time with Gainsbourg, she acted in over thirty films, recorded four albums, appeared in the November 1970 issue of *Playboy*, and in 1971, gave birth to their daughter Charlotte, who is now a well-known actress. She and Gainsbourg recorded the song “Je t'aime ... moi non plus” which created quite a scandal and was banned by the Vatican and the BBC due to Birkin's breathy love-making sounds.

The biographical slide show also features highly sexualized photos taken of Jane tied up; these images evoke associations of masculine sexual dominance and accessibility, and in turn,

illustrate an excessive visibility of the female body in terms of male desire.¹⁵ Jane reveals that she found it completely normal to have photos taken for Lui. Jane is not critical of the photos of her naked, tied up against the radiator and on the bed on her knees with her buttocks pointing to the camera. In fact, she said that she was actually happy that they asked her, that they found her pretty. She matter-of-factly describes that she was featured in the Christmas edition tied-up, wearing garters and high-heels. Jane does not directly question the past sexualized representations of her. It is as if she has accepted being a sex-object at the beginning of her career.

Although Jane is primarily an object of male desire in these early images, Varda's insertion of these photos does not reproduce Jane as an object of sexual dominance and consumption in exactly the same way as their initial publication and circulation, since Varda includes these images of Jane to establish her relationship to the public and to Gainsbourg at the beginning of her career. Jane's reflections about these photos influence to a certain extent how the spectator views them in the context of Varda's film. Although Jane's comments are somewhat naïve and do not reflect an understanding of their circulation and consumption, her perspective adds another reading or interpretation to these sexualized images. Her account of why she agreed to have those photographs taken indicates that she does not understand the meaning associated with the sexualized female body. The validation of her physical beauty proved seductive to the point that she found it affirming to participate in those photos featuring her as an object of sexual consumption. Jane's uncritical eye is a powerful reminder of how ingrained dominant social expectations of beauty are and how they shape the female body; Varda's citation of these images establish their currency so that the spectator will realize the stakes of cashing them in for an alternative vision.

Jane and Varda show the tension between Jane's specific body and associations with the female body in general by having Jane's body bear traditional meaning associated with the female body. Through different versions of Jane, Varda opens up the category of women to include many and sometimes contradictory images of women—there is not a fixed answer to what it means to be a woman. Each permutation of Jane attempts to remove traditional signification associated with the female body by first introducing the former meaning and then undoing it by first questioning them and then offering alternative meaning. Why is bodily visibility linked to female artistic creation and expression?

The challenge for Varda then, in collaboration with her model, is to refashion a subject whose past subjectivity has been both masked and influenced by others who helped to shape her and her career. Varda's goal is not to create an “objective” portrait of Jane, but to explore the very processes by which an artist or filmmaker fashions her subject and herself as a filmmaker in the process. The film, *Jane B. par Agnès V.*, though not a major commercial success, attempts to undo or create a new meaning assigned to Jane's image and body. Smith explains:

Jane Birkin is a woman who sees herself, and Varda uses this in order to construct a new strategy of representing the feminine. [...] This consists of admitting from the start her own involvement, without hiding that Jane as Varda sees her will to some extent be the Jane that Varda would like to see. At the same time, and also from the start, the film establishes that Jane Birkin also has ideas about how Jane Birkin should be.¹⁶

From beautiful star and sexualized image, Jane—through Varda's intervention—transforms herself through role-playing and acting out stereotypical female roles laden with associations and

meanings to create a multi-layered and multi-faceted subject. Consequently, a new bodily visibility emerges, one that Jane defines.

Varda creates the possibility for new forms of representation by first questioning the representation of women in art. Specifically, she interrogates traditional representations of the beauty of women's bodies and transforms signification of the naked female body as the object of male sexual desire. In the opening sequence, Jane is first in a Renaissance costume, sitting as if in a portrait. A few minutes later into the film, Varda suggests to Jane that they start with an official portrait in the style of Titian or Goya and then cuts to a filmic reproduction of Titian's *Venus of Urbino* (1538) by placing Jane as the female nude.¹⁷ Not only is the reproduction familiar, but also the spectator realizes that the first sequence that depicted Jane in the Renaissance costume was a detail of the servant in the background of the Titian painting. What is the effect of the reproduction of the Titian painting done in a realist tradition when Varda puts it in an avant-garde film context?

John Berger argues that “because of the camera, the painting now travels to the spectator rather than the spectator to the painting. In its travels, its meaning is diversified. One might argue that all reproductions more or less distort, and that therefore the original painting is still in a sense unique.”¹⁸ Even though Berger is talking about paintings seen on television or reproductions of the *Mona Lisa* on t-shirts, his analysis is applicable to Varda's reproduction of the Titian painting, since she changes the meaning of the nude model by showing Jane naked and then in a sweater and jeans posing in the same position. By clothing Jane, Varda refuses the sexualized image of the nude model in relationship to the male artist and thereby counters the excessive visibility of a certain kind of female body represented in the Western canon.

Varda then undoes this clothing of Jane by filming Jane naked in the same supine pose; however the way in which Varda films Jane's naked body in the Titian portrait scene is striking for its lack of sexualization of the image and of the body. Varda pans slowly from right to left, instead of using rapid cuts, to contemplate the body as a continuous landscape. This pan, which literally goes against the grain of reading in Western culture, starts at Jane's toes and finishes with a close-up of her smiling face. Although the body is not shot in its entirety, the fact that the camera finishes on Jane's face underscores her subjectivity and changes the iconic image of the female nude. It is important to note that Varda does not cut up Jane's body with fragmented close-ups. This refusal of a form that is linked to sexuality and scopophilia indicates another way of looking at the female body.

Varda deliberately renders problematic conceptions of beauty in painting by evoking the notion of scatology in reference to traditional beauty. She challenges the image of the female nude again through the insertion of flies on a naked woman lying supine in the style of the main figure in Edouard Manet's *L'Olympia* (1863).¹⁹ It is Jane's servant character in the background of Titian's *Venus of Urbino* who releases them.²⁰ The inclusion of flies on socially accepted images of beauty renders the image ugly and introduces the notion of scatology, flies to waste products. Varda's voiceover announces: “Beauty, it's a scandal!”²¹ She casts doubt on societal standards of beauty translated in artwork and the way in which art immortalizes certain versions of beauty especially pertaining to women. In another moment in the film, Jane speaks of wanting to have large breasts when she was young until Gainsbourg told her that he liked her small breasts because large breasts scared him. Varda contrasts Jane's thin body with modern artist Niki de Saint Phalle's statues of women with enormous breasts.²² Jane's flat-breasted chest stands out against the archetypal women with large breasts.

Varda contests the hyper-visibility of the female body, but does not deny Jane's body nor her own (Varda is in her early sixties during the making of this film). As previously noted, Varda cuts in highly sexualized representations of Jane as references to the beginning part of her career when she was idolized as a sex-object in her twenties. In a different sequence towards the end of the film, Jane and Varda play with creating a sexualized image of her, as Jane's reflection is shown in multiple images in a mirror. Jane rocks sexily back and forth to the tick-tock of a metronome and purposely strikes sexy poses while singing Marilyn Monroe's "My Heart Belongs to Daddy." By making a link, even if tentative, between Jane and the ultimate sex-symbol goddess, Varda highlights Jane's sensuality in a new context. Jane may be no longer posing for male consumption as she did in her youth, however, there is not a clear critique in this scene.

The proliferation of images of Jane in multiple mirrors is a potential subversive site, but the citation of the ultimate sex symbol does not do enough to change former meanings of women's bodies as sexual objects of male consumption. Jane even says that as a teenager she was attracted to Monroe's wish to please others, without commenting on the status of Monroe as a sexual icon. The repetition of Jane's image imitates the hyper-visibility of women's bodies and emphasizes the close association with sexuality without offering a radically new image of the female body in this case. Jane flirts with the sexualized image of herself while she gazes at her own body, however, there are a few male figures who move in and out of the background; their unexplained presence, although unthreatening, is ambiguous. The first individual who dons a bright blue plastic poncho complete with a hood is replaced by another in red who in turn is replaced by a person in green. They imitate Jane's movement in the background and she smiles at the red and orange figures toward the end of the sequence. Their maleness, cloaked in gender-neutral garb, acts as a counter-point to Jane's imitation of Monroe, however, their random appearance does not advance a radical critique of sexual iconography.

The challenge for Varda is to present her body and that of Birkin in a way that does not repeat stereotypical and limited signification of women's bodies. Varda foregrounds Jane's body to show how women's bodies can move from being the object of the male gaze to a desiring and creative subject. With the exception of the Marilyn Monroe scene, Varda's approach alters the meaning associated with women's bodies as marked signs. When the female director films her own body, she changes the meanings traditionally associated with women's bodies, namely: body = reproduction, desire = object of male desire, and sexuality = whore or mother.

By foregrounding the body in her film, Varda changes conceptions of women as objects of male desire, as passive beings without agency, as no more than a space to be overcome for the male character in narrative, as vessels of reproduction, as being biologically determined, as mothers, as sex objects, and as the nude model for the male artist. To my mind, the use of the female filmmaker's body does more than merely create a self-portrait of the artist: the filmmaker's body engages with the other material in the film in such a way as to transform the meaning associated with the female body and the role of the artist in this film. The female filmmaker's body becomes the material of the film in such a way as to produce meaning and not merely to be the bearer of it.²³

By having Jane play such a range of roles, Varda not only shows Jane's breadth as an actress, but illustrates different female roles that she can perform or embody. Jane engages in many scenarios and takes on many characters including the following: Calamity Jane, Christine in Truffaut's *Baisers volés*, Joan of Arc, Jane (of Tarzan and Jane), and Laurel (of Laurel and Hardy). Jane explains that Varda gave her the opportunity to play roles that she normally would

not be able to play in films, for example, the role of Joan of Arc. Her English accent would not correspond well to Joan of Arc's declaration to drive the English from France! It is significant that Jane chooses to play roles of strong, independent women who were often in the margins of their respective societies. Jane transforms the passive image of Jane of Tarzan and Jane by explaining how much she likes the image of the Amazonian warriors with only one breast. She says that she prefers to play androgynous characters like Calamity Jane. She hates the image of the Flamenco dancer even though she knows how to play the role.

Jane, as a blank screen, is able to manifest different embodiments or roles, but Varda is sometimes more implicated in the filmmaking process than that of Jane, her subject. As Smith argues:

To think about these portraits is soon to realise that they are both mirror-images and self-portraits, but of the painter not the sitter. The succession of different characters which Varda turns Jane into are thus, avowedly, revealing of Varda and her expectations of Jane rather than of Birkin who is taking on her professional role of blank screen, also avowedly.²⁴

Varda is more interested in the process of artistic creation than the product and urges the spectator not to take the image presented at face-value, especially the images of Jane in stereotypically feminine roles (poor mother of several children, widow, sex object, and lover, for example).

Varda unabashedly calls attention to her role as the artist, the creator, and doubly so in the reflexive mode of the self-portrait. She draws an interesting connection between the portrait of Jane Birkin and a fake self-portrait, which further alters assumptions about form. In an interview, Varda explicitly argues that: "All self-portraits are faked, ours and others, and I therefore made a fake self-portrait for her and effectively I entered into the self-portrait which is just as rigged as another ..."²⁵ Varda uses the French word "truquer," which means fake in reference to artwork or rigged. The idea of Varda creating a rigged self-portrait of Jane not only highlights Jane's participation and collaboration in the project, the self-portrait part, but also reveals that the construction of oneself for others is controlled. Jane, as a famous actress and singer, is always already fashioned by others. Varda's insistence that all self-portraits are fake negates a possible hope that there is an authentic version of Jane present in the film, but, it is the film as a conglomeration of fake self-portraits that produces Jane as a subject.

Varda asserts her directorial authority from the onset of the film while establishing her collaboration with Jane: Varda interviews Jane in a café and asks her questions about making the film together. Varda has noticed that in films and interviews Jane never looks into the camera. Jane replies that she is afraid of the hole, that she does not like looking at it (perhaps Jane's aversion is linked to the aperture as a vaginal metaphor). Varda, as the filmmaker, insists that she needs to look at the camera and establishes the ground rules for the shoot: "You must simply follow the rules of the game and look at the camera as often as possible. Directly, you must look directly or else it is as if you are not looking at all."²⁶ A close-up shows the lens closing down, revealing itself as the eye of the camera and Varda's tool of the trade. Jane explains that looking into the camera is embarrassing, too personal; the act resembles looking into someone's eyes.

Varda then asks Jane to consider the camera as a mirror and explicitly makes a parallel between the camera and the mirror as reflexive tools. Jane replies that in a mirror it is oneself who watches, not another. The metaphor of the camera as simultaneously a mirror and the eye of

the director implicates the filmmaker in both cases: she places the object of reflection for the filmed subject and manipulates the apparatus as a body part. In this early sequence of the film, which moves from the café to an outdoor scene, a medium-shot captures Jane standing in front of a mirror hanging outside in a wooded area (the unintelligible scenery does not provide an explanation of the choice of location, nor does Varda).

Jane looks at herself in profile in the round mirror held in a square ornate frame evoking a painting. The camera pans to the right as Jane turns her back to the camera and reveals an image of the camera operator in the mirror. The camera continues to pan directly in front of the mirror, Jane turns to the other side, revealing Varda's image in the mirror. The filmmaker is associated with the camera, but her image remains distinct from it. Jane stands on the right side of the mirror and looks towards the camera, presumably at Varda standing in front of the mirror. The double image of Jane is striking: the medium shot of her in front of the mirror and the back of her head and torso in the mirror. The spectator is invited to consider all sides and facets of Jane.

Varda's choice to include herself in this film has important aesthetic and existential ramifications. Through the use of her body and the creation of a self-portrait through a portrait of others, Varda shows how she wants to be seen by others as a filmmaker, that is to say, how she fashions herself as an artist. The reflexive move of self-representation expands the inquiry to include the greater artistic project or endeavor, and it is through her body that this reflection occurs or is staged. An argument could be made that all artists use themselves in some way in their art. Varda's specific purposeful use of her body coupled with reflexivity, however, is not the same thing and pushes reflection on artistic creation a step further in theoretically significant ways.

By showing first Jane standing in front of a baroque framed mirror, then the camera in the mirror, then herself, Varda is creating a *mise en abîme* of the process of filming. Both the camera and the mirror create the object-within-the-object effect. Even the camera, the basic tool for filmmaking, is exposed and its involvement questioned. Just as the filmmaker's perspective is not neutral and objective, Varda reveals the subjectivity of the camera. The presence of the mirror creates a double reflexivity and refracts the image twice for the spectator. In *Jane B. par Agnès V.*, the intersection of the portrait and the mirror not only illustrates an important *mise en abîme* of the artist's creative act, but it establishes a significant intertextuality between painting and filmmaking and highlights the process of image formation.

Varda's suggestion that her camera is a mirror, one that captures myriad images of Jane, points to the possibility of providing alternative images of women. Smelik argues that "the metaphor of the mirror as a surface or screen which reflects dominant images of women suggests a possible site of subversive mimesis in cinema: the screen or the image projected on it."²⁷ Smelik views the screen as holding subversive power, since it is a site where the image displaces the gaze. Jane, as a blank screen and as a reflection of her body through Varda's camera, offers a preferred image and attempts to influence how others see her. Varda's move to equate her camera with the mirror suggests that the image of Birkin is a reflection of Birkin's own gaze. The concept of a blank screen is not a passive image, as the term might first suggest, but rather an opportunity to create new images of women for Varda and Birkin. Just as Varda literally projected images of Jane's personal life and career in slide show form on Jane's body toward the beginning of the film, the entire film can be read in terms of Jane as a blank screen, a strategy used to open up female creativity and representation of women.

The notion of the blank canvas or page has already been tied to the female body in a literary context. In "The Blank Page," Karen Blixen, under the pseudonym Isak Dinesen, recounts the story of a convent in Portugal that makes flax for royal bridal linens and then displays the marred sheet as proof of the bride's virginity in a museum-like corridor where the framed sheets can be viewed by visitors and the sisters. Each framed square of the sheet bears an engraved plate with the name of the princess whose blood affirms "the honor of the royal bride."²⁸ The narrator notes an important exception to the collection:

But in the midst of the long row there hangs a canvas, which differs from the others. The frame of it is as fine and as heavy as any, and as proudly as any carries the golden plate with the royal crown. But on this one plate no name is inscribed, and the linen within the frame is snow-white from corner to corner, a blank page. . . . It is in front of the blank page that old and young nuns, with the Mother Abbess herself, sink into deepest thought.²⁹

The blank page evokes contemplation on the part of the viewers, since there is not a mark or stain as a point of departure. It allows the viewer to spin a narrative of its existence based purely on speculation and the individual's creativity. In this way, the blank page is similar to a mirror, reflecting the concerns, fantasies, and ideas of the viewer. The blank sheet suggests that the anonymous bride was not a virgin. Or perhaps she refused to consummate the marriage. Different readings or interpretations emerge from the withholding of information closely tied to both the female body and female sexuality. Simultaneously a void and a mirror, the blank canvas or screen is a source of creativity and the seed of many narratives. It is also important to note that it is both the frame and the blank canvas that encourages viewing; the frame guides the viewer and links the canvases to works of art, i.e., paintings, which are usually displayed in this fashion.

The film shows the tension between the female body as a subversive site for new meaning and as a screen on which others can project their desires, including Varda. The goal, however, is not to escape meaning through a blank screen, but to weigh in on what *kind* of meaning is associated with the female body. Varda first presents a proliferation of meaning, so that Jane, Varda, and the spectator together can sort out the different meanings, discard some, and keep others. The notion of the blank screen also points to the contradiction of the visibility of the female body. In a negative way, the hyper-visibility of the female body is sexualized and exploitative, but in a positive light, visibility of female creativity can transform meaning linked to the female body. Varda's focus on the process of artistic creation, rather than the product, makes visible female creativity, the female body engaged in artistic production.

Varda literally inserts a blank canvas in her film in the Laurel and Hardy sketch in which Jane plays Laurel. The two characters enter a *boulange[gale]rie* where canvases are visible, but exhibited backwards, revealing only the back of the canvases. When asked why they are so, Laurel explains that he is discreet (the baker interjects shy) and admits that he does not sell any paintings. Hardy says that it is a question of marketing. Laurel insists that his friend does not believe in his talent, never has any esteem for him, is condescending, and is jealous of his exhibit, which Hardy points out is in the back of a bakery. Hardy needs to see them to believe in their merit and turns over a canvas to reveal a blank canvas. He muses that Laurel is the *crème* of the avant-garde, a wink to the film's form. He walks to the camera and pushes the blank canvas near the camera, so the canvas almost occupies the entire frame. The vignette ends in typical Laurel and Hardy pie-in-the-face antics. Jane and Varda talk about the scene in the next sequence in which Jane breaks character and talks directly to the camera, as Varda requires, offering her perspective and opinion of the role. She explains what it was like for her to play the role, to imitate a character like Laurel, and explains how difficult it was to do so.

The visible insertion of the blank canvas links female creativity to a vacant site, since female actresses play male roles. The blank canvas may be interpreted as impotent artistic creation, but simultaneously holds the promise of artistic creation and withholds the image. It is this very purposeful lack of visibility that holds the promise of subsequent new images. By including first citations of master paintings and then the blank canvas, Varda suggests that female artistic expression does not need to reproduce former images of women. The refusal of the image potentially invites future representations. While the notion of the blank screen holds much promise, the downside is that it remains a screen on which people can project their fantasies, including Varda. This tension that the film produces does not allow the spectator to take sides easily and thereby forces a constant evaluation of new representational strategies.

Varda further develops the notion of the blank screen in the story of the *inconnue de la Seine* (the unknown woman of the Seine), a woman who was found drowned in the Seine. A rack shot of Jane in close-up switches focus to the image of a camera, which replaces the image of Jane and punctuates the shift of Varda behind the camera to her in front of it. A medium shot of Varda telling the story of the *inconnue de la Seine* in front of a camera and other filmmaking equipment reminds the spectator of Varda's role as the filmmaker. She explains that death masks were made of her beautiful smiling face and the circulation of her image proliferated around Paris. Even Varda bought one at the time. A close-up of the plaster image of the beautiful smiling woman with her eyes closed against a black background reveals the enigmatic smile that intrigued people at the time. Varda speculates that people liked the enigmatic face because they could create their own story around her. Varda wonders if her smile indicates that she was in the end a content suicide victim or perhaps the mortician fashioned her mouth into a smile.³⁰ Both possibilities suggest different narratives, including corporeal manipulation of the female body to produce a desired result.

Varda makes a parallel between the *inconnue de la Seine* and Jane: a dissolve replaces the transparent image of the mysterious woman's death mask superimposed over the Seine with Jane's image in close-up again a black background. The anonymous portrait is similar to Varda's portrait of Jane, since it is an object of narrative fantasies, a blank screen for others, Varda included. The fact that Jane is recognizable, however, suggests that she does want to say something about herself in the portrait, just as Varda does in her myriad representations of her. Jane opens her eyes, looks at the camera, and declares: "I am Jane B. I was born in England. Now I am 5'7". No striking signs. No exceptional talents. But I am here. You are looking at me...."³¹ Jane affirms her name and birth origin in a way that serves as a precursor to Chantal Akerman's similar declaration: "Last attempt at the self-portrait: My name is Chantal Akerman. I was born in Brussels."³² The affirmation of one's name and birthplace confirms her origins and grounds each artist as she treads the murky waters of subject formation. Of all of the different versions portrayed in a portrait or self-portrait, her name and birthplace remain stable and unchanging, hence the need to reiterate what was already known from the very beginning.

On one hand, Varda contests the image of the beautiful dead woman in the Western canon by replacing the image of the death mask with Jane's image, a living beautiful woman. Varda's participation, however, in the commodification of this image through her purchase of one indicates the seductiveness of the image. The citation of the *inconnue de la Seine* suggests that changing representation of women is literally a matter of life and death. The notion of the beautiful dead woman as the "most poetic image," in Edgar Allan Poe's terms, needs to be eradicated or at least challenged to allow for other paradigms of creativity. If living female artists want to forge images of living women, then they invariably dispute a long tradition that has

lauded the dead beautiful woman and made her image both the epitome of femininity and the sublime.³³

Varda's film reflects the period in the 1980s when Jane tried to find her own voice, breaking out of the mold that Gainsbourg created for her. During this time, she grew tired of her image as a “funny English girl” in France and yearned to try something new. She separated from Gainsbourg and explored aspects of her personality, sometimes anxious and distressed, in Jacques Doillon's *films d'auteur*. With Doillon, she had her third daughter, Lou, in 1982. Gainsbourg continued composing for her, and Jane appeared in a few films during the 1980s including Varda's *Jane B. par Agnès V.* and *Kung Fu Master*. 1987, the year *Jane B. par Agnès V.* was released, marked the beginning of her stage career. She has continued singing, performing, and touring since Gainsbourg's death in 1991. In fact, she released an album, *Rendez-vous*, on March 30, 2004, which made the top 10 charts in both France and Belgium.³⁴ Birkin has emerged as a star in her own right, but one who will always be associated with Gainsbourg.³⁵

It is interesting to note the existence and maintenance of Birkin's website, Janebirkin.net, since it is not only another iteration of her public image, but a preferred version of herself. She can update the site and advertise her most recent and current projects, and hopefully influence how the public views her. Making this film with Varda is a way in which Jane can take stock of her career to this point and have a say about her future goals and aspirations. It is significant that Jane turns forty during the shoot of Varda's film, since it is a milestone age that marks an end to youth according to some social standards. Unless the spectator knows Birkin's career well, this fact is not known until the last scene of the film.

In fact, the film begins with Jane talking about turning thirty: she recounts being ill from drinking and throwing up in the toilet. For Jane, turning forty signifies leaving youth behind and evokes much fear and anxiety. Varda, on the other hand, sees it as a marvelous moment in one's life: “I find that on the contrary that forty is a magnificent age for women because—especially because of their fears—they are vulnerable. I firmly believe that fear of something makes people more sensitive.”³⁶ Varda did not want to make a film precisely about Jane turning forty—perhaps one explanation of why Varda does not present this fact until the end—but about the passage of time and changing seasons.³⁷

Varda emphasizes the process of creation, rather than the final product of the film, which highlights her constant presence and agency in the project. In an interview, she explains her analysis of the portrait in *Jane B. par Agnès V.*:

What I was looking for in this less-than-ideal route, but in the chosen course, in the route closest to my project was to remove all heaviness ... to remove ... all ceremonial which could be understood as: “I know about her, she knows about me, we constructed an identity.” No, I wanted it to be always missed, always slipping by, always to be attained. I do not think that one attains another, if you like, one does not attain a portrait of someone, one offers a portrait of someone....³⁸

Varda first asserts her directorial authority in the beginning of the film with Jane and then paradoxically presents the creation of the film as one of collaboration, a sort of work in progress. She attempts to show various aspects of Jane through numerous portraits, each one making a statement about Jane without the ability to make a definitive statement about her. Varda's attempt at the portrait of Jane denies expertise, since she tries to capture Jane's portrait without fully seizing it. She wants to show how she would start, stop, think about what she had done, erase

some parts, and then start again. She refuses to assert that she holds knowledge of Jane that the spectator does not possess; the goal is for the spectator, the filmmaker, and Jane herself to discover Jane together. Varda's unusual approach and role in the film emphasize the need for new formal strategies to change how the spectator thinks about the content of her film.

The self-portrait coupled with the mirror often implies reflection on the part of the artist in regards to herself and the artistic process (it is important to note the double meaning of reflection: contemplation and a likeness in which left and right are reversed). Salvoldo's *Self-Portrait* (c. 1515) features two mirrors in the background, which demonstrates the relationship between the self-portrait and the artistic process involving mirrors.³⁹ Jan Van Eyck's *The Arnolfini Marriage* (1434) includes the self-portrait of the artist at work reflected in a small mirror in the background of the couple's portrait. Parmigianino's *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (1524) is another example of the use of the complexities of the mirror in providing an image of the painter. By capturing the image in a convex mirror, Parmigianino reproduces and represents what he sees in the mirror: his distorted image and that of the room behind him. It seems to me that his depiction of the distorted image underscores the inherent transformation and distortion in all portraits, especially in self-portraits. Just as Parmigianino captures distortion in the convex mirror, Varda uses Jane's reflection in the mirror to produce both distortion of herself and of her model. Varda is indeed on both sides of the camera and she chooses when to reveal herself directly in front of the camera and when to let herself be refracted by Jane.

The concept of a rigged self-portrait is related to the notion of distortion, which is at the heart of Varda's portrait of Jane—the filmmaker's role is integral in this process of transformation and manipulation. Varda once again draws a strong connection between herself, the portrait, and the camera. She tells Jane that: “In film, there are twenty-four portraits per second or per hour.”⁴⁰ To Varda's mind, each frame of film is a portrait: each frame that makes up the image is itself an individual portrait unit. She presents herself behind the camera filming with a black blanket covering her like the photographs of yesteryear. The irony of this reflexive moment is that this camera cannot be the one filming the shot; the revelation of the camera is its stand-in, the representation of the tool: it is the equivalent of Varda putting up a sign indicating, “Ceci n'est pas la caméra du film.”⁴¹ In this scene, she asserts her directorial authority by reminding Jane that she did accept to do this film. Jane retorts by saying that if she accepts for someone to do a portrait of her, she wants to deform herself. The corresponding shot shows her in front of a funhouse mirror, the image of her body twisted out of shape. Jane's word choice, “déformer,” suggests a physical alteration and not just an optical one, which in turn is a reminder of the close relationship between the body and the image.

The notion of purposely distorting one's own image and the image of the subject of the film highlights once again the filmmaker's agency and likewise the agency of Jane in this case. Jane, in front of a funhouse mirror projecting a distorted image, states: “If I accept that a painter or a film-maker does my portrait ... yes I'm very willing to distort myself ... but it's like with you. The important thing is the eye behind the camera, the person behind the paintbrush. I don't really much care what you do with me, as long as I feel that you love me a little.”⁴² Her distorted image, normally an optical aberration and the failure of the mirror to produce a good image, is in fact the logical consequence of a fun house mirror.

In a medium shot, Jane stands in front of the mirror that projects an elongated image of the back of her, as well as that of the camera and crew. She turns towards the mirror, which creates a horizontally stretched double image of her face. A cut returns to the elongated image of Jane; this back-and-forth suggests multiple possible transformations of Jane. A close-up reveals

the doubled image of Jane's face again, which splits more emphatically this time. The doubling and splitting of Jane's image points to both a proliferation of images and a lack of coherence in the new image. This purposeful inclusion of distortion eliminates associations of beauty with Jane's image and points to the openness of the project, instead of indicating a straining or wrestling from true meaning.

The explicit use of distortion, whether in one image or in multiple ones, makes the spectator question what image Jane projects to others and how this image is guided by others, by Varda in this case. A shot in turn reveals Varda behind the camera distorted by the funhouse mirror in a similar way as in Jane's image. Another shot features the camera in the mirror, thereby suggesting that Varda is also making a portrait of the camera as a metaphor for filmmaking—the camera is her paintbrush in a figurative sense. Jane's comments reveal both an abandonment to the creator and confidence that if she has a relation with the person behind the camera, then the portrayal of her will be fine. In fact, she seems less concerned with the process and outcome as long as she feels loved. Perhaps Jane's initial passivity is related to images of her as a sexualized object and her relationship to Gainsbourg. She is used to being shaped by another.

In different ways throughout the film, Varda makes reference to the male artist, suggests that his status is now defunct, and presents female creativity as a vital contributor to a field that has often relegated it to the margins. In one sequence, Varda questions the role of the male artist and symbolically has Jane, who plays the character of a femme fatale art dealer, kill him off. Jane and the artist look frantically for money hidden in his art books, open them, and leave them displayed on the table. The artist notices that in one particular painting there is a female servant looking for something in a chest in the background of the painting. The familiar painting is Titian's *Venus of Urbino*, which Varda reproduced in the beginning of the film when she created a portrait of Jane. The two characters continue to look fruitlessly for the hidden money: the art book "Monet" does not produce the desired money. The artist thinks of Dalí and finds the hidden money in this book. Jane, as the femme fatale, uses her sexuality as a power to manipulate men. She kisses the artist, shoots him in the stomach, and presumably takes the money.

By having the male artists killed off towards the beginning of the film, Varda creates a space for female artistic production. She plays into both cinematic and gender stereotypes of the femme fatale with the hope that new representation may occur. At the end of the film, however, the injured artist, who actually was not killed, reappears and seeks his revenge. He not only wants his money back, but kills Jane as the femme fatale, since she betrayed his love for her. Perhaps it is a symbolic warning against women exercising agency against male artists. In the end, he is still alive, can kill, and resists elimination by punishing her. I am interested in an allegorical reading of these scenes, since the attempted symbolic murder of the artist is more significant than the literal one of the man. To my mind, Varda is issuing a warning for female artists, cautioning women of the dangers of playing roles linked to seductive sexuality, showing what is at stake for female creativity, and suggesting that the male artist will not share his notoriety and fortune easily.

Varda in turn questions traditional roles associated with women, especially in relationship to artistic creation. During the career slide show episode, Varda segues from the men whom Jane loved and who made films and wrote songs for her to the idea of Jane as a romantic muse. Jane plays the role of the Muse who lies on the tomb of Jean-Jacques Rousseau in Ermenonville and complains about the mortality of the artists and authors she inspired. It is not by accident that Varda chooses one of the most important philosophers of the Enlightenment as the epitome of

male artistic creation. Varda contrasts the traditional inspirational role of the female muse for the male artist with both herself as filmmaker and Jane as actress and singer. The visibility and activity of both these female artists suggest a departure from the passive muse who does not create, but inspire. Perhaps through their creativity, both Varda and Birkin will encourage other women to make art and associations with the female muse will change in the future. Varda focuses on Jane's creativity in her own terms, which establishes that Jane has shed the role of muse for Gainsbourg and Doillon.

Varda contrasts Jane's developing subjectivity both in terms of her stardom and interaction with Gainsbourg who influenced her and helped create her persona. In one sequence, Varda alternates between concert footage of Jane and her rehearsal with Gainsbourg. Jane's star image in a concert setting is juxtaposed against the behind-the-scenes effort of practicing. She mentions that she never dared to sing live in the past and it was not until recently that she started performing in front of audiences. Gainsbourg's critical coaching of her coupled with the difficulty of the song make the successful performance of the song even more striking, since the spectator realizes how much work is involved to perfect Jane's talent. She literally is trying to find her voice in this sequence. A medium close-up reveals both Gainsbourg and Jane in the same frame: he corrects her and she repeats the refrain. He acknowledges the difficulty of the task: "It's difficult" and Jane responds: "It will be better next time."⁴³ While to a certain extent she may be seeking approval from Gainsbourg, her comment indicates a commitment to improving her work. Jane's active participation, the development of her own voice, is guided by others, by Gainsbourg or Varda, for example, but she is the one who finally mediates how her voice is heard.

It is interesting to compare Gainsbourg's professional relationship with Jane to that of Varda. At first Varda's comments may seem authoritarian when, for example, she orders Jane to look at the camera, but there is a sense of equal collaboration between the two women. They agreed to make the film comparable to taking a meandering walk. I do not want to set up a false contrast between Gainsbourg and Varda, but the way in which they both work with Jane does seem different. Varda is less concerned with shaping Jane and seeks to create a complicated multi-faceted portrait of her subject. Gainsbourg's interactions with Jane focus on the product of her voice, rather than the process of its development. Gainsbourg's relationship is one of dominance and Varda's relationship with Jane is predicated on companionship and collaboration.

Jane's emerging subjectivity is underscored in a scene in which Varda transforms the Greek myth of Ariane and the labyrinth by having Jane as Ariane chased by the camera instead of by the Minotaur. She is not portrayed as the helpmate of Theseus, who has been written out of this version of the myth, but wanders through the labyrinth on her own while holding the thread. The camera represents Varda's pursuit of Jane, a search that is without specific goals and sometimes full of obstacles.⁴⁴ Jane tries to find her way through the film just as Ariane winds her way through the labyrinth—sometimes there are dead ends, but she holds fast to the thread of herself as an emerging subject.

Jane exercises artistic and creative agency outside of her usual singing and acting: she wrote a story about an older woman who falls in love with an adolescent boy. Jane's story becomes the idea for *Kung Fu Master*, which Varda and Jane film in further collaboration at the same time as *Jane B. par Agnès V.* The *mise en scène* of artistic creation is everywhere in *Jane B. par Agnès V.*, including Jane and Varda talking about the *Kung Fu Master* project together. Varda shows clips of this film with her son, Mathieu Demy, and Jane's daughter, Charlotte, in the context of showing another facet of Jane.

The intertextuality between the two films, as well as one project giving birth to the other, informs both projects simultaneously. Birkin has also released *Boxes (Les boîtes)* in June 2007, which she directed and features her as the lead (her daughter, Lou Doillon is also in the film). This film is significant since it shows her ongoing creativity and her willingness to be in charge of her projects. In an interview, Birkin explains that she wanted to explore what happens to a woman in her late forties when she can no longer have children.⁴⁵ Not only is Birkin showing an older woman on the cinematic screen, she is revealing her character's subjectivity when she is no longer a reproductive woman. The boxes of items that the main character moves to a new house allows her to take inventory of her present and past relationships and contemplate the changes in her life and body.

Varda in collaboration with Jane shows the complicated process of subject formation and image creation as both a social and artistic endeavor. On one hand, she uses a very direct method: personal declarations, dialogue with the subject, and narrative vignettes. On the other hand, she uses reflexivity, distortion, and fantasy to put forth a manipulated portrait, albeit with Jane's collaboration, of Jane. In addition to Jane's portrait, Varda also creates a portrait of herself as filmmaker: she includes her body and the camera to reveal herself as the artist and lays claim to artistic authority by the choices she makes in terms of content and technique.⁴⁶ Their exploration leads the spectator to think about representation of women as multi-layered and the signification of what it means to be a woman in different contexts. The avant-garde form of the film gives the representation of the female body new visibility. By inflecting meaning through one's own body, both Varda and Birkin present meaning associated with the female body as mutable. Varda transforms the hyper-visibility of Jane's sexual body early in her career into a conscious visibility of her as a subject. Through the body of the director and her subject and an assertion of their artistic authority, they both use a general reflection on artistic creation to reveal their own involvement and open up a new space for the female subject.

Notes

1. Starting in the 1970s and 80s, feminist artists, especially female American and Anglophone artists and photographers, included their bodies in their work: Valie Export, Sarah Lucas, Carolee Schneemann, Cindy Sherman, and Annie Sprinkle, for example. Carolee Schneemann was one of the first contemporary female artists to use her body in her work to change meaning associated with it. See Schneemann's *More Than Meat Joy* (New Paltz, NY: Documentext, 1979) and *Imaging Her Erotics* (Cambridge Press: MIT Press, 2002). This phenomenon also occurred in the video work of Sadie Benning and Vanalyne Green in the 1980s and 90s.
2. For a discussion of the significance of digital technology in *Les glaneurs et la glaneuse*, see Maryse Fauvel's "Nostalgia and Digital Technology: The Gleaners and I (Varda, 2000) and *The Triplets of Belleville* (Chomet, 2003) as reflective genres," *Studies in French Cinema* 5 (2005): 219-229. Agnès Calatayud also underscores the importance of digital technology for the self-portrait in Jean-Luc Godard's *JLG/JLG—autoportrait de décembre* (1995) and Varda's *Les glaneurs et la glaneuse*. See "Les glaneurs et la glaneuse: Agnès Varda's Self-Portrait" *Dalhousie French Studies* 61 (Winter 2002): 113-123.

3. Mireille Rosello, "Agnès Varda's *Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse*: Portrait of the Artist as an Old Lady," *Studies in French Cinema* 1 (2001): 29.
4. Sophie Cherer, "Moi Varda, Toi Jane." *7 A Paris*, 15 March 1988: 24. "Je voulais inventer une forme où, avec mon imagination, je fasse passer Jane par tant de fictions et de déformations qu'à la fin on la retrouve. On m'a dit: 'Tu tournes avec Jane.' J'ai dit: Non, je tourne autour de Jane." All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.
5. Agnès Varda, *Varda par Agnès* (Paris: Editions Cahiers du Cinéma, 1994): 185.
6. Alan Williams, *Republic of Images: A History of French Filmmaking* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992): (357).
7. Throughout her career, Varda has explored female subjectivity through a variety of female characters, for example, her investigation of the construction of female subjectivity in *Cléo de 5 à 7* (1961) and *Sans toit ni loi* (1985), explicitly questions social conventions of femininity. *Cléo de 5 à 7*, Varda's second film, is her first attempt to interrogate female subject formation, images of women, and societal standards of beauty. As a cinematic figure, Varda is noteworthy for feminist film theorists, since she is one of the few female contemporary directors in France who identifies herself as feminist. I would agree with Sandy Flitterman-Lewis' assertion, however, that some of Varda's most revolutionary films do not put forward an overt feminist polemic. Films such as *Cléo de 5 à 7* and *Le Bonheur* (1965) "posit a feminist critique of patriarchal structures through their critical explorations of both the production of femininity and its representations, yet they are often not understood as such," argues Flitterman-Lewis in *To Desire Differently: Feminism and the French Cinema* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990): 215. *L'une chante, l'autre pas*, on the other hand, puts forward a feminist topic, but follows traditional cinematic conventions. Despite the mixed reception by feminist critics, Varda sealed her status as a feminist filmmaker with the making of *Sans toit ni loi* (the English title is *Vagabond*) in 1985. The body of a young woman named Mona is found in a ditch at the beginning of the film and the rest of the film reconstructs events and encounters with people leading to the moment of her death. Even though the constitution of the female subject, Mona, depends on the perspectives, fantasies, and desires of others instead of herself, Smith considers the film as treating "almost entirely the possibilities of woman representing woman" (140). *Cléo*, *Mona*, *Jane*, and herself are different female protagonists through which Varda comments on representation of women and does her part in altering traditional representations.
8. Varda, *Varda par Agnès*, 184. "J'allais enfin pouvoir faire, obligée par elle, un film en plusieurs étapes espacées. Un portrait comme autrefois, en prenant son temps. ... en tout cas lutter contre cette incroyable contrainte qui consiste à tourner pendant six semaines, huit semaines, dix semaines en continu"
9. *Jane B.* par Agnès V., VHS, directed by Agnès Varda (Paris: Ciné Tamaris, 1987). "Justement, c'est comme si, moi, j'allais filmer ton autoportrait, mais tu ne seras pas toute seule dans le miroir. Il y a aura la caméra qui est un petit peu moi et tant pis si j'apparais parfois dans le miroir ou dans le champ."
10. "Portraits d'artistes, Agnès Varda: ma bobine," *Les amphes de la 5ème. la 5ème.* December 28, 1998.
11. Varda asks Jane: "Pourquoi je t'ai demandé de faire ce film, tu crois?" Varda, *Jane B.* par Agnès V.
12. Varda, *Jane B.* par Agnès V. "Parce que tu es belle?"

13. Varda does not include the fact that Birkin, born in 1946 in London, made her acting debut at age seventeen at the Haymarket Theatre and then her singing debut in a musical at the Prince of Wales Theater.
14. Jane Birkin's official Web site, <<http://www.janebirkin.net>>. Accessed September 2, 2004.
15. Peter Knapp has also taken photos of her that emphasize her physical beauty and attractiveness (Cherer 23).
16. Alison Smith, *Agnès Varda* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998): 134-35.
17. See Lidia Guibert Ferrara's *Reclining Nude* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2002) for an understanding of the long tradition of the female nude in painting.
18. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (New York: The Viking Press, 1972): 20.
19. See Lidia Guibert Ferrara's *Reclining Nude*.
20. See Berger's *Ways of Seeing* for a comparison of Titian's *Venus of Urbino* and Manet's *L'Olympia*. He considers the woman in the latter painting, "cast in the traditional role, beginning to question that role, somewhat defiantly" (63).
21. "La beauté, c'est une scandale!"
22. Varda, *Varda par Agnès*, 191.
23. I am using Laura Mulvey's term from "Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema": "the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning" in *Feminism and Film Theory*. Ed. Constance Penley. New York: Routledge, 1988): 58.
24. Smith, *Agnès Varda*, 137.
25. "Portraits d'artistes, Agnès Varda: ma bobine" "Tous les autoportraits sont truqués, les siens et les autres, et donc j'ai fait pour elle un autoportrait truqué et effectivement je suis rentrée dans l'autoportrait qui est aussi truqué qu'un autre ..."
26. "Il faut seulement que tu suives la règle du jeu et que tu regardes la caméra le plus souvent que possible. Dedans, il faut que tu regardes dedans, sinon tu ne me regardes pas."
27. Anneke Smelik, *And the Mirror Cracked: Feminist Cinema and Film Theory* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998): 123.
28. Karen Blixen, "The Blank Page," in *Last Tales*. (New York: Random House, 1957): 103.
29. *Ibid.*, 104-5.
30. Elisabeth Bronfen refers to anecdotes that even raise questions about her death, including a researcher who went to the prosperous Hamburg factory where the plaster casts were made and met the factory owner's living daughter who bore an uncanny resemblance to the death mask. See *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity, and the Aesthetic* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992).
31. "Je suis Jane B. Je suis née anglaise. Maintenant je mesure cinq pieds et sept puces. Pas de signes particuliers. Pas de dons exceptionnels. Mais je suis là. Vous me regardez ..."
32. Chantal Akerman par Chantal Akerman, VHS, directed by Chantal Akerman. (New York: First Run/Icarus Films, 1996).
33. See Bronfen's *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity, and the Aesthetic* for a detailed analysis of this tradition.
34. Jane Birkin's official Web site, <<http://www.janebirkin.net>>. Accessed September 2, 2004. The album cover features Birkin half naked and wrapped in a black cloth. She had to insist to use the photo taken by her daughter, Kate Barry, since it predominantly

displays her back and not her face (see

http://www.rfimusique.com/musiqueen/articles/060/article_7266.asp).

35. Varda, Varda par Agnès 184. Jane Birkin plays a sexy grandmother in Catherine Corsini's *Mariées mais pas trop* (2003). This film, plus her more recent projects, shows that Birkin is still very active—and continues developing her career in both as an actress and singer. It is interesting that she plays a sexy grandmother, for example, there is a scene in which she is trying on a sexy black gown and showing it off to her granddaughter who stares at her in disbelief. The character that Birkin plays is on a mission to help her granddaughter fall in love, seduce, and land a rich husband. Is this simply an example of type casting? Or is it an exploration of the notion of a sexy and sexually active older woman in a film by a female director?
36. Ibid. “Moi je trouve au contraire que la quarantaine est un âge magnifique pour les femmes parce que—justement à cause de leurs craintes—elles sont vulnérables. Je crois fermement que la peur de quelque chose rend les gens plus sensibles.”
37. The theme of the time passing is also an important preoccupation for Varda in *Les glaneurs et la glaneuse* as she herself confronts aging and death. Varda's preoccupation with the passage of time contrasts with artists who in general try to stop or freeze time.
38. “Portraits d’artistes, Agnès Varda: ma bobine.” “Ce que j’ai recherché dans le parcours, non pas idéal, mais dans le parcours choisi, dans le parcours le plus proche de mon projet, c’était d’enlever tout pesanteur ... d’enlever ... tout cérémonial qui pourrait entendre à dire: ‘Je sais sur elle, elle sait sur moi, nous avons construit une identité.’ Non, je voulais que ça soit toujours loupé, toujours fuyant, toujours à atteindre. · · Je ne crois pas qu’on atteint l’autre si vous voulez, on n’atteint pas le portrait de l’autre, on tend un portrait de l’autre...”
39. Jodi Cranston, *The Poetics of Portraiture in the Italian Renaissance* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2000): 140.
40. “Au cinéma, c’est vingt-quatre portraits différents par seconde ou par heure.”
41. “This is not the camera of the film” à la René Magritte.
42. Smith 136. “Moi si j’accepte qu’un peintre ou un cinéaste fait mon portrait ... oui je veux bien me déformer ... mais c’est comme avec toi. L’important c’est l’œil derrière la caméra, la personne derrière la brosse à peindre. Je m’en fous un peu de ce que tu fais avec moi, du moment que je sens que tu m’aimes un peu.”
43. Gainsbourg acknowledges the difficulty of the task: “C’est difficile” and Jane responds: “Ce serait mieux le prochain coup.”
44. “Portraits d’artistes, Agnès Varda: ma bobine.”
45. Boxes’ official Web site, <http://www.boxes-lefilm.fr>. Accessed June 27, 2007.
46. This phenomenon of first filming others to film herself is later developed in *Les glaneurs et la glaneuse*.