



KADIR HAS UNIVERSITY  
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**AGNÈS VARDA AND ESSAY FILM**

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ADVISOR: PROF. DR. G. DENİZ BAYRAKDAR

MASTER'S DEGREE THESIS

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This study, titled **AGNÈS VARDA AND ESSAY FILM**, prepared by the **ASLIHAN ZEYNEP KAPLAMA**, was deemed successful with the **UNANIMOUS VOTING** as a result of the thesis defense examination held on **26.07.2021** and approved as a **MASTER'S DEGREE THESIS** by our jury.

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## AGNÈS VARDA AND ESSAY FILM

### ABSTRACT

In this thesis study, I explore the essay film as a form, specifically in the cinema of Agnès Varda. By demonstrating how Varda practices essayistic filmmaking, I discuss some definitions and characteristics of the essay film. Since the essay film crosses the boundaries and manages to take place either outside the scope of documentary or fiction, I discuss the essay film as an autonomous form instead of integrating it within the field of documentary filmmaking. I examine Varda's essayistic filmmaking practices through the instrumentality of essay film theory, which takes its source from the literary tradition and flourishes through analyzing the cinematic essay that combines the verbal and the visual in its unique structure. I focus on the film *Visages Villages* (2017) in terms of how the essay film blurs fact and fiction, objectivity and subjectivity, and establishes a *dialogical* (Bakhtin, 1929) relationship between spectator and image. Before analysis of the film, I present an overview of the historical background of the essay film practices and essay film theory, and draw an analogy between the avant-garde roots of the essay film and the position of Varda in the 1950s avant-garde cinema and the French New Wave movement. The focus of my thesis also follows an essayist approach, shifting between theories, film history, and Agnès Varda's personal story. Since Varda's essayist filmmaking merges documentary and fiction, still and moving images, reality and illusion, past and present on the surface of photographs/murals and her own filmic journey, the analysis of *Visages Villages* allows me to examine - in addition to essay film theory - intertextuality, landscape in the cinema, and the pastness and presentness of photographic and moving images.

**Keywords:** Essay Film, Agnès Varda, Intertextuality, Subjectivity, Landscape, Self-reflexivity.

## ÖZET

Bu tez çalışmasında deneme film formunu Agnès Varda sineması üzerinden inceledim. Varda'nın deneme film pratiklerini incelerken, deneme filmin çeşitli tanımlarını ve özelliklerini tartıştım. Deneme film, klasik anlatı yapılarının sınırlarını aşarak, belgesel ya da kurmaca sinemanın dışına çıkar. Bu bağlamda, deneme film formunu, belgesel film alanına dahil etmek yerine bağımsız bir form olarak ele aldım. Varda'nın deneme film pratiklerini, kaynağını edebi denemeden alan, görsel ve sözel olanı kendine has yapısı içinde birleştiren deneme filmleri inceleyerek gelişen deneme film teorisinin ışığında inceledim. Deneme filmin kurgu ile gerçeklik, nesnellik ile öznellik gibi ikilikleri nasıl bulanıklaştırdığını ve seyirci ve imge arasında kurduğu *dialogik* (Bakhtin, 1929) ilişkiyi *Visages Villages* (2017) filmi üzerinden tartıştım. Film analizinden önce deneme film pratikleri ve deneme film teorisinin tarihsel arka planını ve deneme filmin avantgard kökenleri ile Varda'nın 1950'lerin avantgard sineması ve Fransız yeni dalga hareketi içindeki konumunu beraber inceledim. Bu çalışmada, teoriler, film tarihi ve Varda'nın kişisel hikayesi arasında yer değiştirerek denemeci bir yaklaşım izledim. Varda'nın belgesel ve kurmacayı, durağan ve hareketli görüntüyü, gerçeklik ve illüzyonu, geçmiş ve şimdiki zamanı duvar resimlerinin yüzeyinde ve film yapım sürecinde eşzamanlı olarak kullanması; bu tez çalışmasında, deneme film teorisine ek olarak, metinlerarasılık, sinemada manzara, durağan ve hareketli görüntünün geçmiş ve şimdiki zaman ile ilişkisi gibi kavramları tartışmama olanak sağladı.

**Anahtar sözcükler:** Deneme film, Agnès Varda, Metinlerarasılık, Öznellik, Manzara, Özdüşünümsellik.



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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In my thesis, I discuss how essayistic practices are realized in cinema and focus on the essay film as a form, specifically in the cinema of Agnès Varda. By demonstrating how Varda practices essayistic filmmaking, I discuss some definitions and characteristics of the essay film. Most of the existing scholarly contributions acknowledge that the definition of essay film is problematic, and suggest it is a hybrid form that crosses boundaries and rests somewhere in between fiction and non-fiction cinema (Rascaroli, 2009, p. 21). In the work of Varda, I analyze how the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction film are removed, and essayistic practices are enacted, since her work not only removes the borders between fiction and non-fiction film but also uses primary markers of the essay film such as subjectivity, self-reflexivity, and reflectivity.

Paul Arthur (2017) suggests that “one way to think about the essay film is as a meeting ground for documentary, avant-garde, and art film impulses” (p. 169). In general, there is a tendency to categorize the essay film in the field of the documentary by film festivals and film critics; however, it is obvious that the essay film crosses the boundaries and manages to take place either outside the scope of the documentary or the fiction film. Therefore, I discuss the essay film as an autonomous form instead of integrating the cinematic essay within the field of documentary filmmaking.

The focus of my thesis also follows an essayist approach, shifting between theories, film history, and Agnès Varda's personal story which cannot be separated from the historical background of the main film that I analyze in the third chapter. Agnès Varda has gone through the stages of Nouvelle Vague, left her traces in it, been influenced by her colleagues, by the philosophical and literary waves of the era when she was young, and she as an artist creates her essay, *Visages Villages* (2017), on the way her film developed, which combines the past and the present, and exceeds the boundaries of old and new.

My first chapter, “Essay Film as a Form: An Essayistic Director” is divided into two sub-chapters. The first one, “The Essayistic Practices in Cinema and Theorization of Essay Film” is an overview of the historical background of essay film practices and essay film

theory. Even using a literary term such as “essay” and the bringing together of the verbal and the visual in essay film points to the literary tradition of the essay film; instead of providing an overview of the history of the literary essay, I discuss the essay film as an independent form and prefer to explore essayistic practices in cinema through the instrumentality of essay film theory, which takes its source from the literary tradition and flourishes through analyzing those essay film practices that combine the verbal and the visual within its unique structure. My first sub-chapter covers some definitions and specific markers of the essay film, although every essay film has its own distinct world. Also, the essay film’s bringing together of the verbal and the visual and its nature of transgression makes it challenging to define and limit. Varda’s selected films from different periods provide a useful source to discuss the essay film form further and exemplify essayistic practices.

The second sub-chapter, “Avant-Garde Roots of Essay Film and Agnès Varda” discusses the connection between the avant-garde roots of the essay film, Varda’s essayistic filmmaking, and her position in the French New Wave movement. Varda’s impulse toward the essay film could be found in her interest in intermediality as a photographer, filmmaker, and visual artist. As a visual artist, she expresses herself via her photography, installations, films, video work, and also via her visual works that combine some of these fields. Varda’s first film *La Pointe Courte* (1954), which marks the beginning of the New Wave movement<sup>1</sup>, can be easily linked with the avant-garde roots of the essay film. I also discuss Varda’s own notion of *cinécriture* (cine-writing) in this chapter.

In the following chapter, I analyze the film *Visages Villages* which was co-directed by Agnès Varda and photographer/muralist JR. I demonstrate how essayistic practices are enacted in the film and how it reflects most of the characteristics of the essay film. Starting from the prologue, the film blurs the lines between fiction and non-fiction, resists categorization in a certain genre, and refuses to be related with a specific mode. Essayistic practices that are used in the film combine objectivity and subjectivity, and push the limitations and possibilities of the representation. In *Visages Villages*, Varda’s essayist

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<sup>1</sup> Roger Vadim’s *Et Dieu... Créé La Femme* (1956) and Marcel Camus’ *Orfeu Negro* (1958) are also considered as the harbingers of the Nouvelle Vague.

filmmaking merges documentary and fiction, subjectivity and objectivity, still and moving images, reality and illusion, past and present on the surface of the photographs/murals and also her filmic journey. According to Huxley (2017), essays belong to a literary species whose extreme variability can be studied most effectively within a three-poled frame of reference, including the personal and the autobiographical; the objective, the factual, the concrete-particular; and the abstract-universal (p. 83). In *Visages Villages*, these three aspects can be found as intermingled and in dialogue with each other. The film seems like a road movie and a self-reflexive documentary, as the two artists start out on a road trip and expose the stories of actual people they come across on the road. However, not long after, it is realized that it is also a film about itself, about art, ways of seeing, and the process of filmmaking. As the film unfolds, universal and abstract themes such as aging, youth, death, and creativity are explored. Huxley (2017) finishes the “Preface to The Collected Essays of Aldous Huxley” thus:

The most richly satisfying essays are those which make the best not of one, not of two, but of all three worlds in which it is possible for the essay to exist. Freely, effortlessly, thought and feeling move in these consummate works of art, hither and thither between the essay’s three poles—from the personal to the universal, from the abstract back to the concrete, from the objective datum to the inner experience. (p. 85)

Huxley’s quote reminds me of the starting point of my thesis that - from the perspective of spectator watching Varda’s films - is traveling between different narrative forms, concepts, styles, and modes, while creating unity in itself and being affected by these transitions. Traveling from the concrete to the abstract, from the personal to the universal, urged me to reflect upon the theory of the essay film together with Varda’s films. Therefore, while analyzing *Visages Villages*, I focus on these transitions between Huxley’s three poles, how the structure of the film is mapped from non-fiction to fiction, from the personal to the universal, and from objectivity to subjectivity.

Varda's essayist approach in *Visages Villages* calls for some theories and concepts in addition to that of essay film theory, such as: (i) Kristeva's intertextuality theory - since the film interacts with other texts through many verbal and visual allusions; (ii) Richard Allen's concept of projective illusion - as the film provides the co-existence of the past and the present through gathering still images on the surfaces and mises-en-scène created in front of these still images and portrays how the illusion of cinema is produced; (iii) Martin Lefebvre's discussion of landscape in the cinema - both the film's approach to

landscape as a subject and as a space outside the narrative. In the chapter “Making-of an Essay: *Visages Villages*,” I discuss these theories and concepts in further detail.

While analyzing the film, I discuss subjectivity since it is one of the most prominent features of the film, along with the combination of factuality and the imaginary/fictive world. The subjectivity of both directors - Varda and JR - is profoundly perceived through the film, as we hear Varda's voice-over and see through the perspectives of both directors at many points. As the directors are both the subjects of the narrative and the film's subject matter, they reflect themselves, their vision of art. Since the two artists - a filmmaker and a muralist - collaborate, the film provides double projection, double subjectivity, which also foregrounds multiple subject positions and questions the subjective author's position. I discuss the subjectivity in the film in two aspects. The first one is self-reflexivity because Varda's subjectivity always embodies self-reflexivity. Her subjective point of view cannot be separated from the eye of the camera in her essay films. Self-reflexive techniques that reveal the camera, the director, the film itself cannot be drawn apart from her subjective position. Besides *Visages Villages* being an essay film that uses self-reflexive strategies in connection to its main theme, Varda uses self-reflexivity in her own style during the film. At first glance, in *Visages Villages*, self-reflexive strategies are enacted because the film is about itself, about visual arts, about ways of seeing, and about the process of filmmaking. However, the self-reflexivity of the film goes beyond revealing the camera and turns the camera onto the filmmakers, and it settles on villages, on faces, on murals as they leave their traces throughout the journey. As *visages* deal with physiognomies and *villages* deal with spaces; faces are also surfaces on which mimicry reveals the personalities and the walls, the houses, and the surfaces in the villages are used as if they are the faces of the villages, as a metonymy for the visage. The murals co-created by the authors over the surfaces both reflect and reveal the faces of the villages, the villagers, and the authors. Therefore, self-reflexivity - also an important marker of the essay film - is analyzed while discussing *Visages Villages*.

Secondly, I discuss the subjectivity of the film together with intertextuality as the film investigates the author's position through its intertextual narration. In the chapter of analysis of *Visages Villages*, I refer to intertextuality theory as a post-structuralist theory, which was first coined by Julia Kristeva in 1966. For Kristeva (1980), the text is “a

permutation of texts” and “in the space of a given text, several utterances, taken from other texts, intersect and neutralize one another” (p. 36). The intertextual references denote the openness of *Visages Villages*; relating with other texts and absorbing them, it provides multiple significations on the part of the authors and the spectator. While the film contains many intertextual references to the past life of the director, such as Varda’s previous films, her personal life - her relationship with her partner Jacques Demy and longtime friendship with Jean-Luc Godard - the film contemplates the present through the spatial and temporal presence of screen objects that have memory traces.

Further, Varda uses the essay film form to experiment with and contemplate the issues of illusion and reality. The film portrays the everyday life of villagers in French rural settings with a documentary approach; the process of filmmaking through self-conscious and self-reflexive narration strategies; reflects on Varda's cinematic history; and gathers all in various scenes - both consists of still and moving images, and the past and the present. Therefore the film evokes a discussion of cinematic illusion, and the presentness and pastness of image. For Roland Barthes (1977), “the photograph is never experienced as an illusion, is in no way a presence; ... its reality is that of the *having-been-there*” (p. 44). On the contrary, Richard Allen (1993) suggests that “photographs do *not* wear their pastness on their surface” and “since, in projective illusion, what we perceive appears spatially present to us, what we perceive also appears temporally present to us” (pp. 27-42). The film evokes the discussion of the presentness and pastness of image in many sequences, such as the gathering together of photographs over the surfaces and the *mis-en-scène* created in front of the photographs that appear as the subjects in the photographs come to life in the presentness of the moving image. Therefore, I would also like to explore how Varda provokes the discussion of illusion and reality, pastness and presentness of the image through her idiosyncratic essayistic practices in *Visages Villages*.

One of the prominent features of essay film is its dialogical relationship with the spectator. The film asks questions in order to start a dialogue with the spectators; it does not search for precise answers and gives room to them to think and discover things together with the authors. Landscape plays an essential role during the film as a subject of the narrative, and one which interrupts the pair's encounters and gives the spectator time to look at the

landscape and contemplate. Therefore, I refer to Martin Lefebvre's discussion on the cinematic landscape, “as a *form of being* of external space in our minds and a space acquires some autonomy from narrative” (Lefebvre, 2006, pp. 51-52).

In summary, the main aims of my thesis are to discuss the essay film as a form and examine what are the “essayistic practices” in the selected film work of Varda. I discuss where the essayistic practices combine and/or blur fact and fiction, objectivity and subjectivity; how it pushes the limitations and possibilities of representation; and how the strategies of self-reflexivity, subjectivity, intertextuality, and reflectivity are enacted. I also explore how *Visages Villages* establishes a dialogical relationship between the image and the spectator through its utilization of *landscape*, discusses and dissolves the borders of illusion and reality in art, exceeds the boundaries of old and new, and expands horizons of essay film through double subjectivity of two artists, Varda and JR.



## 2. ESSAY FILM AS A FORM: AN ESSAYISTIC DIRECTOR

Agnès Varda's essayistic filmmaking style can be traced back to beginning of her career, her first film, *La Pointe Courte* (1954) and another early film, *L'opéra-Mouffe* (1958). Although Varda's best-known essay film is *Les Glaneurs et la Glaneuse* (2000), she practices essayistic filmmaking throughout her career; including some films such as *Daguerreotypes* (1975), *Mur Murs* (1981), *Documenteur* (1981), *Jane B. Par Agnès V.* (1987), *Jacquot de Nantes* (1991), *Les Plages D'Agnès* (2008) and *Visages Villages* (2017). Corrigan (2017) says that "the films of Agnès Varda provide an almost unique map of the historical movement of the essay film from its association with French cinema of the 1950s through its continued growth and expansion into the digital present" (p. 217). To discuss Agnès Varda's essayistic filmmaking, it is necessary to trace the theoretical and practical roots of the essay film itself. Therefore, in the first chapter of this section, I trace the development of the essay film by providing an overview of the historical background of essay film practices and essay film theory.

Even using a literary term such as "essay" and bringing together of the verbal and the visual in the essay film points to the literary tradition of the essay film; instead of providing an overview of the history of the literary essay, I discuss the essay film as an independent form and prefer to explore essayistic practices in cinema through the instrumentality of essay film theory which takes its source from the literary tradition and flourishes through analyzing the essay film practices that combine the verbal and the visual in its unique structure. To provide a useful framework for understanding the essay film, I list some definitions and characteristics of the literary essay and essay film, even where most of the definitions of literary and film essays are broad and ambiguous. In the second sub-chapter, I discuss the avant-garde roots of the essay film which are mostly associated with the French New Wave movement, together with Agnès Varda's essayistic practices and additionally the position of Agnès Varda in the French New Wave movement.

## 2.1 THE ESSAYISTIC PRACTICES IN CINEMA AND THEORIZATION OF ESSAY FILM

To argue about Agnès Varda's essayistic filmmaking, it is necessary to trace the theoretical and practical roots of the essay film. The roots of the essay film can be found in its literary heritage, starting with the book of Michel de Montaigne, *Essais (Essays)*, (1580).<sup>2</sup> Essay means "to assay," "to try," or "to attempt." As the title of the book reveals, essay is a search for a new form, and it takes the writer's own self as a subject, as a starting point, as Montaigne (1946) put it, "I am myself the matter of my book" (p. 2). Montaigne (1946) wrote, as he claimed, "not attempt to make known things, but myself" (p. 541). Contextual and formal elements of the literary essay are to be found in the essay film. Subjectivity, self-reflectivity, self-reflexivity, and transgression are shared by both the literary essay and the essay film. Hans Richter (2017) proposes using the term "essay film" in the article "The Film Essay: A New Type of Documentary" in 1940 to differentiate the essay film from the conventional documentary film:

The essay film, in its attempt to make the invisible world of imagination, thoughts, and ideas visible, can draw from an incomparably larger reservoir of expressive means than can the pure documentary film. (p. 91)

Another significant early contribution to the essay film is Alexandre Astruc's renowned article "The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: La Caméra Stylo" published in 1948. Astruc (2014) announces the birth of a new cinema as "gradually becoming a language" and describes the "camera-pen" which is "as flexible and subtle as written language" reflecting the subjective expression of the director (p. 604). According to him, in cinema, an artist can express his thoughts, however abstract they may be, or translate his obsessions exactly as he does in the contemporary essay or novel, and he argues that writing for the cinema becomes a means of writing just as flexible and subtle as any other writing, be it poetry, short stories, or full novels (p. 604). André Bazin (2017) uses the term "essay film" in the article *Bazin on Marker* (1958) and defines Marker's *Lettre de Sibérie (Letter from Siberia, 1957)* as "an essay on the reality of Siberia past and present in the form of a filmed report," and as "an essay documented by film" which emphasizes meeting of the verbal and the visual in the essay film (p. 103). Moreover, Bazin (2017)

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<sup>2</sup> Phillip Lopate claims that the essay can be traced back to Cicero and Seneca and becomes definite with Montaigne and Bacon (Lopate, 1992, p. 19).

calls Marker's new notion of montage as “horizontal” that is “opposed to traditional montage that plays with the sense of duration through the relationship of shot to shot” (p. 103). In the article “In Search of the Centaur: The Essay-Film,” Lopate (1992) tries to identify the markers of the essay film foregrounding the verbal nature of the essay film, highlighting the strong presence of a subjective author and the dialogue between the filmmaker and the spectator. Lopate’s example of the essay film is Resnais’s *Nuit et brouillard* (*Night and Fog*, 1955) and he interprets the self-interrogatory voice of the film as a true essayist one (Lopate, 1992, p. 19). One of the common characteristics of many essay films is the self-interrogatory voice of the author.

Some examples of the essay film from 1950s French cinema which are most commonly acknowledged by film scholars are Georges Franju’s *Hôtel des Invalides* (1952), Alain Resnais’s *Nuit et brouillard* (*Night and Fog*, 1955), Chris Marker’s *Lettre de Sibérie* (*Letter from Siberia*, 1957), and Jean Cocteau’s *Le Testament d’Orphée* (*Testament of Orpheus*, 1959). Through the 1970s and mostly 1980s, the essay film practices increased around the world; including some examples such as Jonas Mekas’s *Lost, Lost, Lost* (1976), Chris Marker’s *Sans Soleil* (1983), Harun Farocki’s *Bilder der Welt und Inschrift des Krieges* (*Images of the World and the Inscription of War*, 1989), and Jean-Luc Godard’s *Notre Musique* (*Our Music*, 2004).

Nora M. Alter (1996) mentions that the essay “is precisely *not* a genre, since it strives to be beyond formal, conceptual, and social constraint. Like ‘heresy’ in the Adornean literary essay, the essay film disrespects traditional boundaries, is transgressive both structurally and conceptually, it is self-reflective and self-reflexive” (p. 171). The essay film crosses the boundaries between documentary and fiction and manages to take place beyond both documentary and fiction. Essay film’s bringing together of the verbal and the visual and its nature of transgression makes it difficult to define and limit, however there are certain tendencies and characteristics of the “essayistic.” Nora M. Alter and Timothy Corrigan (2017) state that the intersection of documentaries and avant-garde cinema can be found in “city” films by the late 1920s and early 1930s such as Alberto Cavalcanti’s *Rien que les heures* (*Nothing but the Hours*, 1926), Walter Ruttmann’s *Die Sinfonie der Großstadt* (*Berlin: Symphony of a Great City*, 1927), and Dziga Vertov’s

*Chelovek s kino-apparatom* (*Man with a Movie Camera*, 1929) which have some defining features of the essay film such as:

- 1) The blending of fact and fiction
- 2) The mixing of art- and documentary- film styles
- 3) The foregrounding of a personal or subjective point of view<sup>3</sup>
- 4) A focus on public life
- 5) A dramatic tension between audial and visual discourses
- 6) A dialogic encounter with audiences and viewers. (p. 2-3)

While the blending of fact and fiction represents contextual transgression, the mixing of art and documentary film styles reflects the formal transgression of the essay. The subjectivity of the author is one of the important features of the essay, together with a focus on public life. In terms of subjectivity, the presence of the author can be obvious - visible and audible - in different forms such as voice-over or the direct appearance and participation of the director as a subject in the film, which also makes self-reflexivity inevitable. Although subjectivity is important to the essay film, the presence of the strong subjectivity of the author is not sufficient for it to be termed an essay film (Rascaroli, 2009, p. 23). Rascaroli (2009) explains how the essay film's structure and the presence of a strong enunciator differs from fiction cinema and documentaries in her seminal article, "The Essay Film: Problems, Definitions, Textual Commitments":

One could argue that fiction cinema and documentaries may also present strong or overt enunciators, who speak through a narrator (who can be either internal or external to the narration). In the essay film, however, this choice is structural rather than occasional (as is instead usually the case of fiction cinema); and is personal and individual, rather than social and collective (as often happens in traditional documentaries). Furthermore, the enunciator addresses the spectator directly, and attempts to establish a dialogue. The "I" of the essay film always clearly and strongly implicates a "you"—and this is a key aspect of the deep structures of the form. "You" is called upon to participate and share the enunciator's reflections. It is important to understand that this "you" is not a generic audience, but an embodied spectator. (pp. 33-34)

According to Rascaroli (2009), "heresy and openness are among the essay film's key markers," in addition to two essential features of essay film - reflectivity and subjectivity (p. 39). The openness of the essay film depends on the dialogue between the filmmaker and the spectator through direct address. Since "you" does not refer to a generic audience

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<sup>3</sup> Huxley, following the tradition of Montaigne, believes in the inclusion of the personal subjectivity of the author, a trait that is not necessary for Lukács, Bense, and Adorno (Alter & Corrigan, 2017, p.8).

- as Rascaroli mentions - so the openness of the film arises from the open-end questions which start a conversation with an embodied spectator (pp. 34-39). Caroline Eades and Elizabeth A. Papazian (2016) further analyze the essay film form, focusing more on the relationship between the subject and the object, narration and reflection, image and thought as the 'subject-I' and the 'camera-eye' (p. 104).

"Essays on the Essay Film" edited by Nora M. Alter and Timothy Corrigan gathers chronologically a wide range of essays, including both constitutive essays on literary essay and contemporary essays on essay film. In my study, I refer to both constitutive essays by Theodor W. Adorno, Aldous Huxley, André Bazin and contemporary essays by Laura Rascaroli, Paul Arthur, Nora M. Alter, and Timothy Corrigan.

Whereas most of the definitions of literary and film essays are broad and ambiguous, this thesis does not aim to offer a clear definition of the essay film. In "The Barthes Effect: Essay as Reflective Text," Reda Bensmaia (1987) defines the essay that "seems to flirt with all the genres without ever letting itself be pinned down" (p. 96). Therefore, the flexible, open, transgressive nature of the essay film form makes it indefinite. In *The Personal Camera: Subjective Cinema and Essay Film*, Laura Rascaroli describes subjective cinema in its plural forms and structures, traces the theoretical roots of the essay film, and discusses the principal issues and problems of the "essayistic" in the film by avoiding the overtheorization of the form. Rascaroli also examines different forms of first-person cinema such as the diary, travelogue, and self-portrait in her book, foregrounds subjectivity and describes the domain of the essayistic as a cinema in the first-person, a cinema of thought, of investigation, of intellectual searching and of self-reflection (Rascaroli, 2009).

In Varda's essay films, these forms - diary, travelogue, self-portrait - are intermingled and in general, Varda starts her narration in the first-person, takes herself as a starting point and asks questions as a process of thinking which also includes the spectator. Varda's films from different periods such as *Jane B. Par Agnès V.*, *Les Plages d'Agnès* and *Visages Villages* calls for Rascaroli's definition of the domain of the essayistic. Each film starts with first-person narration, reflects the author's personal life, utilizes self-reflexive techniques that expose the camera, the author, the film itself from the very

beginning, pushes spectators to think about the film's subject matter together with her, and expands horizons through its thinking about universal themes.

*Jane B. par Agnès Varda*, which is seemingly a docudrama about actor Jane Birkin invokes the issues of representation due to its subject matter and especially its narration. Jane Birkin plays fictional characters in many phantasy sequences during the film, besides her interviews with Varda, which raise questions about the possibility and/or impossibility of representation; limitations and/or limitless, variable versions of representation/reconstruction; factuality and imagination. Varda reverses the codes of the docudrama genre; Varda's presence is profoundly palpable while Varda draws a portrait of Jane Birkin. As a self-reflexive film about representation, the film points out the crisis of representation as well. Even if, at some point, the spectator is hard-pressed to know who Jane Birkin is and the film raises the question of what the differences and borders are between drawing a self-portrait and drawing someone else's portrait. Since *Jane B. par Agnès V.* is not a classical docudrama about a star, while Varda turns her camera on Jane Birkin, she also turns her camera on herself. Varda's camera is exposed starting from the beginning of the film; we are aware of the camera, the framing, especially the subjective framing of Jane Birkin by Agnès Varda. The intellectual searching for the representation, the relationship between the author and the subject continues throughout the film.

*Les Plages D'Agnès* seems like a first-person documentary film about Agnès Varda. Once more, it is realized that the film blurs the borders between fact and fiction. Instead of presenting a retrospective of Varda's directorial career, non-linear narration and the concept of displacement foregrounded during the film. At the beginning of the film, the spectator may assume that it is a first-person, subjective narrative about factual events. However, the film surprises the spectator with its non-linear editing, which combines facts, dreams, ideas, and thoughts. As we are immersed into the life of Varda, the film expands with universal and abstract themes and supports these themes by adopting a non-linear narration. The displacement of Varda at many points keeps us from engaging with her past and makes it obvious that remembering is an act that requires being in motion and reconstructing memories, thoughts, and ideas.

In *Visages Villages*, two artists - Varda and JR - travel around the French countryside and narrate the stories of the people they meet on the road. It seems that it is a road movie and a documentary as the two artists start out on a road trip and discover the stories of actual people they come across on the road. However, not long afterwards, it is realized that it is also a film about itself, about art, about ways of seeing, and about the process of filmmaking. Furthermore, the authors of the film become the subjects; Varda takes herself as a starting point in the film, however the voyage that she takes does not move forwards, it is in constant flow which is capable of fluctuating between different narrative forms, concepts, facts, dreams, ideas and thoughts. In the film, thoughts do not move forwards linearly and do not lead to a single direction, rather they are “interwoven as in a carpet” (Adorno, 2017, p. 70). The non-linearity of the film (the interwoven thinking of the film, which provides the spectator with the capability to travel between thoughts, memories and the present) is also supported by the editing style; instead of linear editing, the film moves in circles, moves back and forth between facts, dreams, ideas and thoughts. During *Visages Villages*, the narrative jumps to the different locations, memories, images from the past in the middle of the events, with one of the authors’ voice-over and it does not follow linear time and thinking. The traveling of the pair moves forward as they encounter new faces and places at each stop, while adding the memory traces in these new encounters.

Discussing the essay film within the work of Agnès Varda would provide productive ground for this thesis. I argue that Agnès Varda, as an essayistic director, practices essayistic filmmaking throughout her directorial career covering more than six decades. Corrigan dates back Varda’s works in the terrain of the essay film to *L’opéra-Mouffe* (1958), lists some of her films in this terrain as *Cléo de 5 à 7* (1962), *Jacquot de Nantes* (1991) and points out *Les Glaneurs et la Glaneuse* (2000) as a remarkable essay film (2017, p. 217). Corrigan (2017) also mentions that *Les glaneurs et la Glaneuse... deux ans après* (2002) stands out with its “dialogic rethinking of that first essay film” as it integrates viewers and participants from the first film (p. 217). In “How the Essay Film Thinks,” Rascaroli (2017) includes the films *L’opéra-Mouffe* and *Les Glaneurs et la Glaneuse* as examples of essay film (pp. 1-96). In “The Essay Film After Fact and Fiction,” Nora M. Alter (2018) locates the essay film within “the zone of indeterminacy” and emphasizes aspects of the essay film that are unique to film and traces the historical

evolution of the essay film as a flexible, transgressive, “ever-changing genre” from silent cinema to contemporary artworks such as audiovisual essays, installations taking place on various platforms such as in museums, galleries, and social media platforms by means of new digital options for production and distribution (pp. 20-21). Alter (2018) also interprets Varda's short essay films *Ô saisons, ô châteaux* (1958), *Du côté de la côte* (1958) and *L'opéra-Mouffe* (1958) in her book (pp. 133-141).

In the following chapter, I draw an analogy between the avant-garde roots of the essay film which is mostly associated with the French New Wave movement and Agnès Varda's essayistic filmmaking style, and additionally I discuss the position of Agnès Varda in the French New Wave movement.

## **2.2 AVANT-GARDE ROOTS OF ESSAY FILM AND AGNÈS VARDA**

In this chapter, I argue about the the avant-garde roots of the essay film, together with the avant-garde origins of Agnès Varda's filmmaking practices which are essayistic, exploratory, and search for the possibilities of cinematic art. I also discuss the position of Agnès Varda in the French New Wave movement, relying on Nam Lee's argument on how Varda was a pioneer of “Nouveau Cinema” and foster my analysis of how Varda's cinema has the features of subjective cinema, utilizes the means of her notion of *cinécriture* and pursues the creation of a new cinematic language.

The avant-garde roots of the essay film go back to the early years of the cinema. By the 1920s, a reference to the essayistic cinema is articulated for the first time in Sergei Eisenstein's notes for the project of a film adaptation of Marx's *Capital*, while some avant-garde films of the period “blend formalist and documentary aesthetics” while preceding the essay film (Corrigan, 2017, p. 203). The modernist avant-garde directors of the 1920s and 1930s reflected their personal and subjective perception of the outer world by combining formalist and documentary styles. Films such as Joris Ivens' *Regen* (*Rain*, 1929), Walter Ruttmann's *Die Sinfonie der Großstadt* (*Berlin: Symphony of a Great City*, 1927), and Luis Buñuel's *Las Hurdes* (*Land without Bread*, 1933) also reflect the intersection of avant-garde cinema and documentary and represent the subjective view of cities, landscapes, people. On the other hand, the avant-garde films of the period such



as *Rhythmus 21* (Hans Richter, 1921), *Ballet mécanique* (Fernand Léger and Dudley Murphy, 1924), *Entr'acte* (Francis Picabia and René Clair, 1924), *Un chien Andalou* (Salvador Dalí and Luis Buñuel, 1929), *Chelovek s kino-apparatom* (*Man with a Movie Camera*, Dziga Vertov, 1929) differ from each other in terms of formal and stylistic aspects, while holding a common point of interest in modern life (Turvey, 2011, p. 16). Turvey (2011) rejects the standard view of the avant-garde, minimizing the varied differences and emphasizing its unquestionable commitment to social and aesthetic change; and suggests that avant-garde filmmakers reconcile between change and stability, the future and the past, bourgeois modernity and its critics while having their complex stances toward bourgeois modernity (pp. 12-16). The documentary films of the 1920s and early 1930s, such as Alberto Cavalcanti's *Rien que les heures* (Nothing but the Hours, 1926), Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), and Jean Vigo's *À Propos de Nice* (1930) represent the meeting of avant-garde and documentary film practices and foreshadow the structure of the essay film which would emerge in the 1950s (Corrigan, 2017, pp. 202-203).

In 1948, French film critic and film director Alexandre Astruc (2014) introduced the idea of the subjectivity of the camera and announced the birth of a new cinema as “gradually becoming a language” and described “caméra-stylo” (camera-pen), “as flexible and subtle as written language” reflecting the subjective expression of the director (p. 604). Astruc (2014) mentioned that in cinema, an artist can express his thoughts, however abstract they may be, or translate his obsessions exactly as he does in the contemporary essay or novel, and he argued that writing for cinema becomes a means of writing just as flexible and subtle as written language (p. 604). Astruc's seminal essay “The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: La Caméra Stylo” is essential both to the essay film and the French New Wave Movement, since he asserted one of the main themes of the French New Wave and essay film, subjective cinema. Varda's own notion of *cinécriture* (cine-writing) is, in the words of Varda, “not illustrating a screenplay, not adopting a novel, not getting the gags of a good play, not any of this...something that comes from emotion, from visual emotion, sound emotion, feeling, and finding a shape for that, and a shape which has to do with cinema and nothing else” (Quart, 1986, p. 4). *Cinécriture* reflects Varda's desire to explore what cinema can do and search for visual and vocal equivalents of emotions which could be unique to cinema. Varda's notion of *cinécriture* has similarities with

Astruc's caméra-stylo since both share the desire to create a new cinematic language through the possibilities of subjective camera and the foregrounding of an authorial presence. Even Varda's cinécriture and Astruc's caméra stylo have common characteristics, Varda questions her subjective position as author constantly. Her presence in her essay films manifests itself as a character of the film, as an enunciator and as a filmmaker on many levels.

The 1950s witnessed the emergence of a significant number of essay films which reveals the structure of the essay film and also coincides with the evolving of the Cinéma français to perform new functions that had an influence on the birth of la Nouvelle Vague.<sup>4</sup> In 1954, Varda shot her first film *La Pointe Courte* which foreshadowed her idiosyncratic essayistic filmmaking style that would be transformed through the years and renew itself in all of her media work. Varda's impulse for the essay film could be found in her own notion of *cinécriture*, her interest in self-reflexive cinema; her concern for intermediality as a photographer, filmmaker, and visual artist. As a visual artist, she expressed herself via her photography, installations, films, video work, and visual work combining some of these fields. She drew her inspiration from literature, combined different mediums in her works, however, as her notion of *cinécriture* advises, she was searching for the possibilities of cinematic, visual expression, pushing the boundaries of representation.

It is evident that Agnès Varda clearly gave clues to her essayistic filmmaking style, starting from her first film, *La Pointe Courte* (1954), and continued practicing essayistic filmmaking throughout her career in many films such as, but not limited to, *Daguerreotypes* (1975), *Mur Murs* (1981), *Documenteur* (1981), *Jane B. Par Agnès V.* (1987), *Jacquot de Nantes* (1991), *Les Glaneurs et la Glaneuse* (2000), *Les Plages D'Agnès* (2008), and *Visages Villages* (2017). As Corrigan (2017) puts it, "the films of Agnès Varda provide an almost unique map of the historical movement of the essay film from its association with French cinema of the 1950s through its continued growth and expansion into the digital present" (p. 217). In *La Pointe Courte*, she blends fact and fiction, objectivity and subjectivity, realism and fantasy, the social and the private.

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<sup>4</sup> In 1936, Henri Langlois and Georges Franju founded Cercle du Cinéma which inherited the ciné-club tradition of the 1920s. In 1948, Cercle du Cinéma transformed into the Cinéma français.

Whereas the private life of the people and the city's public life overlaps in *Man with a Movie Camera*, *La Pointe Courte* combines/juxtaposes two different stories on two different levels without intersecting. Varda's inspiration for the film came from literature, from the novel *Wild Palms* (Faulkner, 1939), which narrates two separate stories in parallel. In the film, the formal choice of each story differs: the daily life of the villagers in the fishing town Sète, the struggle of the fishermen with government officials are portrayed as a documentary, through the footage of actual people and actual events, whereas the relationship of a married couple on the edge of a break-up is portrayed as a poetic fiction film. One of the most astonishing formal elements - remarkably essayistic - is the sound design which makes the sound feel like an invisible - audible - curtain just before the images. The sound of the poetic dialogues between the couple is imposed over the images, almost like a voice-over, which disrespects the sound perspective of the fiction cinema.

*La Pointe Courte* is defined as “certainly the first film of the French *nouvelle vague*” by Georges Sadoul and he points out that “its interplay between conscience, emotions, and the real world make it a direct antecedent of *Hiroshima, mon amour*.” He also adds that “in its concern for the ambiguous relationship between the apparent world of things and the interior world of feelings and thoughts *La Pointe Courte* reflected a theme that was to occupy many of the new French filmmakers of the Sixties” (Sadoul, 1972, pp. 287-288). Although the French New Wave has been reviewed from various different perspectives, it is mainly considered together with the *Cahiers du Cinéma* group and associated with the directors François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, Claude Chabrol, Eric Rohmer and Jacques Rivette. This group, referred to as the Young Turks, worked together as young critics on the film journal *Les Cahiers du Cinéma* before making their first films as directors (Greene, 2007, p. 3). In *A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema*, Truffaut criticizes the French “tradition of quality” and critically comments on the films of Claude Autant-Lara, Jean Aurenche and Pierre Bost as being literary adaptations while he praised the films of Jean Renoir, Robert Bresson, and Jean Cocteau due to their personal cinemas (Truffaut, 2014).

In terms of the French New Wave, Varda is known as a part of The Left Bank Group (Rive Gauche), together with the directors Alain Resnais and Chris Marker. Involvement

in political themes and active engagement with documentary filmmaking are some of the common points of this group. They were also influenced by the literary avant-garde movement of the period, the *nouveau roman* (new novel) that differs from traditional novel conventions. Neupert (2007) reviewed the New Novel - that it was associated with such writers as Nathalie Sarraute, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Michel Butor and Claude Simon - as a literary subgenre “balancing itself between telling a story and destroying the possibility of fiction at the same time” (p. 16). The Left Bank directors and New Novel writers have shared interests for some themes and formal choices. Greene (2007) mentions these common themes such as “the weight of memory and the past, the behavior of people caught in the meshes of desire and obsession, the correspondences between inner and outer landscapes” (p. 45). Therefore the Left Bank departed from the *Cahiers du Cinéma* group as Left Bank directors utilized a literary language that had “theatrical cadences and poetic repetitions” in contrast to the “improvised dialogue and contemporary speech patterns” of the *Cahiers du Cinéma* group (Greene, 2007, p. 45). The Left Bank directors are known for their inspiration from painting, literature - the New Novel in particular - and the theatre and also their involvement in political themes as they reflected their political stances on the political climate of the time. Since these directors made their modernist films before *Cahiers* group made their first films, they are also reclaimed as antecedents of the French New Wave. Varda’s relationship with the New Wave was always complex, she never acknowledged any inclusion in any group, including the New Wave and The Left Bank, except for sharing friendships and collaboration. In regard to being called as a New Wave Pioneer, Varda puts it, as follows:

“The grandmother of the New Wave!” I found it funny, because I was 30 years old! Truffaut made *The 400 Blows* and Godard made *Breathless*, but I had done that five years before with [1955’s] *La Pointe Courte*, my first film. (Myers, 2019)

Nam Lee (2008) discusses historical accounts of the New Wave and the position of Varda within the movement and explains how *La Pointe Courte* exemplifies many traits of the New Wave, even though the film was made five years before the French New Wave Movement “officially” started:

First, it was a low-budget film made by a first-time filmmaker in her twenties; second, it was totally outside the mainstream commercial film circuit<sup>5</sup>; third, it was a feature film shot on location with a documentary sensibility, featuring unknown actors; and finally and

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<sup>5</sup> As the film does not comply with the regulations of CNC (Centre Nationale de la Cinématographie/National Centre for Cinematography), it was out of the commercial circuit.

most importantly, it was innovative in its film language and narrative structure—it aimed to create a new “modern” cinema. (p. 24)

Neupert (2007) defines *La Pointe Courte* as “one of the most unusual and beautiful motion pictures of 1950s France and a wonderful example of what could be produced by this new era’s calls for personal cinema” and mentions that together with Resnais’s later films *Hiroshima, mon amour* (1959) and *L'Année dernière à Marienbad* (1961), it presents “a great blending of a New Novel–style narrative with the *jeune cinéma*” (p. 62). Lee (2008) additionally calls into question “the equation of New Wave = Cahiers du cinéma = modern cinema” and agrees with Jean-Michel Frodon on distinguishing between *la Nouvelle Vague* and *le Nouveau Cinéma* (p. 51). According to Lee (2008), Frodon uses the term “Nouvelle Vague” for the Cahiers group and uses the term “modern cinema” for other groups being part of this new filmmaking that stood for “a revolution in the practice of filmmaking” and was “less structured than the Nouvelle Vague” (pp. 42-52). Alain Resnais’s *Hiroshima, mon amour* (1959) is acknowledged as the first modern film in some studies and it is ranked as one of the first New Wave films by others. Lee (2008) rejects the perception that the invention of modern or modernist cinema in France began with *la Nouvelle Vague* and reclaims Varda as “the pioneer of the Nouveau Cinéma”:

If we redefine the Nouvelle Vague as an invention of a new “modern” cinema—Nouveau Cinéma—and a new cinematic writing, then Varda certainly deserves an important place as pioneer and legitimate member. However, I prefer to distinguish between the Nouvelle Vague and the Nouveau Cinéma because I would emphasize that the Nouvelle Vague, which began in the year 1959 when Truffaut’s *400 Blows* and Alain Resnais’ *Hiroshima, mon amour* were screened at the Cannes Film Festival, is a product of the postwar French cinephile culture. The Left Bank filmmakers—Varda, Resnais and Chris Marker—were making modernist films before 1959, but they did not belong to the cinephile generation. Also, the Nouvelle Vague erupted during the short period of 1959-1962 when more than 160 young filmmakers made their first films, resulting in the Nouvelle Vague becoming the “cult of first films.” In this regard, Varda deserves her proper title as the pioneer of the Nouveau Cinéma which in turn influenced the emergence of a new cinema by young filmmakers. (p. 52)

Varda’s new “modern” cinema that has features of subjective cinema, utilizes the means of her notion of *cinécriture* and pursues the creation of a new cinematic language. During that period, since the writers of *nouveau roman* (new novel) pursued a new form that differed from the conventions of 19th century literature, the filmmakers of the Nouveau Cinéma and New Wave sought subjective expression far from the conventions of traditional cinema. As an essayistic director who looked for new forms and images throughout her career - starting from her first film in 1954 to 2019 - Varda practiced essayistic filmmaking in various forms. Bazin’s review of Varda’s *La Pointe Courte*

presents her distinguished style and authorial presence in her first film: “there is a total freedom to the style, which produces the impression, so rare in the cinema, that we are in the presence of a work that obeys only the dreams and desires of its auteur with no other external obligations” (1955, as cited in Neupert, 2007, p. 60). Whereas in *La Pointe Courte*, Varda combines fact and fiction in a delicate way and calls for a new language that has both poetic and realistic characteristics, in *L’opéra Mouffe* (1958), she presents the very personal experience of a pregnant woman through her subjective camera.

*La Pointe Courte* was followed by three short films during the 1950s which were *Ô saisons, ô châteaux* (1957), *L’opéra-Mouffe* (1958), and *Du côté de la côte* (1958). *L’opéra-Mouffe*, which was produced by Varda unlike the films *Ô saisons, ô châteaux* and *Du côté de la côte* - which were commissioned documentaries - was truly an essay film in its structure, narration and form of thinking. The film starts with the information that we will watch a “filmed diary of a pregnant woman” and combines the visual and verbal through the film. The prologue of the film presents some images of a pregnant woman from different perspectives. During the film, we mostly witness the actual life of a street, rue Mouffetard, but also watch a fictional section consisting of images of a couple and lastly abstract, symbolic images which expose the subjective thinking process of the film. The film closes with the images of a pregnant woman walking along the street. The prologue and the epilogue of the film could be considered as brackets which suggest that the film represents the personal experience of a pregnant woman through her perception of the outer world. Also the film is highly reflective and personal since the film was shot during the pregnancy of Varda. The film presents the thoughts, feelings, and ideas of a pregnant woman about her body, pregnancy, life, birth, poverty, and cravings while combining the private and the public in its images, and the verbal and the visual in its form. The film does not have a voice-over, however it has intertitles for each section which are subjective rather than descriptive, and offers extradiegetic musical accompaniment to the images.

If we move on to another essay film of Varda from the 1990s, *Jacquot de Nantes*, Varda presents two different spaces in the film; one is diegesis which accounts for the narrative, imaginative and biographical past and the other one is the documentary space of actual shots representing Varda’s personal view of Jacques Demy. Varda juxtaposes two

different worlds - the past in black and white, the present in color - whereas these transitions between narrative and documentary urge the spectator to reflect upon representation, reconstruction, fact, and fiction. The film does not flow smoothly, and its transitions between two different worlds distract and challenge the spectator. However, it is not total alienation; its Brechtian alienation effect<sup>6</sup> estranges the spectator and but also creates involvement with Varda's own emotional universe outside the film's diegesis. Varda's formal choice for the film supports the distance between the inner and outer worlds, past and present, tough and tender, facts and feelings, memory and reconstruction.

In summary, I argue that Agnès Varda is an essayistic director who practiced essayistic filmmaking starting from her first film. By the 1950s, Varda, as an avant-garde artist and pioneer of Nouveau Cinema, started to utilize essayistic filmmaking practices in her films and transformed her directorial, formal choices through the years while continuing to search for new images, and narrative freshness in each work. The 1950s also reflected the emergence of a significant number of essay films that revealed the structure of the essay film. The avant-garde roots of the essay film can be said to go back to the 1920s, in which cinema witnessed the meeting of the avant-garde and documentary styles, and through the 1950s, the essay film form broadened and diversified. Varda's position in the New Wave is controversial; she is considered as the precursor of New Wave, considered as a part of the second group in the New Wave - the Left Bank group - and sometimes she is even omitted from consideration. I think Lee's argument that differentiates the New Wave and Nouveau Cinema which includes a re-definition of the New Wave, and positions Varda as a pioneer of the Nouveau Cinema presents a fresh view and strengthens my views on Varda's essayistic filmmaking practices which dated back to her earlier films and continued throughout her career.

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<sup>6</sup> The term "alienation effect" was used for the first time by Bertolt Brecht in "Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting" published in 1936. Brecht describes it as "playing in such a way that the audience was hindered from simply identifying itself with the characters in the play."

### 3. MAKING-OF AN ESSAY: *VISAGES VILLAGES*

*Visages Villages* (2017), a film co-directed by Agnès Varda and photographer/muralist JR, is the story of two artists who travel around the French countryside and narrate the stories of people they meet on the road. It seems a documentary, as the two artists take a road trip and discover the stories of actual people they come across on the road. However, not long afterwards, it is realized that the film is about itself, about art, ways of seeing, and the process of filmmaking. The film merges various genres and forms such as the road film, self-reflexive documentary, diary, and travelogue and rejects being placed in any single genre. It also reflects the primary markers of the essay film such as subjectivity, self-reflexivity, and reflectivity. As the film unfolds, universal and abstract themes such as aging, youth, death, and creativity are explored. The film interweaves the past and the present through many intertextual references, while transforming the past and creating new meanings. While it links the past and present, it combines fictive and documentary, imaginary and actual, the public and the personal.

As the film starts with an animated sequence, the spectators become aware that there are different modes of representation, and they will not only watch a documentary based on actual events but also watch something fictional, constructed, and represented. After the animated opening credits, we watch the story of not how Varda and JR have met, but a representation of how they might have actually met. The reenactment of events which did not happen makes us think about documentary and fiction film. In other words, the film blurs the lines between documentary and fiction, starting from the prologue. Since the essay film is placed within “the zone of indeterminacy” and manifests its simultaneous existence “as an in-between, hybrid genre that transgresses and dissolves” conventional filmic forms (Alter, 2018, p. 21), how the lines between documentary and fiction are blurred in *Visages Villages*, is one of the main points of this chapter.

The film presents an episodic narrative that lines up the pair’s encounters in various villages, in a series of scenes portraying the characters on a journey. In some episodes, the chronological order of events is interrupted by thoughts, ideas, backstories, and memory traces. The backstories present how they collect their materials, collaborate on



and come to creative decisions. Traces of memories and various visages stuck in the authors' minds become prominent during the film. In this respect, the non-linear episodic narrative structure contributes to the collage technique that Varda employs in which she gathers different materials such as the past and the present, factual and imaginative, and creates various layers, forms such as documentary and fiction, still and moving images and then she links, combines them. This narration technique also mirrors the main subject of the film. The authors gather their materials from external sources such as the people, villages, faces, and encounters, as well as from internal sources such as inspiration, memories, and a passion for images. They co-design the images they create together or solely and paste them on various surfaces such as walls of unfinished houses, water tanks, a factory, a house in an abandoned village or a bunker. As a photographer and muralist, JR exhibits his visual works on the walls of public spaces in various cities and collaborates with his team and with locals. He could be considered a rebel who rejects conventions and chooses public spaces over the galleries. Varda takes an urban artist to the rural areas of France, dislocates him, and composes new images with him. This mirrors the film's narration, as the film is an overall collage in which the authors dislocate things, combine them and produce new meanings.

Rhymed dialogues between Varda and JR, mostly heard in melodious voice-over, tend to be critical about the voice-over tradition of the documentary convention on one level. The voice-over in essay films differs from the voice-over in conventional documentaries through its subjective and interrogative tone instead of having an objective and informative mode. The voice-over commentaries in non-fiction films often grants “an authority that is readily accepted and rarely challenged. Many essay filmmakers consciously play with this false authority” (Alter, 2018, p. 60). Varda's voice-over, which we hear on many occasions in the film, does not inform the spectator on the facts; it gives room to see from the authors' perspectives and sometimes to think about the images and stories together with the authors. If the rhymed dialogues are considered scripted on another level, they reflect the fictive mode of the film, which is combined with factual events. The melodious voice-over also reflects the film's playful tone, as luck and play are essential to the essay (Adorno, 2017, p. 61). In the scene where Varda and JR discuss their journey, how they work together, and where to start, Varda says that what she likes most is the spontaneity of the project. Luck and playfulness are outstanding materials of

their filmmaking process. However, at some points, we are not able to recognize the difference between spontaneity and what is staged. As spectators, we are forced to ask questions about whether we are watching improvised performances or fictional narratives. The film has a multi-layered relationship with its spectator; the spectators could move back and forth between whether some scenes are improvised or fictional, feel alienated through the self-reflexive narration-wise strategies, need to reflect upon some themes since the film demands spectator engagement, or enjoy a road movie through identifying themselves with the characters at some points.

In the first scene of the opening credits of the film, JR's lower body is seen in a medium shot as he passes from left to right and walks on a grassy road. In the next medium shot, clouds disperse to reveal the opening credits, the names of the co-directors, while Agnès Varda and JR inch towards each other and have a face-to-face encounter. The composition divides the screen horizontally, with the clouds moving across the top half and the encounter of the co-directors showing only their upper bodies running across the lower half. Then we see a van that looks like a camera moving from left to right on the road placed inside a landscape with trees, mountains, and the sky in a long shot. As the van moves from left to right, the title of the film appears. These three shots, presenting JR's quick steps, unlike Varda, the encounter of JR and Varda while they are headed in different directions, and a giant camera-shaped van moving on the road reveal the title of the film and the landscape, could be considered as a summary of the film's subjects: Varda, JR, the camera, the landscape, and the encounters. The first shot presents the differences and contrasts between JR and Varda. In the second shot, their encounter while they are going in different directions represents their collaboration, which is enriched by their distinctive styles. The directors standing face-to-face also looks like a mirror image that makes the spectator question whether they have identical characters or styles. The third shot obviously reflects the film itself as traveling, exploring, and filming. As the camera-van moves, the film's title and the landscape appear, pointing out that Varda and JR are creating their essay on the means of its making. These shots are followed by a scene where the credits are rolling, similar to ending credits. Some animated images moving horizontally on a grass-covered road are seen in a long shot in between some long credit lines. First, the camera-shaped van moves from right to left. Secondly, JR walking from left to right is seen below the van. This is followed by a moving image of Varda

walking from right to left below JR's image. Then the camera-shaped van is seen between the credit lines. As the credits are rolling, Varda walks from left to right, and JR passes by her fast.

At the end of the rolling credits, in the "Thanks" part, JR and Varda are seen on the top of the camera van holding up the title "Merci à eux" together. Varda and JR appear in different landscapes in the following medium shots, such as walking at different speeds, fixing or pulling titles. In another medium shot, two camera vans heading in opposite directions on the road overlap. The difference in their speed is visible as JR passes by Varda many times. As the prologue puts it, we witness the differences between two artists based on binaries such as young and old, spirited and wise, and as well as their collaborative creative process. Their encounter while heading in opposite directions represents their collaboration, which is encouraged by the contrasts. This animated sequence at the very beginning of the film not only foregrounds its dual structure, floating in between fiction and nonfiction, the verbal and the visual but also presents its themes including encounters, the state of being on the road, collaboration, and the discrepancies between Varda and JR.

In the final shot of the sequence, the animated image of the landscape turns into an actual one. Landscape plays an essential role during the film as a subject of the narrative, and one which interrupts the pair's encounters and gives the spectator time to look at the landscape and mediate. Martin Lefebvre (2006) starts to discuss the notion of cinematic "landscape" by distinguishing between setting and landscape (p. 20). Setting is the place where the action or the events occur; however it cannot be reduced to what is on screen since it may include larger and unseen spaces (Lefebvre, 2006, p. 21). For example, the setting of the scene, where Varda walks through the village L'Escaze, can be considered as a wall of images. However, we can interpret the setting as L'Escaze or France in a broader sense. For Lefebvre (2006), landscape differs from setting as a "space free from eventhood" (p. 22). In the context of painting, landscape can be reviewed in two ways, as *parergon* that is "spatial accessory to a painted scene" and as *ergon* that is "the primary and independent subject matter of a work" (Lefebvre, 2006, p. 22). Lefebvre (2006) discusses the term of cinematic landscape as a *form of being* of external space in our minds and a space which acquires some autonomy from narrative (pp. 51-52). Lefebvre

(2006) also says that “the spectator mentally arrests the unfolding of the film and internally holds the space for contemplation until returning to the narrative mode” (p. 52). In the film, in between stops, Varda and JR enjoy the landscapes of a lake, a village, or a garden while talking about the faces, places, and stories they encountered. Each time, the camera shoots them from the back and at a medium distance, talking about how they feel about their encounters. These landscape scenes allow the spectator to reflect upon the images/representations before and after the given scene. That makes the spectator interpret the images from the previous episode and imagine the next scene, and thus the film demands activity from its spectator while the pair are having conversations.

The sequence of non-encounters and/or almost-encounters presents fictional scenes where we witness how Varda and JR have not met in some places such as on the road, in a disco, in a bakery, or at a bus stop. As the animated landscape turns into an actual one in a long shot, we see JR walking from left to right in a medium shot which is followed by another medium shot where Varda walks from right to left. Afterwards, we see both of them in a long shot, walking in opposite directions set in a landscape with a road, and trees. As JR hops on a tractor, Varda continues to walk, and we hear JR’s voice-over mentioning that they did not meet on the road. This sequence includes other almost-encounters in different places with both JR and Varda’s voice-overs. Afterwards, we see some shots from Agnès Varda’s films such as *Les glaneurs et la Glaneuse* (2000), *Cléo de 5 à 7* (1962), *Mur Murs* (1981) which represent Agnès for JR, with his voice-over. While JR says “I remember images from your films,” a scene from *Les Glaneurs et la Glaneuse* appears. In the original scene from *Les glaneurs et la Glaneuse*, Varda says “Again one hand filming the other hand, and more trucks. I'd like to capture them. To retain things passing? No, just to play.” *Les glaneurs et la glaneuse* reflects the subjectivity of Varda; while presenting gleaners, Varda represents her personal gleaning, “gleaning of images” with her digital hand-held camera. Varda also discusses getting older in this personal diary while filming her grey hair in front of a mirror. *Visages Villages* also considers being on the road, recording people’s stories and personal subjects such as aging and foregrounds both authors’ subjective views. However, *Visages Villages* gleanes the images from the past through memories, reference to other films, and merges them with present images that have been produced during the filming, thus foregrounding the transformative aspect of the film. When the image of Varda filming her hand with her

other hand and capturing the trucks on the road appears in *Visages Villages*, in a new context, on a new layer, it creates new meanings. This time the same image has a different meaning, since Varda made that very subjective film (*Les glaneurs et la Glaneuse*), shared it with the audience and then those images produced new meanings for each spectator. In *Visages Villages*, we see the same image but this time it is from JR's point of view, reflecting his vision of Varda. Therefore, the film highlights the transformation of images for each viewer.

*Visages Villages* presents how JR and Varda transform the images, pasting them onto various surfaces in this present voyage. This scene precedes the next scenes later in the film which take the past - verbal or visual references to the Varda's previous films or her personal life - as filmic material and places them in a new context; recreating them or being inspired by them. The film's intertextual narration calls for Julia Kristeva's intertextuality theory. The term of *intertextuality* was coined by Kristeva in 1966 and takes its roots from Bakhtin's *dialogism*. In *Word, Dialogue and Novel*, Kristeva (1986) explains Bakhtin's dialogism: “the word’s status is thus defined *horizontally* (the word in the text belongs to both writing subject and addressee) as well as *vertically* (the word in the text is oriented towards an anterior or synchronic literary corpus)” and she adds that:

Hence horizontal axis (subject-addressee) and vertical axis (text-content) coincide, bringing to light an important fact: each word (text) is an intersection of word (texts) where at least one other word (text) can be read. In Bakhtin's work, these two axes, which he calls dialogue and ambivalence, are not clearly distinguished. Yet, what appears as a lack of rigour is in fact an insight first introduced into literary theory by Bakhtin: any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another. The notion of *intertextuality* replaces that of intersubjectivity, and poetic language is read as at least double. (p. 37)

Whereas the horizontal axis indicates the connection between the film and the spectator, the vertical axis points to the relationship between the film and the other texts. The dialogical relationship between the authors and the spectator expands through presence of other texts inside the film, foregrounding that spectator's own perception of the film cannot be separated from spectator's involvement with other texts. The intertextual references also denote the openness of *Visages Villages*; relating with other texts and absorbing them, it provides multiple significations on the part of the authors and the spectator. The film serves as an *intertext* which does not conceal its inspiration from other texts - the authors' own works and other works - and reveals its starting a dialogue, thinking together with other texts.

After we see JR's perception of Varda -the images, the visages that evoke Varda for him - some of the photographs and murals of JR appear, reflecting JR in the memory of Agnès Varda, accompanied by her voice-over. The scene hints that we will see the images through their point of views in this journey. Both artists' subjectivity is evident at many points during the film. The film portrays Varda's subjective gaze on many occasions beginning with the bus stop scene, where Varda seeks help from other passengers when she cannot see the time schedule. Varda's moments in the bus stop is presented from her blurred, subjective point of view. Later in the film, her subjective gaze glorifies in the scene where the actualization/representation of how Varda sees things takes place on the steps of the Bibliothèque Nationale, JR helps her to represent how she sees literally: through letters moving up and down. The film foregrounds Varda's gaze; however she continues to transform her point of view during the film as a constant search. Her subjectivity is not limited to how she sees the world. Varda interacts with the spectator, how the spectator sees. Rascaroli (2009) debates the subjectivity of essay film:

The essayist does not pretend to discover truths which he holds the key, but allows the answers to emerge somewhere else, precisely in the position occupied by the embodied spectator. The meaning of the film is created via this dialogue, in which the spectator has an important part to play; meanings are presented by the speaking subject as a personal, subjective meditation, rather than as objective truths. It is this subjective move, this speaking first person that mobilises the subjectivity of the spectator. (p. 36)

As Varda digs into the stories of the inhabitants of the villages, she gazes at them, and they gaze back at her, they ask about the point of some works. Instead of being the subjects of the visual works, people crossing the street randomly interrogate and ask questions about their work. These conversations may indicate a possible dialogue between the author and the spectator.

When it comes to the story of how they met, we see them taking pictures of each other in their offices. The scene opens with a medium shot, JR taking photos of Varda with her cat on Daguerre Street. Varda holds the center of the frame; however we do not see her face, JR is taking her photo while his camera covers almost all his face. The road stretching away behind JR holds ample space in the frame. Visually, JR looks as if he is hiding behind his camera; even though Varda's back and the road hold most of the frame, he cannot hide. As the camera moves toward Varda, in order to reveal all her visage, the continuous and rapid movements of the camera blur her face. In the next reverse shot, the subject of the photo shooting, Varda, is seen. The shots are also accompanied by JR's

voice-over that brings out subjectivity and authorship. These shots emphasize that the authors cannot hide behind their subject, moreover the authors expose themselves before their subject, which also precedes the next scenes in the film, presenting various encounters.

The film asks if authors can represent their subject without revealing themselves and what the difference and borders are between drawing someone else's portrait and drawing a self-portrait. Varda's presence is also profoundly palpable while she draws portraits of the people they meet on the road. Also, both JR and Varda draw each other's portraits during the journey, which leads the spectator to reflect upon their similarities and differences as artists and the possibility and impossibility of the representation; limitations and/or the limitless, and variable versions of representation/reconstruction. Both Varda and JR narrate each other over images, *visages*. *Visages* deal with physiognomies, and villages deal with spaces; faces are also surfaces on which mimicry reveals personalities and identities, and the walls in the villages are used as if they are the faces of the villages, a metonym for the visage. The images that they have produced in the past are also used as if they are the faces of the authors. Before meeting in person, they had meanings for each other through the representations that they created.

When it comes to Varda's turn, three portraits of JR by Varda are seen in a row, with her voice-over. Then still images from Varda's short film *Les Fiancés du Pont Mac Donald* (1961) which is a film-within-a-film appearing in *Cléo de 5 à 7* are seen. These still images are Jean-Luc Godard's portraits by Varda. Three sequential shots of JR are connected to four sequential shots of Godard with a sound bridge. The missing fourth shot of JR is at the end of the film. (Figure 3.1) Varda first establishes an analogy between JR and Godard, mentioning that JR reminds her of the young Godard. The physical resemblance between Godard and JR is narrated, especially in this scene where Agnès says both cannot give up on their sunglasses and remind the spectator of the moment where Godard takes off his dark glasses during the shooting of the short film for the sake of Agnès when presenting the sequential shots. Then Varda establishes another analogy between her relationship with JR in the present and Godard in the past. The first shot shows Varda and Godard sitting on the bridge at the set of *Les Fiancés du Pont Mac Donald*, looking like they are talking to each other. The second shot presents Varda and

JR sitting on a cabinet with many drawers in JR's office, they occupy almost the same frame space as Varda and Godard in the first shot. It may be considered that this resemblance between JR and Godard haunts Varda and the spectator, as Varda travels with a ghost image of Godard during the film. However, as Adorno (2017) suggests, the essay deals with objects that could be derivative, thinks through linkages, freely associates and does not insist on an object beyond mediations (pp. 68-69). Therefore, JR's resemblance to Godard is just a part of Varda's chain of thought; Varda presents the coexistence of an old friend and a new friendship in JR's presence, in front of his visage. Varda photographs JR in 2017 as she photographed Godard in 1961. She remembers, instead of just carrying on the past, she recreates those images with JR. She moves forward as she does in this voyage, to the next stops on the journey.

The film could be considered as a celebration of process of art as the two artists on move experience the villages, get inspired by everyday life and collaborate. As they travel with a van designed as a gigantic camera which includes a photo booth and a large format photo printer, they take pictures and listen to the stories of lots of villagers. As they travel around many villages and narrate different human stories, they become the subjects and the subject matter of the film. We witness their conversations about life, art, creation, and their friendship. Their so-called contrasting traits turn into complementary features. They share their search for new forms, their passion for creating in various media.

As Varda and JR are the film subjects along with the camera, the landscape and the walls, their friendship is also one of the crucial aspects of the film. Varda does not like the sunglasses which JR never takes off, as she wants to see his eyes. In most of the photo shootings, we hear Varda asking people to take off their glasses for the shooting. Whenever she brings it up, she exposes not only her professional choices but also personal details, as the spectator knows that she is obsessed with JR's sunglasses and it is seen that she reflects herself, her personality, and her subjectivity in her works. It also evokes the resemblance between JR and Godard that is planted at the beginning of the film and recalls the film's various interactions with other texts.





Figure 3.1. Visual analogy between JR and Jean-Luc Godard

This chapter is divided into seven sub-chapters regarding the prominent themes of the film, such as “Still and Moving Images,” “Landscapes,” “Coexistence of the Past and the Present,” and so on, in which related sequences are analyzed.

### **3.1 STILL AND MOVING IMAGES**

JR and Varda take photos of the people of L’Escale village one by one inside the photo booth in the shape of a giant camera. The villagers are asked to hold a baguette in front of their mouths. After the photo shooting, we witness the collective printing and pasting of photos. The authors produce a story of composing portraits on the wall which looks like all the villagers are eating one gigantic baguette. Varda walks through the images on the wall, which looks like one big picture; while JR is filming, Varda says, “the faces I met, and the photography makes me remember the faces and not to forget.” in her voice-over. When she walks, instead of moving images, we see her movements in still images. (Figure 3.2) In this scene, she reflects the effect of the still image and the meaning of this work to herself. As the film searches for the different modes of representation and utilizes collage technique, the still images and moving images are mostly combined.

While JR is filming Varda, she directly gazes at his camera, in front of a wall full of the images they have co-created, while holding a camera in her hand. This self-reflexive moment reveals both directors with their cameras. Varda’s gaze into the camera in front of images in a row, seems like one whole image instead of separate photos, mirrors the process of making a film. Varda combines still images and moving images and makes films.

The most important effect of these images on the wall is that it reminds us of the continuous images per second, the movement of the film. In other words, how each frame is assembled as a whole makes the film, and vice versa a film is the assemblage of a series of images. The baguette functions like a leitmotif and Varda's walking towards us animates both her movement and the images on the wall. She both initiates the movement and brings them to life. As a voice-over, she says “It’s like a game. In fact, JR’s fulfilling my greatest desire to meet new faces and photograph them, so they don’t fall down the

holes of my memory.” This self-reflexive moment also reminds me of *Les Glaneurs et la Glaneuse* where Varda looks closer at her own self with her digital hand-held camera and



Figure 3.2. The representation of the movement of the film as the assemblage of a series of images

says “Again one hand filming the other hand, and more trucks. I’d like to capture them. To retain things passing? No, just to play.” Given the two statements made by Varda, it may be concluded that she does not aim to capture things passing and possess them and instead, she likes playing with the images and transforming them. Also, this scene foregrounds the encounter of two artists. When she gazes directly at the camera and also JR, it feels like two mirrors are facing each other. Two artists film each other: they both portray one another and themselves simultaneously.

On their second stop, the pair visit a village with the abandoned houses of ex-miners. There is only one woman, Jeannine, who still lives in the deserted area. Jeannine refuses to leave her house, resists the passing of time, seeks to keep the memories alive. As she tells of a vivid childhood memory which both reflects the difficulties of mine work besides the honor and joy that they share with their miner father as a family; it does not feel like she lives in the past, she lives in the past and the present at the same time. Varda and JR collect the photos of miners from previous generations and place their blown-up photos over the row houses. While the photos of ex-miners both refer to memory and to

digging in the archives of the past, Jeannine represents the unity of the past and the present. As Jeannine is the last inhabitant of the abandoned area, Varda and JR paste a large picture of “Jeannine La Résistante” over her home as well. Therefore, the visual work of Varda and JR mirrors Jeannine and the ex-miners as they dig into the archives of the past, merging the past and the present. At the end of the sequence, a tracking shot of the row houses covered with the giant photos connects the miners with Jeannine and the past with the present.

While the pair leave marks on the walls which represent the villagers, they also leave their traces, representing themselves. When they put up a huge image of a farmer on his barn, Varda says that “now everyone will know whose barn this is” which has a double meaning. They both reflect the villagers, themselves, and also their filmmaking process. In other words, they reveal themselves while drawing the portraits of others. The self-reflexivity of the film goes beyond thinking of the medium itself, exposing the camera and the directors, revealing the film itself as an artifice; it is embodied in villages, murals and faces throughout the film.

### **3.2 LANDSCAPES**

The film’s narrative structure is not linear, as the spectator feels as if inside the authors’ minds at some points. While we watch the story of a farmer, who is working on his own in a field, in the middle of the story, we are interrupted by the image of Varda and JR having a conversation in front of a lake view. When JR looks reluctant to respond to Varda’s question, we return to the farmer. As Adorno (2017) puts it, “in the essay, concepts do not build a continuum of operation, thought does not advance in a single direction, rather the aspects of the argument interweave as in a carpet” (p. 70). The film weaves the plots between various locations, and landscapes like a carpet loop that binds memories, thoughts and the present. The non-linearity of the film (interwoven thinking of the film which provides the spectator to travel between thoughts, memories and the present) is also supported by the editing style; instead of linear editing, the film moves in circles, moves back and forth between facts, dreams, ideas and thoughts. Since this is an essay film and a road movie simultaneously, the pair's journey moves forward, while adding the memory traces to new encounters. In the film, in between the stops, Varda and

JR enjoy the landscapes of a lake, a village or a garden while they talk about the faces, places, and stories they have encountered. Each time, the camera shoots them from the back and at a medium distance as they gaze at the landscape and talk about how they feel about their encounters. Martin Lefebvre (2006) discusses the term *landscape* as a *form of being* of external space in our minds and a space that acquires some autonomy from narrative (pp. 51-52). Lefebvre (2006) says that “the spectator mentally arrests the unfolding of the film and internally holds the space for contemplation until returning to the narrative mode” (p. 52). These landscape scenes give the spectator a space outside the narrative that enables the spectator to weigh the images left in their mind from the previous episode or to imagine the next part. The authors also ask for the spectator's engagement during the exchange of words. As we see Varda and JR from behind, we are not able to identify with them. The lack of eye-level shot during their conversation pushes the spectator outside the narrative space; however, instead of total alienation, the spectator looks at the landscape and contemplates the scenes before and after. Rascaroli (2009) comments:

The structure of the essay film (as well as of the literary essay), in other words, is that of a constant interpellation; each spectator, as an individual and not as a member of an anonymous, collective audience, is called upon to engage in a dialogical relationship with the enunciator, to become active, intellectually and emotionally, and interact with the text. The spectatorial position is in the singular, because the genuine essay film asks questions and does not offer clear-cut answers. (p. 36)

The essay film asks questions to start a dialogue with the spectator, does not search for precise answers, and gives them room to think and discover things together. *Visages Villages* manages to establish a dialogical relationship between the enunciators and each spectator. While the authors of the film think about their last stop, gazing out onto a landscape, the spectator contemplates as well. In between portraying a village or a villager and shooting or pasting grand pictures, a space outside the narrative is given to the spectator. In these scenes, the pair's conversations are presented through voice-over, they talk to each other and to the spectator as well.

The course of the landscape scenes in relation to active spectatorship crystalizes in the last words of Varda. In fact, these are the last words we hear in the film: “Shall we look at the lake?”. One more time, Varda and JR gaze at the landscape, we see them from behind in a long shot and the landscape dominates the last scene of the film. Whereas the film establishes a dialogical relationship with its spectator through the landscape scenes,

it also stages an ongoing dialogue between two authors/protagonists. The film ends with an emphasis on openness in many senses, as a recurring theme in essays and with multiple significations on the part of the spectators and the authors.

### **3.3 REMEMBERING IN BONNIEUX: *LES PARAPLUIES DE CHERBOURG* AND *LE BONHEUR***

When Varda and JR stop by Bonnieux village, they meet two siblings who tell them their grandparents' love story. As they hear this story, they start to design a mural in their minds, decide to use an old photograph of the couple in a frame. We watch this process while they are discussing ideas, going to the flea market, and designing the project. We witness how they come up with their ideas, co-work on the mise-en-scène, produce the murals and reconstruct the past.

The film's self-reflexivity is obvious, as we witness in this film the process of making and producing art along with the inspiration that comes from the faces and places. They pass the photo of the couple's picture in a frame on the wall of an old building. The crack on the wall visually splits the couple. While we see the photo of the old photo, which is settled on the wall, a window is opened near the image, which may remind some spectators of a scene from *Mur Murs*. In one scene of *Mur Murs*, a mural of a newly married couple is seen on a building where another couple is looking from a window in the middle of the mural. When Varda plans another photo shooting in Bonnieux, she looks for an umbrella, and one of the villagers brings his mother's wedding umbrella from the 70s, which reminds us of Varda's partner Jacques Demy's well-known film *Les Parapluies de Cherbourg* (1964). Varda shot *Le Bonheur* (1965) during that period too. Neither of the films has a happy ending; in *Les Parapluies de Cherbourg*, when the lovers finally meet by coincidence, even though they still have feelings for each other, they return to their committed relationships reluctantly. *Le Bonheur*'s ending reveals the truth of the interchangeability of partners in marriage. The story of the couple in *Mur Murs* is also melancholic as one of the couple leaves before the completion of the mural. The crack splitting the couple in *Visages Villages*, the gloomy story of the couple in *Mur Murs* and the realistic ending of both films (*Les Parapluies de Cherbourg* and *Le Bonheur*)

point out Varda's train of thought and her feelings and memories about her relationship with Demy.

After the photo shooting, we follow the villager who brings the umbrella, heading to the church where he works as a bell-ringer. It may seem that the narration jumps to the story of the bell-ringer spontaneously; however, it is not for sure if it is staged or not. During the film, the spectator is not able to recognize easily whether some of the moments and the events are scripted or not, which is a marker for an essay film. Fiction–nonfiction and scripted–spontaneous are intermingled.

### 3.4 THE FACTORY

Another scene of photography in a factory combines two different groups of shift workers. Both groups pose while leaning to opposite sides on their own working shifts. (Figure 3.3) When both pictures appear side by side on the same wall, it can be perceived that a new reality is constructed. As an aspect of making art - composing the things that do not belong to the same place and the reconstruction of reality - is uncovered through these scenes. (Figure 3.4)



Figure 3.3. Photoshooting of workers in the chemical factory as a *happening*



Figure 3.4. Mural of workers

In this scene, Varda and JR create a kind of *happening/performance*, a Brechtian parable that represents a spectacle, yet it reminds us that they are indeed factory workers, not actors. This scene brings both a distancing effect by reminding us that this is a *mise-en-scène* and also reveals something that lies in the heart of the reality of the work. After the photo shooting and pasting up of the photos, one of the workers finds herself in the photo and engages in small talk with Varda and JR in front of her representation, asking both how they met. Figures standing in front of their representations on the wall mirror the representations in the film. Then one of the factory workers stares at the photos and walks through, saying that “It is surprising. Art is meant to surprise us, right?”. These random encounters presented through continuous camera movements - looking like actuality footage - foreground the documentary approach.

The next scene inside the factory, presenting an interview with one of the workers who expresses how he feels about his last day at work after many years of working life, is connected with Varda's voice-over, saying that “Each face tells a story.” Again it feels like we are watching a documentary. The smooth transitions and going back and forth between *mis-en-scène* and actual footages continue throughout the film. According to Huxley (2017), most richly satisfying essays are:

... those which make the best not of one, not of two, but of all three worlds in which it is possible for the essay to exist. Freely, effortlessly, thought and feeling move in these consummate works of art, hither and thither between the essay's three poles—from the personal to the universal, from the abstract back to the concrete, from the objective datum to the inner experience. (p. 85)

The following scene, depicting another visual work in the factory manifests the personal aspect of the film. The idea of covering the water tanks with fish photos comes from Varda when the water tanks and distilled salt remind her of the sea and the fishes. In the scene where JR climbs up the stairs quickly to see the water tanks, Varda follows him slowly; however, when she feels tired, she stops and tells JR “Look for me.” A non-diegetic piece of music accompanies the scene, foregrounding the emotional and personal aspect of the journey for Varda.

In the next scenes, again, the chronological sequencing is not followed. After their work in the factory is done, we watch how they take fish photos in the first place. Disruptions to the chronological sequencing and self-conscious strategies make us aware of the editing and that we are watching a film in this sequence. Also, it is not for sure whether



this scene shows how the photos are actually taken, or if it is just a reenactment. Before this scene, a split-screen which includes three different images is used in order to indicate different aspects of their work; drawing together the things which seem impossible or to contradict each other, and exploring the ways of seeing. The middle photo in the split-screen is profoundly self-reflective and self-reflexive as it raises some questions about the authors' filmmaking process. (Figure 3.5)



Figure 3.5. Multiple representations in split-screen

What does the collaboration of the two artists mean? Is it something impossible, just like the fish swimming outside the water tank? Could art make dreams come true by getting the impossibilities together? As a spectator, my answer to some of these questions would be that the collaboration between the pair is an artistic attempt to combine different worlds through the power of imagination, and it present multiple representations. Another marker of self-reflexivity in this shot is that the pair's reflection in a puddle of water as they are leaning towards each other is centered on the image and combined with their artworks from three different angles. It demonstrates that they are trying to reach each other's world while they collaborate and it reflects their subjectivity, their vision of art and multiple representations of the same object. The split-screen, presented in still image, crystallizes the film's essayist structure, which is mapped from non-fiction to fiction and fluctuates between Huxley's three poles as shifting “from the personal to the universal, from the

abstract back to the concrete, from the objective datum to the inner experience” (Huxley, 2017, p. 85).

### 3.5 WISE GRANDMA AND SPIRITED YOUNG MAN

In the scene where people hold up big letters on the stairs of the Bibliothèque Nationale, Varda’s blurry vision is actualized/represented with the help of JR. In the prologue, as a fictional scene, when Varda cannot see the time schedule at a bus stop and seeks help from other passengers, JR helps her. Later in the film, JR helps her represent how she literally sees: using big letters moving up and down on the steps of Bibliothèque Nationale. The spectator and JR try to see through Varda's point of view during the film, and here Varda’s blurry vision is visualized playfully as the spectator literally sees through her eyes. Distinctions between youth and age are mentioned through Varda's deteriorating vision in this scene and later in the film, through many dialogues and scenes referring to her aging body. However, Varda challenges the death as she collaborates with a young artist who plays the young Godard in the film that makes a linkage to Varda's youth. Varda's essayist approach in the film is an attempt to transform the death drive<sup>7</sup> - as this film belongs to later years in Varda's life - into jouissance<sup>8</sup>. JR brings joy and novelty in Varda's narrative and makes a linkage to Varda's youth, as the ghost image of Godard. As she travels with JR, she relates to both the past and the present.

After this scene, we see that Varda and JR sit on the stairs and have a conversation about each other's vision:

JR: You see blurry and you are happy.

AV: You see everything dark and you are happy. It depends on how we see things.

JR: With some distance.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Freud introduced the concept of the death drive in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920). He established a fundamental opposition between *life drives*, conceived of as a tendency towards cohesion and unity, and the *death drives*, which operate in the opposite direction, undoing connections and destroying things (No Subject - Encyclopedia of Psychoanalysis, 2019).

<sup>8</sup> *Jouissance* is an enjoyment which has a reference to pleasure; however, it is not possible to translate *jouissance* precisely. It always has a deadly reference, a paradoxical pleasure, reaching an almost intolerable level of excitation (No Subject - Encyclopedia of Psychoanalysis, 2019).

<sup>9</sup> In the original dialogues, JR says “avec de recul” which also means “looking back” and Varda replies, “ou en prenant de la hauteur,” meaning “or from a different perspective.”

AV: Or from above.

This time, while they are talking about ways of seeing or different perspectives, they face the spectator, unlike the previous shots from the back. As they catch the spectator's eye, they invite the spectator to think about their point of view.

Another scene that takes place in Provence displays Pony, an older man who lives in seclusion. This is followed by another scene where JR and Varda gaze at her cat in her courtyard. We suddenly find ourselves in Varda's courtyard in Paris. The scene is shot from behind them as in other landscape scenes and their conversation reveals their roles in the film:

JR: You are playing the wise grandma.

AV: And you are playing the spirited young man.

As a new shot appears which depicts a flock of sheep on a meadow, their conversation continues as a voice-over. While the sheep are moving in circles in a long shot, Varda points out that "I have to admit that the young lambs on the outside are leading the dance." There follows a shot where the camera-van moves from right to left through the trees. The movement from right to left – the spectator perceives the movement from left to right as natural since the writing direction is from left to right in Latin languages - reveals something unusual. This movement direction reflects the fact that Varda still leads the dance and it is supported by the next shot. The famous disco song, *Ring My Bell* accompanies the scene, showing the duo inside the van, singing and dancing. The disco song is reminiscent of the scene depicting how they have not met in a disco in the prologue. That scene starts with a disco ball, the camera pans down to the dancing crowd, shows JR dancing, JR's voice-over is heard. As Varda completes his sentence, "we did not meet on the dance floor," Varda is seen inside the crowd, dancing. The scene highlights the fact that Varda still leads the dance, is still creative.

While Varda and JR are singing and dancing in the van, loud honk of a tractor silences the song and then it is cut to the tractor's getting into the way of the van. As the tractor drives away, Varda and JR are seen again inside the van, in a medium shot: Varda is filming with her hand-held camera. As the van come closes to the frame, a giant camera picture on the side of the van holds the frame. The directors get back to filming instead

of being filmed. Next scenes show two different goat farmers' stories: one who burns the goats' horns for them being obedient and other one who refuses to remove their horns. JR puts up a big picture of a goat with horns on a wall. As the image of the goat holds the frame, it is cut to a worker who is telling how he feels when he sees this picture. We see him from different angles while he is being interviewed, asking them the point of the work. During the conversation, in a close-up shot, we see the word "acteur" (actor) behind him, on the wall. It is cut to medium-long shot depicting the camera crew and then to close up of the worker again. This time, as he moves, the full word reveals: "autotracteur" (tractor). This self-reflexive moment exposes and highlights how the film freely moves between fact and fiction, blurring the lines between author-actor and actual people-actor.

Another self-reflexive moment appears when Varda says "he made me lose the thread of my transition from the goats to a photograph I took in my youth" following a discussion between the pair over JR's sunglasses. There follows a shot where the photograph taken by Varda in 1954 in Normandy appears. She narrates the image of a goat, a child and a naked man gazing at the sea which is also appeared in *Ulysse* (1983) and *Les Plages D'Agnès*. Then another still image is seen in which JR rides a motorcycle on a beach in Normandy, accompanied by his voice-over which depicts his memories on this beach during his motorcycle rides and his desire to paste an image over the fallen bunker that appeared him before.

Afterwards, we witness how they collaborate as they measure the bunker, are informed on the tide schedule and look over various old photographs taken by Varda in the 1950s. They sometimes conflict with each other while checking out other surfaces for the photo pasting such as a wall with holes, a ruin or a building under construction. While they discuss what kind of work they could produce here, they come to a beach cabin where Varda made a portrait of his friend Guy Bourdin in the past. As JR leans against the wall as Guy Bourdin did in 1954, Varda tells him the moments of the photo shooting. (Figure 3.6) Then it is decided: they put that image on the bunker as tilted. The pasting of the image is presented as time-lapse shooting until Guy Bourdin, in the image, looks like, in Varda's words, "a child in his cradle, resting in peace." After the pasting of the photo, they pose in front of the dislocated and recreated image of Guy Bourdin. (Figure 3.7)

This sequence reflects many aspects of the film: the self-reflexivity as we witness the pair's collaboration, how they come up with their ideas despite some conflicts, how they produce their artworks and their film; the self-reflectivity as they both reflect their own memories related to Normandy; and the intertextual narration since other works inspire them to reconstruct and recreate the past images.



Figure 3.6. Revisiting the photograph of Guy Bourdin taken by Agnès Varda in 1954, in *Visages Villages* (2017)

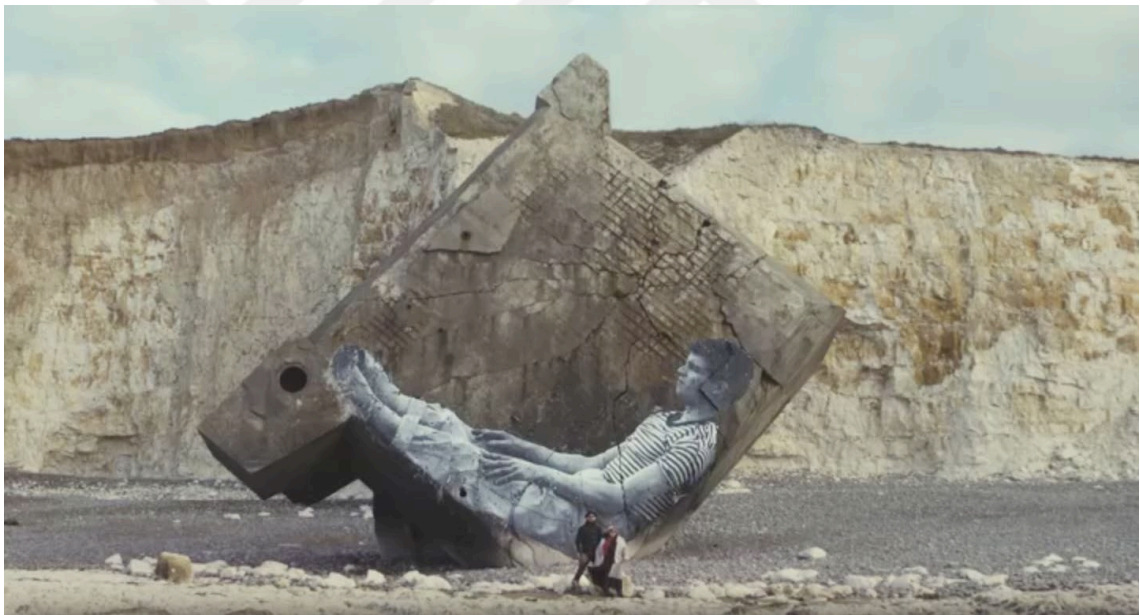


Figure 3.7. Agnès Varda and JR posing in front of the dislocated and recreated image of Guy Bourdin

The next morning, when they go to the beach, it is seen that the image is washed away due to tide. We see them from behind as they walk to the beach and gaze at the sea. While heavy wind and flying sand particles accompany the scene, they are vanished smoothly from the scene as if they are washed away due to tide. A link between them and their work is established as they reflect themselves for a while before the tide washes away the work they made. The scene leaves us with the questions of memory, creativity, resisting

to time and death. One more time the spectator finds themselves traveling from concrete to abstract, from past to present and from personal to universal.

### **3.6 ARCIMBOLDO, FRUITS, FLOWERS AND MORE**

As JR jumps from one block to another in his grandmother's yard, a transition takes us to the Dockyard of Le Havre. The sequence that starts with JR's jump, continues with the entrance of JR and Varda to the dockyard showing that Varda is there for the first time besides the song she remembers from her childhood. Since JR has worked with dockers to paste huge photographs of eyes on boats in the past, he introduces Varda to some striking dockworkers. Instead of interviewing them, Varda interviews the dockers' wives on the strike and their own jobs, and invites them for a photo shoot. The project in Le Havre consists of taking pictures of three women, Morgane, Nathalie and Sophie and pasting huge pictures of them over the containers. After taking photographs, while Varda and JR ride up the elevator, they recall the last time they did so. The transition takes us to an elevator in the Louvre Museum.

In the following scene, Varda and JR restage the famous Louvre scene from Godard's *Bande à Part* (1964) where the three protagonists run through the Louvre, with a minor difference. JR runs through the Louvre, pushing Varda in a wheelchair. They run past the Renaissance paintings of Bellini, Del Sarto, Lorenzo Costa, Ghirlandaio, Botticelli, Raphael. As Varda reaches out to the Renaissance paintings, the joy in her face is visible. While JR pushes her at top speed, Varda sees the paintings of *Summer* (1573) and *Spring* (1573) of Arcimboldo, and they slow down. *Summer* represents a profile portrait of a woman made up of fresh and ripe fruits and vegetables and *Spring* is made of a wide variety of flowers, petals, and blossoms. In a scene highlighting Varda's aging body, she slows down for the paintings which represent the seasons of spring and summer which are equal to youth, excitement and enthusiasm in a sense. Arcimboldo's work reflects Varda's collage technique that she employs throughout the film. She dislocates, defamiliarizes the images, the objects from their original places - deconstructs them - and then reconstructs them.

Another transition takes us to the top of a container where Varda and JR sit and watch the pasting of photos over the containers. The sound bridge between the scenes links Arcimboldo's work and their work. The pasting of the photos is presented as time-lapse shooting, depicting how each container is positioned until they represent a whole work. (Figure 3.8) The next shot resembles the landscape scenes, as we see JR and Varda from behind gazing at the pile of containers. The following scene shows that Morgane, Nathalie and Sophie posing inside the "hearts" of their huge portraits on the containers. This is followed by a scene where their husbands walk toward the containers, appearing as if they are going into the photographic image. (Figure 3.9)



Figure 3.8. Derivation of representation through use of photographic image as background

The work in *Le Havre* recalls both artists' previous works. In *Mur Murs*, Varda portrays the outsiders of Los Angeles while exploring the murals of the city. In one scene, an artist's mural made up of 6-meter high pictures of various artists is seen. Women are portrayed there as outsiders in a male-dominated art environment. (Figure 3.10) The *mise-en-scène* presents the artists, who are portrayed in the mural, posing in front of the mural and then walking toward the camera and filling the frame. Varda recreates the scene in *Le Havre* and reverses it. Unlike the scene in *Mur Murs*, as the dockworkers walk towards the image, they occupy little space on the screen. Three women, as the subjects of the work, are in the center of the frame, not represented as outsiders. JR's 2014 work *Ballet*,

*Le Havre* which presents series of photographs of dancers on containers in Le Havre is recalled as well, there being visual and thematic similarities between these works.

The scenes present frame in frame, photographs inside the film; still images inside the moving images. As the photographic representations are portrayed as backgrounds and the characters move inside or in front of the representations, the depth of focus decreases and the derivation of representation occurs as a part of the whole narrative system. On the one hand, the photographs touch the space of everyday life - reflecting the stories of actual people - the photographic images also turn into mises-en-scène via *happenings*<sup>10</sup> created in front of the representations.



Figure 3.9. Transformation of still image into moving illusion

While Varda and JR experience the villages, and visages throughout their journey, the factual stories deviate to illusion, a spectacle of performance. As the film reflects the process of making art, it presents a prospect from Renaissance paintings to the avant-garde movement of the 1960s, Fluxus. Varda, one more time, exposes her artistic inspirations - the collage technique of Arcimboldo and the happenings of Fluxus - in this scene. Although the murals on the containers serve as backgrounds decreasing the depth

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<sup>10</sup> *Happening* -in the context of the avant-garde art movement of the 1960s, Fluxus- is a type of performance art where the viewers interact with the artists in a way that the artists cannot control and they become the part of the spectacle, depicting the creative process without limitations and employing spontaneity as an artistic tool.



of focus and point out the *mise-en-scène*, a frame is not drawn by the containers. There is a space outside the frame that unveils the everyday life and location of the *mise-en-scène*. If the shots were framed solely by the containers, there would be filmic space composed of illusory representations; however, the frame exposes the filming location. Therefore, the film produces *video murals* combining everyday life and spectacle, blurring the borders between reality and artifice.



Figure 3.10. Remembering murals of *Mur Murs* (1981)

Another crucial aspect of these scenes is their relation with the pastness and presentness of photographic image. For Roland Barthes (1977), “the photograph is never experienced as an illusion, is in no way a presence; ... its reality is that of the having-been-there” (p. 44). On the contrary, Richard Allen (1993) suggests that “photographs do not wear their pastness on their surface” (p. 27). The film evokes of the discussion of the presentness and pastness of image and also *projective illusion* in this sequence as the subjects in the photographs come to life in the presentness of the moving image. In Allen's concept of *projective illusion*:

...what we perceive appears spatially present to us, what we perceive also appears temporally present to us. In projective illusion, the fiction appears to unfold before our eyes as we watch, as if it were live, as if it were created in the moment of projection. The illusion

involved is not the illusion of something present that has passed, it is the illusion of something spatially present that is not spatially present. (Allen, 1993, pp. 42-43)

As the film moves freely between fiction and nonfiction, it merges photography with cinema, spectacle with actuality, illusory representation with everyday life. Further, the film offers a portrayal of how the illusion of cinema is produced. These scenes unveil the fact that the photographic image inside the film does not belong to the past; as we experience the film, still images turn to moving images that are temporally and spatially present to us. Since the film performs how the projective illusion unfolds: we perceive the scene as if it is created in the moment of watching, as the still images come to life through *happenings*. Therefore, it could be derived from this that the film experiments with Allen's notion of projective illusion as the still images come to life through happenings that consist of both illusory representation and everyday life.

### **3.7 CO-EXISTENCE OF THE PAST AND THE PRESENT**

Even though the film has a playful character that conveys curiosity and a love of people, in fact, throughout the road scenes, the themes of abandonment, isolation, solitude and loss manifest themselves. The playful part is how the duo reshapes, reconstructs these through ideas, creativity, curiosity and subjective memory. Like previous encounters, the epilogue presents disappointment and reconstruction, which is compatible with the narrative structure.

As the sequence begins with the pair's train trip to visit Godard in a small village, the spectator witnesses the pair's excitement, especially Varda's excitement and hopes of meeting with her longtime friend and introducing JR to him. When Godard does not show up for their meeting, not only Varda, but also JR and the spectator are disappointed. The viewers miss out on a landmark meeting between two legends of the French cinema, but they share Varda's disappointment. Godard does not open his door, and Varda finds his heart-breaking notes on the glass surface of the street door, reminding her of their shared past. The notes depict memory traces of a shared past bearing both joy and sorrow. The scene both presents a happening and a melodramatic mode in which Agnès plays or feels, experiences.

After the scene where Godard does not show up for their planned meeting which stands for a truly essayistic approach and style, Agnès and JR discuss this in front of a lake view. Unlike the previous landscape scenes, the shot-reverse shot of the scene depicts the action. This time the landscape does not provide a space outside the narrative; the lake becomes the *parergon*, the setting. JR wants to comfort Varda and tell her that Godard would probably have wanted to challenge her filmic structure. When Varda replies, she corrects JR, stressing that it is “our film.” At the end, when JR takes off his sunglasses to cheer up Varda as Godard did before, the similarity between the opening and the ending becomes apparent. Although the structure of the film seems to open up to random encounters and incidental events, Varda as an auteur/cineaste remains at the helm of the structure. The film is open to factuality and improvisation to flourish and expand, but it does not drift apart from Varda's envisaged narrative structure of the film. In the train scene, where the pair discuss their next stop, visiting Godard at his place, Varda says that “he is unpredictable, so you never know.” Varda is prepared to deal with the material that comes out of this essay. This essayistic approach includes the questions that she asks herself and the spectator, which all start in her mind, move toward to spectator, and then turn back to Varda. This does not mean that she replies to all the questions: the open-ended questions continue to move in filmic space. However, Varda's authorial presence cannot be denied.

Through the landscape scene which follows the non-encounter scene with Godard, Varda and JR reshape Varda's disappointment with Godard and the common past that she shares with him. In this sequence, disappointment manifests itself; one last time, the authors reshape the disappointment and reconstruct the past. As JR takes off his sunglasses in the landscape scene, he is “undressing” Godard's persona and he shows himself to Varda as a genuine friend. Varda continues her voyage with a new friend that points out the present.

The scene's portrayal of the present takes me back to the reason why Varda started this journey with JR at the first place. Throughout the film, we see the resemblance between JR and Godard; however, the epilogue takes us to the point where JR and Varda resemble each other in several aspects. The contrasts between JR and Varda, which are presented at the beginning, dissolve as the film unfolds and reappear as similarities. They both share the inspiration of the universe of images surrounding them and the urge to reconstruct, remake them. They are both outsiders as artists. Varda has been an outsider, as the only

woman director in the French New Wave and she was not a part of the Cahiers du Cinema group. Varda (1994) tells how she began filmmaking in her book *Varda par Agnès*:

When I began my first film, I knew nothing about filmmakers or films and had not even a vague idea of entering the world of cinema. Therefore, it is a mystery or an incomprehensible combination of chance and embryonic desire. (p. 38)

JR started taking photographs when he found a camera in the Paris Metro. He has documented his adventures in the cities, photographed people, and then pasted pictures on walls across the world. Instead of art galleries, he chooses the outdoor walls of streets to exhibit his works, namely the *sidewalk gallery*. Both JR and Varda started their journey by chance and through impulse, and continue their work with a constant search for new images, new meanings through various media to discover ways of seeing and representation. Paul Arthur (2017) suggests, “one way to think about the essay film is a meeting ground for documentary, avant-garde, and art film impulses” (p. 169). The meeting of the documentary, avant-garde, and art film impulses both mirrors *Visages Villages* and the authors’ style. They are both inspired by the streets, combine reality with their artistic approach, and are pioneers in many respects.

Besides that, the pair share many common features including how they started making art; the epilogue also shows that Varda does not carry her memories as baggage. She takes her memories and re-creates them in new forms, in new contexts, and defamiliarizes them. Until the end, JR does not take off his sunglasses even though Varda insistently asks him to do. JR’s taking off his glasses, which changes his visage, points out the future, a new friendship. Varda looks forward, not to the past. The authors reconstruct Godard - who is disguised as JR throughout the film - and Varda’s past with him. Throughout the film, many intertextual references remind the spectator of the past, the old films; however, each time new images, new meanings occur which foregrounds the present.

The film brings together various encounters in the countryside of France, from Provence in the deep south to Normandy in the north. The epilogue presents a non-encounter, similarly to the prologue, which shows us how Varda and JR have not met. The epilogue also presents an encounter between Varda and JR since they catch each other’s eye for the first time. Even though the plot twist disappoints the spectator, and the expectation of the spectator is not fulfilled, the beginning and the ending echo each other. The film starts with how JR and Varda have not met as a constructed, scripted, fictive part of the film

and ends with how JR and Godard have not met, which foregrounds the essayistic texture as an improvised, unpredictable aspect of the film. The continuous and rapid camera movements - which looks like actuality footage - of the scene also point out the performative documentary element of the film. Therefore, the binary structure crystallizes with the epilogue: the staged non-encounter of Varda and JR in the prologue and improvised non-encounter with Godard in the epilogue.

The spectator also witnesses the co-existence of various binaries: subjectivity and objectivity, fact and fiction, old and young, urban and rural, city and village, fast and slow, past and present throughout the film. In this scene, past and present coexist on the part of Varda, the film history, and the spectator. The film overcomes the contradiction between past and present and combines them, incompatible with the dual narrative structure of the film. The images that we encounter during the film have many connections with Varda's oeuvre or in general, with Varda's memory. Not only the images by Varda but also images of Godard, JR, and Demy are presented. Despite the connections with the past, we always witness the spatial and temporal presence of the images.

The course of the landscape scenes in relation to active spectatorship crystallizes in the last words of Varda: "Shall we look at the lake?". One more time, Varda and JR gaze at the landscape, *parergon* turns to *ergon*, we see them from behind in a long shot and the landscape dominates the last scene of the film. The film ends with an emphasis on openness in many senses, as a recurring theme in essays and with multiple significations on the part of the spectators.

## 4. CONCLUSION

In my thesis study, I aimed to explore the essay film form, specifically in the cinema of Agnès Varda. By demonstrating how Varda practices essayistic filmmaking, I discussed some definitions and characteristics of the essay film. The essay film as a hybrid form refuses to be placed in a certain genre, it fluctuates between different narrative structures (Rascaroli, 2009, p. 21). Since the essay film crosses the boundaries and manages to take place either outside the scope of documentary or fiction, I discussed essay film as an autonomous form instead of integrating it within the field of documentary filmmaking. I selected *Visages Villages* to analyze, out of Varda's oeuvre due to its shifting between nonfiction and fiction, objectivity and subjectivity, personal and universal and its distinctive formal elements in relation to the essay film. Varda's essayist approach in *Visages Villages* expands one of the prominent aspects of the essay film - merging documentary and fiction - through combining various forms, concepts such as the photographic image and moving image, reality and illusion, the past and the present. The focus of my thesis has also followed an essayist approach, shifting between theories, film history and Varda's personal story which can not be separated from the historical background of the film.

The chapter on “The Essayistic Practices in Cinema and Theorization of Essay Film” presents an overview of the historical background of the essay film practices and essay film theory. I summarized some defining features of the essay film, referring to some essay film theorists such as Nora M. Alter, Timothy Corrigan and Laura Rascaroli and to some literary theorists such as Adorno and Huxley, while addressing the openness of the form in this chapter. Varda's selected films from different periods provided a useful source to discuss the essay film form further and exemplify essayistic practices.

Since, Agnès Varda was an avant-garde filmmaker whose filmmaking practices were essayistic, exploratory and searching for the possibilities of cinematic art; I drew an analogy between Varda's essayistic filmmaking and the avant-garde roots of the essay film in the chapter “Avant-garde Roots of Essay Film and Agnès Varda.” This chapter also allowed me to reflect upon Varda's position in the French New Wave movement and fostered my analysis of how Varda's cinema has the features of subjective cinema, utilizes

the means of her notion of cinécriture and pursues the creation of a new cinematic language. While discussing the position of Agnès Varda in the French New Wave movement, which is controversial since she is considered as the precursor of the New Wave, considered as a part of the second group in the New Wave - the Left Bank group - and sometimes she is even omitted from consideration. I relied on Nam Lee's argument on how Varda was a pioneer of "Nouveau Cinema" which presents a fresh view and strengthens my views on Varda's essayistic filmmaking practices which dated back to her earlier films and continued throughout her career. Lee (2008) calls into question "the equation of New Wave = Cahiers du Cinéma = Nouveau Cinéma" (p. 51). Since New Wave which began in 1959 is a product of the postwar French cinephile culture and being a "cult of first films" and The Left Bank filmmakers - Varda, Resnais and Chris Marker - were making modernist films before 1959, but they did not belong to the cinephile generation; Lee (2008) distinguishes between New Wave and Nouveau Cinéma and positions Varda as a pioneer of the Nouveau Cinema (pp. 51-52).

In my third chapter, I focused on the film *Visages Villages* (2017) in terms of how the essay film blurs fact and fiction, objectivity and subjectivity, and establishes a dialogical relationship between spectator and image. *Visages Villages* blurs the lines between fact and fiction, starting from the prologue. The animated sequence of the opening credits is followed by a fictive sequence that presents how Varda and JR have not met. Then the film brings together various factual encounters in the countryside of France, from Provence to Normandy and combines both the subjective point of view of both directors, and the "objective" record of the events. The spectator could hesitate if some scenes are either improvised or fictional. While the melodious/rhymed conversations between JR and Varda point to staged performances, the portrayal of actual people exposes the objectivity of the film. In this way, the film obscures the line between subjective and objective point of views.

Since the narration that Varda starts in the first person, expands to universal themes and fluctuates between different narrative forms, concepts, styles, and modes, while creating unity in itself; I referred to Huxley's three-poled frame of reference for studying the essay. According to Huxley (2017), the most richly satisfying essays freely, effortlessly move between the essay's three poles - from the personal to the universal, from the abstract

back to the concrete, from the objective datum to the inner experience. (p. 85) Therefore, I focused on these transitions: how the structure of the film is mapped from non-fiction to fiction; from the personal to the universal; and from objectivity to subjectivity.

As *Visages Villages* presents the double projection of the two authors and pushes the limitations of representations by creating frame in frame, the series of representations inside representations, non-stable subjectivity appears. Even though Varda's subjectivity is perceived during the film as we hear her voice-over and see through her point of view at many points in the film, subjectivity of the authors is challenged with the intertextuality. The film interrogates the author's position and resists relating with any stable signification through intertextuality. As the film serves as an *intertext* that does not conceal its inspirations from other texts - the authors' own and others' works - it reveals that there is no original text.

The intertextual narration of the film also foregrounds the openness of the essay film and the active spectatorship through the dialogical relationship between the spectator and the image. The essay film's mediation between the image and the spectator reflects on the utilization of landscape in the film as providing a space outside the narrative for contemplation, namely the landscape as *ergon* according to Martin Lefebvre (2006, p. 23). Varda welcomes the spectator into the landscapes and allows a double consciousness for both the director (herself) and us the spectator. She opens a space for the spectator to inhabit in the film. The film has a multi-layered relationship with its spectator; the spectators move back and forth between whether some scenes are improvised or fictional, feel alienated through the self-reflexive narration-wise strategies, need to reflect upon some themes since the film opens a space for the spectator and demands spectator engagement, or enjoy a road movie through identifying themselves with the characters at some points.

The directors are the subjects of the narrative and the subject matter of the film; they reflect themselves, their vision of art. The film is profoundly self-reflexive, as it represents the visual arts, the process of filmmaking, and ways of seeing. Moreover, the



self-reflexivity of the film exceeds the exposing of the film itself as an artifice, it is embodied in villages, murals and faces in the film.

Since Varda's essayist filmmaking merges documentary and fiction, still and moving images, reality and illusion, past and present on the surface of the photographs/murals and her filmic journey, the analysis of *Visages Villages* allowed me to examine - in addition to essay film theory - intertextuality, landscape in the cinema, and the pastness and presentness of photographic and moving images.

In *Visages Villages*, Varda uses the essay film form to experiment with and contemplate the issues of illusion and reality. The film portrays the everyday life of villagers in French rural settings with a documentary approach; the process of filmmaking through self-conscious and self-reflexive narration strategies; reflects on Varda's cinematic history; and gathers all in various scenes - both consists of still and moving images, the past and the present. While the film merges photography with cinema, it also merges illusory representation and everyday life. Further, the film offers a portrayal of how the illusion of cinema is produced in many sequences, such as the gathering together of photographs over the surfaces and the mises-en-scène created in front of the photographs that appear as the subjects in the photographs come to life in the presentness of the moving image. These scenes unveil the fact that the photographic image inside the film does not belong to the past; as we experience the film, still images turn to moving images that are temporally and spatially present to us. Since the film performs how the *projective illusion* unfolds: it could be derived from this that the film experiments with Allen's notion of projective illusion (1993) as the still images come to life through *happenings* that consist of both illusory representation and everyday life.

To conclude, *Visages Villages* exemplifies essayistic filmmaking through reflecting primary markers of the essay film such as subjectivity, self-reflexivity, reflectivity, blurring the fact and the fiction, and mediation between filmmaker and spectator. Moreover, Varda's essayist approach points to the thinking of the essay film in its making and its possibilities, to create its own discourse by using cinematic tools. Varda as a filmmaker/artist creates a work of art which exceeds the boundaries of old and new, she leaves a concrete trace in film history that reaches beyond the Zeitgeist of the Nouvelle

Vague with the film *Visages Villages*, which makes itself on the road for an eternal journey.



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