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The Places of Agnès: Representation of Space in Varda's *Sans toit ni loi*

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French Filmmaker Agnès Varda's acute awareness of the interactive relationships between people and spaces they frequent has long been one of the principal components of her cinema, from *La pointe courte* (1956), through *7 P, cuis., s. de b.* (1984) to *Les plages d'Agnès* (2008). "I believe," states the director, "that people are made not only of the places where they were brought up, but of those they love, I believe the environment [*le décor*] lives in us, directs us . . . by understanding people you understand places better; by understanding places, you understand people better" (Smith, *Agnès Varda* 60).¹ Faithful to time periods and geographical details, Varda's *mise-en-scène* and film techniques lead the viewer in a better understanding of the ways in which personal and private spaces both prescribe daily behaviors and provide springboards for identity creation. Most specifically, all her films, whether fiction or documentary, feature or short, allot a great deal of screen time to interactions between female protagonists and their domestic space; moreover, when viewed chronologically, her films reveal a progression in this depicted relationship: a cinematographic shift from the traditional bourgeois domestic sphere, as well as places bearing such class markings, towards a more complex involvement with more natural land and seascapes. This is a problematic move since natural space often implies one that needs to be cultivated, arranged, ordered and contained. Varda's linkage of environment and people draws heavily on an understanding of the inhabitant/habitat dynamic in which personalized living space provides protection from the outer elements (often strangers and harsh weather), replicates its inhabitants' roles and status within the larger social sphere, and supports its residents' integration into the specific community by reinforcing the essential values on which it is founded.

By prioritizing characters' interactions with natural landscape, Varda allies them with the exterior, at times exiling them from communities and reconnecting them with nature and the natural body. This exile offers a place for a self-definition and reflexive relationship of interior/exterior and self/other: she begins *Les plages d'Agnès*, "if one opened people up, one would find landscapes. If one opened me up, one would find beaches" (Varda, *Les plages*).

Much scholarship on the extent to which Agnès Varda uses *mise-en-scène* to reinforce character identity and development has been devoted to her 1962 feature *Cléo de 5 à 7*. Rightfully so, since in no other film has the director so overtly explored the reciprocal relationship between women's identity and space. Noteworthy here is Janice Mouton's 2001, *Cinema Journal* article, "From Feminine Masquerade to Flâneuse: Agnès Varda's *Cléo* in the City," which remains, to date, the most concentrated analysis on the interplay of female protagonist and place in Varda's cinema, examining *mise-en-scène* alongside dichotomies of artifice and natural bodies. Despite the fact that the protagonist's trajectory in *Cléo*, from controlled spaces of artifice and cliché into versions of untamed nature, encapsulates a crucial pattern in Vardian cinema, the film stands out as one of her rare attempts to correlate cityscapes with the development of the female protagonist; more often, interactions with natural, unmanicured landscapes, such as open fields, seascapes, wooded areas or lakes motor the plot or provoke character change, as one finds in *Les créatures* (1965), *Sans toit ni loi* (1985), *Les glaneurs et la glaneuse* (2000) and her project in *Les veuves de Noirmoutier*.² Overall, *Sans toit ni loi* (*Vagabond*, literally *Without Roof or Law*) functions as the clearest case study attesting to this obvious preoccupation with people and locations stemming from Varda's belief that "place has a profound effect on character and perception" (Smith, *Agnès Varda* 60). The film, one of Varda's most heralded features, proposes an attempt at reconstructing the encounters that lead to the natural death of a young female vagabond, Mona Bergeron (referring both to the "Mona Lisa" and the French word for shepherd, *berger*), played by Sandrine Bonnaire. Here, Varda places Mona's wandering in the Southern French region, Languedoc, during the low, unproductive season of winter. Associating her heroine with the rudeness of barren countryside, she appears to condemn her socially, depicting the very vulnerability of a young woman who *opts out*, and the extent to which a

refusal of permanent domestic space, and the traditional behaviors it may prescribe, creates, by analogy, a categorical and suicidal social exclusion.

This film project is not unique to the director. It is exactly this documentary-style of escaping portraits or portrait-puzzles seen in *Jane B. Agnès V* (1986-87), *Les glaneurs et la glaneuse*, *Les veuves de Noirmoutier* and *Les plages d'Agnès* that attests to Varda's founding principal that "one does not fully capture a portrait of the other; one attempts a portrait of the other" (Varda, *Ma bobine*). Illustrating this artistic attempt, Mona's uncompromising anti-quest is set forth as a series of non-temporal sequences sewn together by fades and slow pans from right to left (Varble 48). The result is a dialogue set forth by the filmmaker (Patterson 20), a commentary on the inability of the other to fully capture someone else's identity. The camera appears to pass through the path and past of the protagonist, a form of cinematic tourism and wandering in what Sandy Flitterman-Lewis has called Varda's "inventive, collage-type signature" (214). Fragmented close-ups, unfocused long shots, panoramic movements or pans often leaving Mona off-screen reinforce Mona's belonging to the outside, or as the shepherd-philosopher says, her being just "*out*." These stylistic devices and the film's episodic structure relaying blurbs of a once-living female wanderer lend to a reading of *Sans toit ni loi* as a classic example of the road movie genre. Each episode both adds another piece to an endless portrait puzzle and offers a challenge or obstacle to be dealt with (an offer for lodging, a violent act, personal questions to be answered). The film's journey is twofold. First, one can speak of the narrator's quest to capture the last days of the protagonist, a journey of understanding and testimony. Second, there is Mona's endless wandering, a series of moments testifying to a progression in her physical and emotional degradation. Of course, Mona's earthly journey clearly comes to an end; however, that of the narrator continues in the ambiguity of the testimonies provided. The only authoritative societal impulse to break, indicating a pressure for Mona to pause before she is stopped dead in her tracks, is the presence of the stop sign appearing twice: at six minutes, after Mona's sea bathing scene, and, at one hour-twenty after we witness in close-up the progressive effects of the severe cold on Mona's body as she tries unsuccessfully to zip closed her leather jacket. Consistent with the film's almost noncommittal message on *opting out* of society, the stop sign is ambiguous since it refers at the same time to

Mona's hitchhiking, *faire du stop*, as it does to Mona's desire for others to stop for her.

The overall lack of tighter longer shots of Mona or full-frontal close-ups of her face hinders any true understanding of her emotions or intention. In fact, she is often either visually embedded in a natural setting—through use of similar hues, costume camouflage, dim lighting, refracted light and shadow—or she is framed in extreme long shots, as one inherent element of the landscape often seen from another character's point of view. More often than not, she is filmed in overly-charged interior decors (in clutter, collections, or full of unused or discarded objects creating a sense of static space) or seen in continual movement.

As Mona states to Madame Landier, the middle-aged bourgeois professor who gives her a lift, her freedom stems from flight from home, family and a career as a stenographer/secretary, in essence, her rejection of domestic space and the conventions and behaviors associated with a habitat/inhabitant dynamic in the long term: she adheres to no social space in particular and to no specific community. While her indifference and lack of empathy replicate the rudeness of the winter months, her sarcasm, puns, short replies, lies and continual non-participatory behavior hinder any flourishing conversations or relationships; as she states, "she moves about/ *elle bouge*" taking no roots, allowing for no future character development.

Moments in which she establishes contact with others or in which she takes possession of a space never last longer than a few sequences. Protective spaces are refused her, as witnessed in three principal scenes: in Madame Landier's car when Mona is left near an isolated wooded area and later raped, on the shepherd-philosopher's farm where she is removed from the house and offered shelter instead in an old beat-up caravan, and in the scene of the vineyard clipper Assoun's apartment where she is expelled due to the Moroccan migrant workers' "no women visitors" policy. The only scene in which Mona appears to attempt a personal appropriation of space through physically establishing a trace or mark of her passage is the country manor scene in which she shares a bourgeois secondary residence with a young drifter, David, with whom she shares several days and nights. In this particular scene mentioned, Mona writes the names "Mona" and "David" in the dust of a large wall mirror causing David to immediately wipe the names while commenting "no traces or tracks/

pas de traces." The question here is whether or not Mona's marking of the mirror with their names qualifies as mere child's play in which one claims space as his/her own or if this gesture is, in fact, evidence of an attempt to render this space symbolically and emotionally charged, and thus appropriated. Given Mona's indifference to David's erasing of the names and his authoritative "no traces or tracks/ *pas de traces*," one can conclude that Mona's writing is mere play realized in immediacy. Overall, Mona's interaction with people viewed within living space is either primarily need-based, such as scenes of eating, asking for food, water, accommodations, or is demarcated with dismissive gesture and behavior; in no other sequences does she appear to consistently adopt space. This dismissive behavior is most evidently played out in Mona's moving about in the home of elderly shut-in Tante Lydie whose relationship with interior/exterior space appears to oppose that of Mona.

Tante Lydie's house represents in itself the perfect opposition to mobility and passage of time, since its contents function solely as vehicles of personal and familial memory. Within, domestic objects are held for their sentimental value and not their exchange or use value, as we see in Mona's case. The perpetual mastery of domestic space, assuring the safety of the female inhabitant, gets played out in two ways: the memorization of the interior by the nearly blind Tante Lydie and the prohibition of guests (an external presence), whose presence would introduce a certain disruptive randomness and alter the house's composite (dirt, dust, disease, information, etc). The careful ritualistic maintenance of the household, through her maid Yolande's continual dusting and precise mealtimes, creates a stability allowing for the occupants to exist in a timeless vacuum: ritualistic cleaning removes traces of time and human contact; and the strict schedule regulates life into temporal increments so as to establish a stable rhythm of provisions for the body. In such a portrait of domestic tranquility, upholding material and symbolic orders depends uniquely on the presence and efficiency of the housekeeper and companion, Yolande. Later, it is her transgression in inviting Mona into Tante Lydie's home that provokes the disruption of the domestic homeostasis and harmony. For it is when Yolande steps out that Mona's *randomness* (drinking, wandering, touching, displacing and lifting objects) and her role as *contagion* (dirt, disease, unconventional ideals, asocial mannerisms) unravel the tightly woven fabric of the bourgeois domestic.

If Mona steals household objects associated with the passage of time, such as Tante Lydie's silver spoons or a manor pastoral painting, it is less with the goal to appropriate another's memory, or keep a souvenir, *per se*, than it is to use the object for an immediate need, in its exchange value. Like Mona's writing on the mirror, her stealing of the landscape painting from the manor can also be read as a wish for a physical memory of the domestic interior shared with David, a means of symbolically prolonging feelings attached to a space, a means of appropriating. Either explanation would validate her frustration in realizing that the little painting she had picked up now has a hole in its center and is unsellable. I would argue that the ambiguity in Mona's sudden anger is a crucial element in her portrait-puzzle. Not privy to her inner-workings, the viewer cannot truly discern the intentions behind the protagonist's behavior. Our understanding of the mirror writing and the painting scenes is further complicated when we later discover, just after the rape scene, that Mona possesses a postcard collection, though very different from the tourist imagery of the nude beach postcards looked at by two young men (one man being Yolande's boyfriend Paulo) during the end of the sea bathing scene. Of Mona's six postcards, five are of landscapes; one depicts a coiffed Bretonne touching a *menhir*, referring to the ancient pagan fertility ritual of young maidens in Brittany; the sixth is of a garden dragon. These pastoral portraits (paintings and postcards) follow scenes of intense vulnerability, insecurity and violence in which Mona is assaulted and David is beaten, leading one to conclude that neither house nor bucolic countryside provide a safe haven for the young woman wanderer.

It is probably more by commodity, for selfish, further venture and gain, rather than by a refusal for material souvenirs, that Mona encumbers herself to a minimal amount of baggage. Without a familial space of her own, she exchanges with little regard others' objects imbued with personal memory and, in doing so, erases any personal markings that these objects may hold. Whereas other female characters are associated with household or personal objects of exchange, such as Mme Landier's fur coats, Jean-Pierre's wife Eliane's preoccupation with acquiring Tante Lydie's house, Yolande's domestic service, and Tante Lydie's family souvenirs, Mona escapes by ingesting, destroying, losing or wearing out any object of exchange value she may have from the beginning of the film. Furthermore, all protective or valued items

she carries or dons deteriorate or are destroyed by the film's end, leaving no evidence of the bearer's ownership.

In the very beginning, the explicative narrative in voice-off, "this natural death which leaves no traces," comes suddenly to support the fact that no durable attachment exists between Mona and physical evidence of the self. Reinforced by the *gendarmes'* observation that she has no identity papers, the notion of "leaving one's mark" is at the very heart of the transformation of concrete space into living space. The question then arises that if Mona refuses or is refused to mark her physical environment, does she truly live in (or inhabit) a space? The film seems to answer no. Rather, she passes through, as supported by the director's pans, landscape long shots and empty screens. Evidence of her presence remains in the memory and self-censored testimonies of those who have had limited contact with her. What "marks" the witnesses most, it appears, is Mona's "difference as a woman vagabond," writes Katherine Patterson (17), especially the extent to which her hygiene practices, or lack thereof, physically mark her body as other, as exotic or dangerous. Varda's emphasis on the body, its odor, its collecting of dirt, its overtly expressed needs, in image and dialogue, extends naturally to a preoccupation with the prescribed roles and rituals of living space. The absence or Mona's refusal of a permanent domestic space, by extension, an obvious neglect of any daily maintenance of the body and personal property, implies a distancing from the traditional paternalistic order and laws associated with notions of the bourgeois domestic. Yet Mona is a walking paradox: she dreams of "so many big houses, so many rooms" while refusing almost all of them in the long term. As Valery Varble has suggested, Mona's dreams have more to do with caretaking than with propriety (85): watching kids, watching houses, watching dogs, not owning, *per se*; Mona explains to Mme Landier, "What I would like also is to have a patch of land for me, to grow potatoes." Consistent in her noncommittal behavior, Mona does nothing with the piece of land offered her by the philosopher-farmer.

The original title proposed by the filmmaker, *À saisir (Up for grabs!, For sale!)*, a French expression strongly associated with real-estate, had two functions. First, it recalled what the director sees as the heart of most of her filmic projects: "my principal theme . . . is that of houses. Having a house or not. Being inside or outside" (Racine 27). Second, it highlighted the total availability of the protagonist; as Varda

has noted, "A woman alone is up for grabs" (*Varda par Agnès* 269). However, it is not always easy to fully understand the director's stance on the destiny of a young woman who tries to live "freely" outside of the norms and in the margins of society, since from the very beginning, Mona is found dead in a ditch, her body incrustated in frozen mud and clothing; still images of Mona's body, intermittent with those of a woman washing wine dregs from walls, the scene which leads to her death, are contrasted with shots of the living heroine, introduced by a voice-off, in which the director attempts to reveal the true origin and identity of the character "Mona Bergeron." Though Mona's clothing attaches her to the earth, this voice-off tells that she appears to have come from the sea. The assertion off screen that Mona's death left no traces "left no traces/ ne laissait pas de traces," accompanied by a medium shot of a sandy beach rippled by the tide, marked temporarily by the water, links the two segments of the film while setting up dichotomies to be explored in what follows: establishment against nature, death against movement, or stability against randomness/ wandering. The continuation of Varda's voice-off, "I (even) know little about her, but it seems to me that she came from the sea," symbolically illustrates a relationship of disassociation with the earth (soil) and its resources which traditionally have furnished the materials of construction necessary for the elaboration of a domestic providing protection against external elements and participating, by extension, in the construction of a private sphere. Varda's voice-off, "she came from the sea," recalls Fellini's 1954 *La Strada*, the story of a naïve yet resourceful young woman, Gelsomina (Giulietta Masina), who is brought to accompany a harsh wandering street entertainer, Zampanò (Anthony Quinn). I do not believe that such a connection is gratuitous. First, no true identity is documented at Mona and Gelsomina's deaths. Moreover, key moments of their lives are recounted by exterior narrators who have crossed their paths. In the last scene of *La Strada*, Zampanò is performing in a coastal village. Strolling down the river walk, he hears a woman singing the familiar song of Gelsomina; he stops to inquire and the woman explains to him that she knew the song from "a vagabond" whom her father had found ill on the beach, who stayed with them for a while and who, one day, just never woke up.

Though both protagonists are set up as women on the road, refusing or being refused traditional domestic space, displaced and, through the progression of events, further marginalized, deprived eventually of any

protection or societal recognition, it is their connection to the sea that is the most striking. Both are presented as inherent to the sea: Gelsomina's family lives right off shore, she is found there ill, and Varda claims Mona to be born from it. It is perhaps for this reason that the stories of their end-days and the validity of their identity come from those who were and remain integral to the community in which the protagonists merely passed through.

Community and domestic spaces in *Sans toi ni loi* furnish only relative security and stability for its inhabitants, their relationships to their own spaces being parallel to the dire instability in Mona's life. For example, Madame Landier almost electrocutes herself in the bathroom and Yolande is passed on to another family. As for Eliane, she explains clearly to Jean-Pierre, her husband and Tante Lydie's nephew, that she does not feel comfortable enough to have 'intimate relations' in their tiny apartment:³ she wants Tante Lydie's seven rooms for "the best years of their lives." The male protagonists are equally vulnerable in their temporary living situations: David is knocked out and the Tunisian vineyard-clipper, Assoun, must follow communal rules, expelling Mona upon the other workers' arrival from Morocco. In essence, it is Varda's overall representation of the interactive and symbolic relationship between characters and their domestic space that creates a cohesive universe in which Mona is systematically visually *out*; including imagery of enclosure and/or dialogue concerning propriety or households in each female character's witness statement makes this subtext all the more convincing. By introducing three primary female characters, Mona, Madame Landier, Eliane, in very different bathing/washing scenes, Varda forefronts the importance of the female body and its upkeep to the overall film plot. Most relevant is Varda's association of Mme Landier and Eliane with the bathroom, which is viewed as the most feminized space in family lodging (alongside the kitchen). Presenting Madame Landier and Eliane in the bathtub and shower, respectively, Varda marks these two early on with social preconceptions that the viewer has about primping, vanity, intimacy and leisure behavior of the bourgeoisie. Such *mise-en-scène* also gives the director yet another opportunity to exploit themes of hygienic practices and space: the bathroom, by its very definition, provides canalized, controlled water for social hygienic practices, whereas Mona's bathing site, the sea, has only been *by default* a venue of body washing since the late-twentieth century.

Knowing that no lodging provides Mona with bodily protection, Varda has suggested that the protagonist's protective layer is [her] dirt: "she encloses herself in something, filth" (Racine 28). However, I would argue that her dirt-encrusted body and clothing serve more as a natural envelope, an extension of her body, rather than as a barrier against the exterior elements and her own bodily residues. The evolution of Mona's boots, filmed in sporadic medium shots and close-ups throughout the film provide insight into the degradation of Mona's body; fully functional and intact at the beginning of Mona's journey, her fabric-lined, leather biker boots no longer zip, then slump at the ankles by the end of the film. She falls more victim to this tattered enclosure than anything else, appearing the most healthy and free when in the sea. Bathing in the open waters on an apparently empty beach suggests a communion with nature, an acceptance of the natural body, and a refusal of societal garb along with the practices and behaviors prescribed by attire. This unique scene of Mona's bathing functions as Mona's rebirth through storytelling, an attempt at a reconstruction of the other; it also reinforces Mona's proximity with nature, her flesh matching the seascape just as her clothing matches the barren land.

The sea, the seaside, and the island have long been in the heart of Varda's narratives, providing an associative venue for rebirth and attempts at renewal, such as in *Les créatures*, *Les veuves de Noirmoutier* and her latest documentary, *Les plages d'Agnès* (*The Beaches of Agnès*). Here, as Varda has also done in *Sans toit ni loi*, the very title suggests both property, or lack thereof, and the interconnection between people and places motoring the film. Like *Sans toit ni loi*, *Les plages d'Agnès* is first about landscapes, or rather seascapes internalized by the director, who literally decorates the shore by parceling it with household mirrors and frames, in an attempt to capture the sea and the self in reflection. At a later point, she even creates the beach in the front of her home, *rue Daguerre*. By setting up house, at one point inside a fabric whale, Agnès Varda brings the inside/ outside, and vice versa, a notion reinforced through a pan of the beach accompanied by Georges Brassens's "Supplique pour être enterré sur une plage de Sète"/"Plea to be buried on a beach at Sète." Here, Varda's series of seascapes and structure bring us back to Mona, this time offering more insight into the thoughts behind such an enigmatic character. Varda cuts scenes of Mona's frustration into her own personal reflection on the women's movement, documentary footage and clips from her 1977

film *L'Une chante, l'autre pas*, in order to indirectly illustrate the director's anger in combating for women's rights. "Mona is revolted," she says, as we see Mona banging on bread, then on her shoes. "Mona wants to be free," the director continues, "I don't know when I realized that it is not only a question of being free, but that the woman's struggle had to be collective or it would not exist." The sea in *Sans toit ni loi*, and *Les plages d'Agnès* is a place of security, of solitude, of the individual, where one reflects on the self and the body; its waves continually effacing traces of the previous day remind us of our ephemeral existence and our dependence on others to formulate ourselves. Taking identity construction out of traditional domestic space and linking it to the open sea offer Agnès Varda an odd safe haven, where characters are inscribed in immediacy and temporality, in sand, not stone, on the shoreline where the one intersects with the other.

NOTES

¹ See also Agnès Varda's interview with Jean Michaud and Raymond Bellour in *Cinéma 61* 60 (1961): 4-20. All translations from French are mine.

² *Les veuves de Noirmoutier* (2004-2005) was one component of Varda's 2005 exhibit *L'île et elle* at the Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain, Paris. The 9m30s, 35mm documentary, with music by Ami Flammer, was projected as part of a large panel composed of one large central screen, onto which the film was projected in loop, and 14 openings which held 14 monitors showing 3m30s videos of *Les veuves de Noirmoutier*. Viewers watched from 14 chairs equipped with 14 headsets.

³ Eliane and Jean-Pierre's conversation follows: "I see you coming and the answer is no," says Eliane. "We're married and you never want to," he answers. "At my parents' place," she finally tells him, "I wasn't comfortable, but here in this closet, I'm not in the mood. When I think that your Aunt has seven rooms to herself. Not enough money or space. We're wasting the best years of our lives. Stop annoying me."

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Integrating Classroom and Community: Service-Learning in the Spanish Conversation Class

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Introduction

One of the many challenges that foreign language departments face is how to make sure their majors, including those who begin acquiring the target language in elementary classes, develop oral, aural, reading, and writing skills to a level that would allow them to participate actively and intelligently in the learning experiences they have in their upper division courses. Not surprisingly, there is no magic formula that states how much emphasis must be placed on each skill in order to guarantee a successful participation and, as Steinhart argues, the result is usually a clear disconnect between content and language. She points out that "collegiate language courses are typically viewed as supporting the goals of academic work and preparing candidates for more intense content study, typically literary-cultural content" (260). The problem with this unsystematic and incoherent articulation model is that many professors of upper division courses presuppose that students are prepared to function appropriately when, in fact, this might be an unrealistic assumption.

Of particular interest is the acquisition of oral communication skills. With the development of more communicative approaches to the teaching of foreign languages (FL), most first- and second-year FL programs claim to apply a methodology that encourages learners' oral expression of meaning in classroom situations that try to resemble real-life situations, placing speaking at the core of their course objectives. This is often carried out through the use of small-group and pair activities meant to simulate a real-life conversation. Research on oral