

Unchained

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There is a reason that some people are considered legends and others are not. There is a reason that one art piece may move you and one may not. And there is most definitely a reason that one person can find themselves unchained by that same art that others are chained by. It truly does come down to perception, but more so, to authenticity. Agnes Varda knew how to channel that authenticity in everyone of her works, never failing to rile up emotions in her spectators, whether positive or negative. There is a reason that she is referred to as the “grandmother of the French New Wave” (Vonderheide, 2017). This paper will tackle, as best it can, the reasons as to why Varda is such a legend. It will do so with a background on important aspects that cannot be missed when speaking of Varda, including a short biography, the French New Wave itself and how it came about as well as the Right and Left Bank Cinema. Furthermore, this paper offers a consideration of Andrew Sarris’ auteur Theory, and employs the theory to make the argument that Varda is undoubtedly an auteur, a notion that will be explored through multiple of her films. The films in question include *Cleo de 5 a 7* (Varda, 1962), *Le Bonheur* (Varda, 1965), *Black Panthers* (Varda, 1968), *One Sings The Other Doesn’t* (Varda, 1977), *Vagabond* (Varda, 1985), and *Kung Fu Master* (Varda, 1988). The paper concludes with my personal reaction to the films studied as well as the impression the whole experience left on me.

Before Agnes Varda was known as “the grandmother of the French New Wave” (Vonderheide, 2017), she also had a life outside of the world of cinema. Born Arlette Varda, on March 30th 1928 in Belgium and sadly passed away on March 29th 2019. Varda lived in France where she studied at La Sorbonne and obtained her Bachelor’s in Psychology and Literature. She

then decided to take up photography and studied at Vaugirard School of Photography. Agnes Varda is someone who was known to be full of life and joie de vivre (Vonderheide, 2017). Varda absolutely adored things like photography, landscapes, people, art and literature. All of these elements which she incorporated into her films throughout her entire career, never stopping to add her own personal touch to what was already so authentic (Hornaday, 2009). Interestingly enough, she had no intentions of becoming a filmmaker and in fact, had barely seen any movies by the time she shot her first film; and didn't even know a Cinematheque existed in France (Hornaday, 2009). It was while shooting portrait work for a class that she suddenly got the idea for a film and the rest is basically history. She decided to shoot her first feature film, *La Pointe Courte*, in 1955, already writing her own script from the beginning. Little did she know that this same film would end up being the precursor to the revolutionary films of the French New Wave, half a decade later (Vonderheide, 2017).

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the film art movement called the French New Wave, emerged, originally called La Nouvelle Vague (Neupert, 2007). It got its name from the radical way in which the directors of that movement shot their films, totally breaking the expected rules of French cinema. The French New Wave emerged in the world of post-war France. About 15 years after the end of WWII, people were longing for a sense of culture once more. This culture which had been saturated with “mainstream media that felt trite and contrived” (Maio, 2015) due to embargos that had since been lifted on foreign films. People were sick of the same old narratives from Hollywood films and wanted something fresh, something new. As the people were starting to have enough of the repetitions, many other events were taking place in France, all which contributed immensely to the creation of the art film movement. These events included

the cinémathèque Française, the Cahier du Cinéma, government funding, technical advancements as well as the development of the Auteur Theory itself (Maio, 2015). The Cinémathèque Française was a “French film organization that [held] one of the largest archives of film documents and film-related objects in the world” (The Cinémathèque française, PARIS, France - Google Arts & Culture, 2021), an organization that is still well and running till this day. In the 1950s, the cinémathèque was extremely popular and encouraged a culture of cineastes. With this, there was also the Cahier du Cinéma, a film journal founded in 1951, run by a group of French critics who couldn't afford to make their own films. But with new government funding from the Centre National Du Cinéma, these film critics were then able to create, and that, they did. To continue, there were many technical innovations happening, including portable equipment like 16 mm cameras, direct sound recording, and faster film stock, just to name a few (Neupert, 2007). All of these technical innovations not only drastically simplified the filmmaking process but also allowed for filmmakers to have a new found independence and autonomy as they no longer needed to depend on the film studios, who by comparison, ended up losing their monopoly due to these advancements. The French critics, influenced by Italian-neorealism and the American Noir, literally took to the streets with their newfound burst of energy and funding (Neupert, 2007).

The French critics slowly became filmmakers, as they all experienced with different styles, throwing away old rules of cinema and replacing them with what is known to be so revolutionary today. Characteristics of French New Wave films included one of the biggest differences, on location shooting instead of in-studio shooting, which meant that filming was done at a real place, whether indoor or outdoor instead of just made up sets from the studios.

Handheld cameras became huge as well as scenes having way longer takes instead of the regular cut & dry scenes that French cinema was so accustomed to. Furthermore, there was no longer the want for real actors and filmmakers, like Varda, often used non-actors or mixed them with real ones, using friends and family in their films. Another big difference was the direct sound that was not present as well the use of available lighting instead of studio lighting. This meant that some shots could be poorly lit, but contrary to popular belief, it did not take away from the film and if anything, made it even more intriguing. When it came to the editing, continuity editing went out the window and what now existed was jump cuts and nonlinear editing. There was no longer a need for everything to add up perfectly or to be in perfect synchronicity or even to make sense. The philosophy behind these films changed. It was more than just a story being told, it was now about bringing attention to the medium itself, also known as reflexive cinema. Before this, such a thing as breaking the fourth wall in cinema was a deathwish, it was considered bad acting on the actor's part and horrible directing on the director's part. With this reflexive cinema, looking straight into the camera became as powerful as sentences and made both the directors and the actors. Filmmakers of this film movement cared about capturing the authenticity of human emotion, and of human life (Maio, 2015). This resulted in movies being about everyday life and everyday people and the real struggles that they faced, but the beauty behind those struggles. Many times the films had open endings where the audience had no resolution but somehow there is always a sense of wonder and content at the end of each film. It is important to note that in this film movement there were both the Right Bank directors, which were more successful like Jean-Luc Godard; and the Left Bank directors who were more experimental and not as known, like Agnes Varda (Neupert, 2007). Varda, unlike the other directors, was not from

the film journal like the other directors of the French New Wave but gained her title as her work was very similar and with deep meaning.

With the French New Wave also came the development of the Auteur Theory. In 1948, Alexander Astruc wrote an essay titled "La Camera Stylo" or "The Camera Pen" explaining how "the film-maker writes with his camera as a writer writes with his pen" (Maio, 2015). From this essay and its ideas came the development of the Auteur Theory by Andre Bazin and François Truffaut in 1954 who believed that there was "no higher authority than the director, when it comes to the creative process of filmmaking" (Sarris, 1962). This perspective became extremely popular during the French New Wave and as it became popular, Andrew Sarris, an American film critic, had more to add in 1962 with an essay titled "Notes on the Auteur Theory". This essay included the 3 criteria which are essential for a director to be worthy of being called an auteur. These 3 criteria include technical competence, distinguishable style and interior meaning. The first premise of the Auteur Theory is technical competence. Technical competence includes the ability of the director to make a worthwhile film. Where "one can make interesting conversation about the subject, the script, the acting, the color, the photography, the editing, the music, the costumes, the decor, and so forth". (Sarris, 1962) It is, more simply put, the *mise en scene* of the film. The second premise includes distinguishable style. "Over a certain group of films, a director must exhibit certain recurrent characteristics of style, which serve as [her] signature" (Sarris, 1962). Well put in the essay, "the way a film looks and moves should have some relationship to the way a director thinks and feels" (Sarris, 1962). The third premise includes interior/deep meaning. As put in the essay, "interior meaning is extrapolated from the tension

between a director's personality and [her] material" (Sarris, 1962), or more simply put, it is the soul of the piece in question.

Though many directors can be great, it does not necessarily make them auteurs. Someone who most certainly was an auteur who embodied all three of these criteria, was Agnes Varda. Through the analysis of multiple of her works: *Cleo de 5 a 7*, *Le Bonheur*, *Black Panthers*, *One Sings The Other Doesn't*, *Vagabond*, and *Kung Fu Master*, this statement will be supported. Each of these films are very different from each other but yet offer a lot of similarities and more so, they all are extremely enjoyable and all are worth the watch. *Cleo de 5 a 7*, is a drama which starts in color but then goes in black and white, which is very fitting to the movie itself, as this film deals with existentialism. 5 to 7, in French culture, are the hours where lovers meet, a title which is very misleading as this is not at all what this film embodies. Cleo, a rising singer goes to see a card reader to affirm suspicions she has of a pending medical test. When the cards reveal themes of death and loss, she becomes obsessed with the meaning of life and throughout real time of 2 hours, the audience is taken through her life, her struggles but mostly, her state of mind. In the experimental drama *Le Bonheur*, we are taken through the beautiful and blissful life of Francois, his wife Therese, then one day, Francois starts having an affair with a postal woman named Emilie. We continue to see their day to day life till Francois finally tells his wife of the affair and she abruptly dies in a very intense scene, Francois eventually finds comfort in Emilie as does his 2 children. In *Black Panthers*, Varda documents the Black Panther movement, interviewing members of the party as well as the leader, she gets many beautiful shots of different events happening. In this, the Black Panthers opinions and thoughts are made clear, and she truly gives them a huge voice. *One Sings The Other Doesn't*, is a drama/musical

about the journey of two close but very different friends, Pauline and Suzanne who go through the struggles of womanhood and big issues like abortion and societal norms of marriage and gender roles, as the Women's movement of the 1970s in France is very prevalent and very much so part of the story. As Pauline and Suzanne, separate, find themselves and reunite multiple times throughout the film, they go through struggles that do nothing but bring them closer even though they are extremely different. *Vagabond*, is a drama about a homeless woman named Mona who is found dead at the beginning of the film, throughout the film, the story of how she got there is recounted by the different people she met along the way as well as flashbacks of her journey, leaving the audience with a very vivid yet impersonal but touching idea of all that Mona was. Lastly, *Kung Fu Master*, is a drama about a 40 year old woman, Mary-Jane who falls in love with a 15 year, Julien. The film follows their growing romance which falls apart when her daughter finds them embracing, resulting in the collapse of Mary-Jane's life.

With the brief explanation and genre of the films alone, it would seem that they have nothing in common as the stories are very different and the only seeming resemblance would be the drama genre. Although it is true that these films all tell different stories, when watching them, there are remarkable similarities in the mise en scene as well as the meaning behind these films. Firstly, it should be pointed out that each of these meanings are incredibly deep and all share very powerful messages independent to themselves. Here is the first resemblance that can be pointed out from Varda, is that her films are never just about the stories themselves, it is very important to read between the lines or sometimes, the lines themselves. In *Cleo de 5 a 7*, you will find themes of existentialism, solitude and death, views of how society sees women, true meaning of beauty, objectification of women and more. In *Le Bonheur*, you find themes of what

true happiness and love is, fidelity and morality. In *Black Panthers*, the themes are more straightforward, as it involves literal life and death, the importance of black lives and the lack of equality that people of color will do anything to get, at any cost. *One Sings, The Other Doesn't*, has themes of gender roles, women's equality, and the overall expectations of women. *Vagabond* deals with social responsibility and the different realities of life. Lastly, *Kung Fu Master* deals with themes of loneliness, taboo love and what's socially acceptable. It is very clear that when it comes to the deeper meanings of the films, even though they all include different themes, there is such deep meaning in the films, such depth and thought provoking themes that even when watched today, are still extremely relevant, highlighting in how timeless and magnificent the pieces are. Truly, "she [had] never slowed down: a ceaseless creative force, she [had] been on the spot at historic moments" (Dupont, 2018)

Other than deep meaning, Varda has many other stylistic features that make her films unmistakably hers. Varda combined multiple elements which resulted in her personal touch, these included personal experience, political activism, love of landscapes, art, music and photography, as well as an intense curiosity for people (Dupont, 2018). Most importantly, she showed the beauty and diverse dimensions of women, by showing their bodies, lives, faces, struggles, stories and more. She truly showcased women in a time where women were not at the forefront of cinema, neither on or off screen, and certainly not as lead characters. Something that is remarkable about Varda's films is that the protagonists are often women, and if there are multiple main characters then one of the leads will undoubtedly be a woman. In all of the films below, the protagonists are women except for *Le Bonheur* which is more male centered but at the same time, there is a huge emphasis on women as well. These women, in her films, are also

never weak, frail or uninteresting; they are always full of life, personality and certainly something to say. The women always seem to jump off the screen with how daring they are. This is obvious with such a bold character like Pauline who chooses to have a child and raise her on her own, as she continues to tour and sing songs of women's freedom in *One Sings, The Other Doesn't*. Or in *Vagabond* with a quick and witty mouthed Mona who is blunt and unafraid of anyone's opinion. Or with Cleo who at first, is so worried about how men perceive her, but then realizes that their opinions mean nothing and all that truly matters is her personal happiness in *Cleo de 5 a 7*.

To continue, something that Varda was known for and that the French New Wave was known for in general, was the use of non-actors in their films. Varda would shoot friends and family, even shooting her own children. "Varda's cinema is one of subjective inclusion: She includes herself, her friend and her family directly and indirectly in her films" (Hottell, 1999). Her daughter can be seen at the end of *One Sings, The Other Doesn't*, as the elderly version of one of the characters, or her son as the tiny little Zorro in that same film. This same son is the main character, portraying the 15 year old boy in *Kung Fu Master*. In *Le Bonheur*, Francois's family is his actual family in real life, including the wife and children. Varda loved to mix actors and non-actors alike and did so frequently. Another recurrence in her work is her title sequence; normally the title of the movie is seen before the film starts but in all of Varda's work above, the title becomes a part of the movie, unfolding as the film does itself. Furthermore, as I mentioned that Varda had previously been a photographer, her love for photography is very evident in all of her work. She creates amazingly scenic work, using landscapes most beautifully. All of her films are shot on location and the scenes are absolutely breathtaking, whether it be the beautiful sand

desert in Iran of *One Sings The Other Doesn't*, or the scenic park scenes of *Cleo de 5 a 7*, or the marvellous flower beds and lakes of *Le Bonheur*, the mundane dry cold surroundings of Mona in *Vagabond*, the relaxing beaches of *Kung Fu Master* or the powerful landscape made of people in *Black Panthers*. With a photography degree comes this incredible eye for capturing true beauty in each of her shots in all of her films, it is truly impeccable. As beautiful as her shots were, what was also beautiful was the way in which she was able to capture people so authentically. Another one of her marks was the way in which her films always had a documentary aspect to them, with shots that included close ups, people talking off screen, tracking shots, very realistic shooting.

This brings me straight to how in her style, she was not afraid to let people look straight into the camera and keep it there. Per usual, breaking the fourth wall is something that is forbidden in cinema, but to Varda, it is only the beginning of something beautiful. With the fact that her films felt both very cinematic and documentary like, she was not afraid to incorporate aspects of both in her films. Even if for just one moment, her characters always end up staring straight into the camera, as is obvious in each one of the films in this paper. Sometimes the reason for doing so was in a POV shot, or sometimes it was just for the mere fact of that self reflexivity that the French New Wave is known for, or if not that, it would be to incorporate another one of her remarkable signature moves, her narration. Varda had a way of incorporate diegetic and non diegetic sound in all of her work, and most often times, she had some sort of introspection or personal reflection that would happen with the characters where they would either talk to themselves in their heads like *Cleo de 5 a 7* where Cleo's maid talks to herself about how she feels about Cleo, or directly to the audience like in *Vagabond* where a housekeeper shares her annoyance about the elderly lady she is forced to take care of; or there

would just be narration explaining what was happening like in the epilogue of *One Sings, The Other Doesn't* as Varda herself explains what would become of the main characters. *Black Panthers*, a full documentary, also deals with many of its interviewees looking straight into the camera as they speak so powerfully or stare deeply as their eyes tell more than words ever could. When it comes to breaking the fourth wall, it might as well be a must, an iconic scene is when Cleo sings directly to the camera as she cries in *Cleo de 5 a 7*, or when Mary-Jane looks into the camera as she's caught embracing Julien in *Kung Fu Master*, or in *Le Bonheur* where Francois' hand covers half of Emilie's face as she stares into the camera, or in *Vagabond* when Mona falls to the ground ready to ascend, or in *Black Panthers* as Varda's camera captures many lurking eyes, or in *One Sings, The Other Doesn't* as Pauline's husband looks into a mirror that is pointed at the camera.

There are multiple aspects of Varda's work that could be put together to make the argument that she is in fact an auteur, "each film is used to exemplify a unique aspect of her filmmaking" (Davis, 2017). Even more so, she even coined a word for the level to which she wanted all of her work to be at, whether that be the screenwriting to the acting to the props to the mise en scene to the editing. She called this cinecriture, or cinema writing (Vonderheide, 2017). This is how incredible she was, that she made a term for herself and her work because it was too authentic for anything else. The aspects covered certainly don't even do her justice as there are more that could be uncovered and talked about for hours. Yet something that is also important to consider in why she is an auteur, even though it is not in Sarris's criteria, is the way in which she was able to influence people and their work. Agnes Varda has inspired so many people, including Mirando July, an American screenwriter and director who says that she was inspired

by *Kung Fu Master* for its weirdness. (Dry, 2019) Or Ava Duvernay, an American filmmaker who was inspired by Varda herself (Dry, 2019). Agnes Varda was a pioneer, and the list of the people who were probably influenced by her is infinite, including filmmakers like Scorsese. The movies that she could have inspired I also believe to be infinite. But I do not believe that I can truly speak for anyone but myself.

Agnes Varda has influenced me in so many ways, she's taught me to be daring. I have never felt competent as a filmmaker, because I used to believe that I had to know everything and do everything perfectly to be worthy of even considering myself a filmmaker. I had many insecurities when it came to my technical capacities as well as intellectual capacities to create something worth watching. I always asked myself "why me? What is so wonderful about me?". I felt like I couldn't possibly have much to offer the world. As I went deeper into my film studies and learned about such great directors and filmmakers, I was even more perplexed as I felt both inspired but also chained to my beliefs. This due to their competence and how powerful their movies were, I continued to think that I could never amount to that. Then I had the privilege of learning about Varda and to me, it was more about just being inspired by her work. She not only moved me and dazzled me, but more so, she unchained me from my debilitating beliefs. Before her, I was trying so hard to break free from my unfitting thoughts, but there was something that kept me there. Varda was the force strong enough to help me break me, help me unchain me from myself. I have found such comfort and reassurance in her work and also in her personal story. To know that she herself had no background in film, and that lack of, ended up being the precursor to the French New Wave, one of my favorite periods in film history. There is such power in her personal story alone. The fact that she was so daring and bold, that she didn't even

care that she knew nothing of cinema and its rules that sometimes box you in instead of free you. She let herself truly be her authentic self, film from her heart's true desires and from that, came staggeringly beautiful work. I am so grateful to have been shown her work, and even though I do not believe that I myself will have work resulting in the birth of a new film movement, I do believe that I have been unchained, freed from myself and that in itself, is more than I could have ever asked for.

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