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Beyond the Other Hand:

Self, Social, and Technology in Agnès Varda's *The Gleaners and I*

“I mean, this is my project: to film one hand with my other hand. To enter into the horror of it. I find it extraordinary. I feel as if I am an animal, worse, I am an animal I don't know.” – Agnès Varda, *The Gleaners and I*

In one of his seminal works, *The Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche boldly begins, “We are unknown to ourselves, we knowers: and for good reason. We have never looked for ourselves, - so how are we ever supposed to *find* ourselves” (Nietzsche 3)? Despite all its rhetorical prowess, for anybody who has seen Agnès Varda's *The Gleaners and I* that statement cannot ring true. In her experimental documentary on gleaning, if Varda hasn't found herself, it certainly is not for lack of looking. In the very title of the film, it is clear that Varda herself is just as much a subject of her work as the various people she turns the camera onto. It is not just “The Gleaners,” but rather “The Gleaners *and I*,” indicating from the very beginning the interconnection of self and subject, internal and external, that Varda conveys throughout the work. In one sense, this places *The Gleaners and I* squarely in the context of the essay film, a category of filmmaking where the filmmaker embraces the subjective viewpoint through self-reflexive and self-referential techniques in lieu of obscuring their role through feigned objectivity. However, I argue that Varda's *The Gleaners and I* pushes beyond the traditional conceptions of an essay film. Through an embrace of new technology, particularly the handheld DV camera, Varda's film takes on a quality of unmediated immediacy. In this, I argue, she is able to explore her own self in an

exercise of self-portraiture, as both a character and a psychological projection onto her environment. At the same time, Varda's film is not confined to an exploration of the self, but rather is able to use the portrait of the self as a catalyst and also a canvas for a wider discussion and critique of global capitalism, waste and those who exist at society's margins.

To begin, it is first useful to place Varda's film within the context of the essay film. In his book, *The Essay Film: From Montaigne, After Marker*, Timothy Corrigan discusses the "essayistic," an element of the essay film, noting that it "indicates a kind of encounter between the self and the public domain." He elaborates, stating, "Appearing within many different artistic and material forms besides the essay film, the essayistic acts out a performative presentation of self as a kind of self-negation in which narrative or experimental structures are subsumed within the process of thinking through a public experience" (Corrigan 6). On the surface, Varda's *The Gleaners and I* contains the essayistic in the terms which Corrigan defines. In many ways, Varda's self is the guiding organizational principle of the film. After interviewing a man who gleanes and collects abandoned junk, Varda reflects on her own filmmaking, "The encounter also happens on the road, and it happened to us. On our left, an abandoned factory. On the other a sign 'Finds'" (Varda 36:48- 37:00). Following this, she proceeds to film her process of gleaning junk from a secondhand shop before she finds a painting on gleaning. She then exclaims, "The painting had beckoned us because it belonged in the film" (Varda 37:45-37:50). In my view, this sums up the central conceit of this film – what beckons to Varda is what is depicted, explored and analyzed. In this, there is a sort of "performative presentation" of the self which usurps the traditional conventions of structure, guiding the narrative twists and turns of the film.

Furthermore, Varda converts these encounters into a type of thinking through of the public experience, as Corrigan terms it. One of the clearest examples of this conversion occurs

after Varda interviews the shopkeeper, magistrate and homeless kids involved in a legal scuffle regarding foraging for food in trashcans. After getting everybody's side of the story and going back to hear the kids out again Varda says, "They're not through talking about this episode, and I'm not through thinking about it in my hotel room. We filmed and continue to film people hanging around trash cans" (Varda 53:00-53:10). Here, in classic documentary fashion, Varda begins by seeking to represent all sides of the issues in a quasi-objective roundtable of all the talking heads involved. What is unique, however, is that she does not stop here. Rather, she brings in herself and her own personal feelings in such a way that creates a space for thinking about the experience on a scale beyond the individual. In this, though she brings in her personal interest as an organizational structure, it moves to the background as she turns it into the opportunity for mediation on the larger social, political, and economic implications of the episode.

Even as Varda's *The Gleaners and I* fits neatly into Corrigan's broader discussion of an essay film in some ways, in other ways Varda's film expands beyond it. In laying out the history of the essay film, Corrigan does a reading of *The Gleaners and I*. He writes, "For Varda and this essay film, representational gleaning moves across the cinematic image, specifically her digital camera, allowing a continual sketching of the self as it dissolves in the world, especially as a mounting mediation on the drafting of the self against the vanishings of time" (Corrigan 72). In one sense, Corrigan's reading of the role Varda plays in her film is compelling. He points to the immediate, unfiltered relationship with the external that Varda is able to represent with the use of a handheld digital video camera. At the same time, his sense of what Varda's innovative portrayal of the self works to accomplish is limited. Corrigan sees Varda's representation of her self as ultimately fading into the background, giving way to the larger issues and ideas of her

documentary. Here specifically, he points to her continual depiction of her aging body. He argues, that this depiction gives way to a larger rumination of the self in relation to time, and in doing so, Varda's specific portraiture of herself is a means to a larger whole. That is to say, for Corrigan, the self, in the essay film generally, and Varda's work specifically, necessarily fades into a meditation on the public experience.

In my view, however, the involvement of Varda's self within her film, both as a guiding eye, active participant and extraneous subject, is more than just a bridge to a larger rumination on issues outside of the self. In many ways, *The Gleaners and I* serves as not just an essay film, with a subjective argument, but also a portrait of Varda herself. In this sense, it is not just a means to an end, but also an actual end in and of itself. In her essay, "The Self-portrait Film: Michelangelo's Last Gaze," Laura Rascaroli provides a poignant introduction to the concept of self-portrait in film. Drawing from the scholarly work of Michel Beujour, she describes self-portraiture in literature and film as lacking in continuous narrative, showing the reader not an ordered sequence of events but a jumble of juxtapositions that encourage re-ordering and interpretation by the reader in their amalgamation into an aesthetic whole (Rascaroli 57-58). She then turns to the scholar Raymond Bellour, to espouse why video serves as an ideal medium for self-portraiture. She relays four reasons to support this: "the instant feedback provided by video; the possibility for the author to more naturally include his or her body; the ease of postproduction intervention on the image; and the role of mass communication (the TV screen to which the video is bound) to perform the role fulfilled by rhetoric" (Rascaroli 59). Throughout this discussion of the self-portrait generally, and its specific implementation in audiovisual mediums, Rascaroli references *The Gleaners and I* twice as an example of self-portrait in film.

Although Rascaroli does not offer an in-depth look at *The Gleaners and I* in this essay as it is not her primary subject, an analysis of the film demonstrates the many ways which it fits into the defining framework she lays out. For one, in many ways, Varda's work eschews traditional narrative form, offering a series of personally culled moments from the filmmaker's lived experience which, even as they focus on others, have the qualities of a sort of psychological sketch of the filmmaker. A good example of the stream of conscious quality of Varda's filmmaking comes near the end of the film where she says, "We got there in the early hours. The people from the fair were still asleep, and I saw a man looking at the river flow by. I half-felt like talking to him" (Varada 1:01:59-1:02:12). While Varda is speaking images of the empty fairground flash on the screen and then the camera slowly pans to linger on a lone man watching the river, before just the river rushing flashes on the screen. Here, both the voiceover and the visual imagery are particularly poignant representations of the psychological self-portraiture of Varda's filmmaking. Firstly, the impulse to talk to the man is only half followed up, Varda's camera lingers on the man but she does not interview him. This can be viewed as Varda making explicit her implicit filmmaking process, her narration providing a look into the underlying logic of the film. From this then we can glean that Varda's film is a collection of individual interests, curiosities and whims, effortlessly documented with a DV camera and then either acted upon, followed through and explored or left lingering. In this sense, there is an imprint of Varda's cognition in the structure of *The Gleaners and I*; it is not a continuous narrative but rather a disparate jumble of juxtapositions that when re-constructed by the viewer yield a psychological self-portrait of Varda. Furthermore, this is represented in the visual imagery using the river. Varda's lingering on the river serves as a visual representation of her stream of conscious

construction of the film, while the ponderous stranger looking over it can be likened to the viewer ruminating on what is flowing before them.

Additionally, much of the reason Varda is able to construct her film in this way is because of the particular possibilities afforded by the handheld DV camera. In this, Varda's film also provides a poignant demonstration of the reasons Rascaroli outlines for video as an ideal medium for audiovisual self-portraiture. Varda's handheld camera affords her the immediacy to capture the subjects and events that capture her interest with little mediation, for example when a heart shaped potato captures her eye and she uses it as a starting point for a longer rumination on the potato and its connection to herself (Varda 9:40). Varda also uses the ease of the handheld DV camera to regularly feature herself and her body as an immediate subject in the film, such as when she films herself combing through her graying hair (Varda 05:12-05:25). Finally, Varda calls attention to the opportunity made available by the DV camera to instantly edit and apply effects to footage (Varda 04:20), and while the medium of mass communication is not explicitly referred to in the film, the handheld sheen of Varda's finished product demonstrates this final point. Thus, the form of *The Gleaners and I* provides a case study in the benefits of the medium of video in audiovisual self-portraiture, making Varda's work in *The Gleaners and I* a particularly effective example of self-portrait.

Again, despite this particularly compelling reading, I do not argue that Varda's film is ultimately primarily inward focused or concerned most with representing herself. This argument is articulated by the scholar Kevin Corbett in his article, "'Gleaners' and 'Waste': The Post Issue/Advocacy Documentary." Corbett says that while most of the content in the film is composed of differing types of gleaners and the social, political, economic and historic contexts surrounding them, that these subjects and issues are actually tangential to the main focus of the

film. Instead, Corbett writes, “Varda instead uses these segments more like linking devices for her own introspection. The “issue” or “social problem” dimension of the segments concerning the various gleaners within the film is touched on but sort of glossed over” (Corbett 132). In my view, Corbett’s conception of the dual subjects of the film (Varda herself and the larger public discussion on Gleaning) as locked in a zero-sum game for dominance as the main subject of the film is an overly simplistic analytical framework. Instead, I posit that the intellectual characterization of Varda’s film can be both that of an essay film as defined by Corrigan and a work of self-portraiture as described by Rascaroli. In this sense, the self is both a means to a broad engagement with and mediation on external society, while also emerging front and center as a primary focus itself.

In order to show this, a new critical framework needs to be applied to Varda’s work, one which does not assume struggle for dominance between representations of self and ruminations on external society. In her article, “Documenting the Gaze: Psychoanalysis and Judith Helfand’s *Blue Vinyl* and Agnès Varda’s *The Gleaners and I*,” Hilarly Neroni argues for a critical conception of Varda’s use of self in her film as a *didactic* tool. Neroni begins her article with an introduction to and elaboration of the psychoanalytical concept of the Lacanian gaze. She argues that the Lacanian gaze is an illuminating concept for what she terms autobiographical documentary films because it “appears at the conjunction of the subject and the object, the point at which the subject’s desire manifests itself in an objective form” (Neroni 179). That is to say, in her understanding, the Lacanian gaze is a useful analytical concept as it bridges the gap between the subject, i.e. the filmmaker, and the object, i.e. the external world that she is filming. In this, Neroni begins to lay the foundations of the conceptual bridge that can be used to bind

together Varda's self-portraiture, and her essayistic exploration of the larger social, political and economic systems which gleaners, the external object of her interest, operate.

Neroni goes further, elaborating specifically upon what she means by the Laconian gaze. She writes, "at times we encounter an object within the visual field that embodies or evokes our unconscious desire [...] the Lacanian gaze is a point in the visual field that we perceive as gazing back at us" (Neroni 180). That is to say, one's perception of the external world is not entirely one sided. Certain objects within the external world can catch the attention of one's unconscious internal psyche, causing these objects to be imbued with meanings far beyond what they are able to signify themselves and uniquely connected to the individual self of the gazer. This connection is one of interaction and exchange as the object now imbued with meaning is able to act upon the psyche of the individual who has given it this meaning. It is in this sense that the objects are "gazing back at us." Neroni continues, insisting that gaze, in this conception, must be divorced from the traditional notion of the camera's point of view. She writes, "the gaze here is more a structural point or nexus between the psyche and the external world" (Neroni 180). It is with this conclusion that she lays the scholarly framework necessary to bridge the gap between Varda's depiction of self and the external in her work, setting up the possibility of a relationship of exchange and interaction.

However, it is in her reading of Varda's film that Neroni really brings this conclusion to full fruition. She describes Varda's project in *The Gleaners and I* as such: "these objects that she searches for in the field of the visible represent to her all her own existential angst and ambivalent feelings about aging. At the same time, they fascinate her and motivate her artistic and philosophical desires. Equally, the leftover signifies society's ills[...]" (Neroni 181). Here Neroni argues for an understanding of Varda's film which operates on multiple scales: individual,

intellectual and societal. Though her process is driven by herself, flitting from object to object as they speak to something within her, for Neroni, Varda's work cannot just be judged purely on its depiction of the self. Rather, Varda uses her exploration of the personal to inform and provoke her thinking both artistically and philosophically, and to extend her exploration to a broader discussion about waste and leftovers on the level of social critique. What's more, the path to each of these differing scales is not a singular trajectory from individual to social. Instead, Varda's work on each of these scales informs the other (i.e. exploration of the individual informs the social vice versa). In this sense, the film is able to simultaneously contain three of these scales, acting on and reacting to each other in concert. Neroni sums this up when she concludes, "For Varda, the pursuit of the gaze also constantly gives way not just to an understanding of her own desire but also to a connection to the social. Indeed, often Varda's encounter with her own gaze leads to social activism" (Neroni 182-183).

A clear example of the efficacy of the conceptual framework Neroni outlines for understanding Varda's *The Gleaners and I* is provided by returning to the aforementioned scene where Varda uses her camera to explore an incident where homeless youths are charged with vandalism for damaging the trashcans of a supermarket because the contents are doused in bleach. Varda's exploration of this incident offers a particularly clear example of the interplay of the individual, intellectual and social. To begin, it is Varda's own personal interest that guides her to explore this incident. She notes that the events were brought to her attention by "our musician Joanna" who had learned about this through a chance encounter with the youngsters. Varda's introduction to the situation culminates in her exclamation, "I thought I could film them explaining the case" (Varda 50:19-50:37). Key here is Varda's use of the verb "thought," which, through its inherently psychological nature, draws immediate attention to the subjective. Instead

of portraying the filmed sequence to follow as an inevitable part of a larger organized narrative, Varda presents it as the result of her personal premonition, and, in this, reveals something of the interests and concerns of her internal self.

From the personal, Varda slips easily into the intellectual, moving beyond a portrait herself to artistic and philosophical concerns. Of the kids Varda says, “We filmed them with their dogs. It was picturesque. [...] Their beauty is poignant when you realize that, for whatever reason, they get most of their food from trashcans” (Varda 52:12-52:30). Here, through her initial personal curiosity, Varda finds something which she declares to be of aesthetic value. In this, her filming of the kids is elevated beyond her own interest into an art object. At the same time, in this aestheticizing, Varda creates a distance between her film and the larger social problems. When she insists that there is a more moving beauty in their eating mostly from trashcans, there is a clear disconnect between the value of these youths and their plight as art objects and as social commentary.

Yet, through a return back to the individual scale, Varda is able to bridge the gap between intellectual/aesthetic and the social, shifting her artistic rumination into a moving display of political criticism. As discussed earlier, after speaking to the youths, Varda notes that they have given her much to think about, demonstrating a return back to the individual scale which she then uses to guide her camera to other subjects hanging around trashcans (Varda 53:00-53:10). It is through this individual interest that she finds her next subject, a man who gleans all his food from trashcans despite having the means to afford to purchase it. When she questions his motivations he declares, “Salvaging is a matter of ethics for me, because I find it utterly unacceptable to see all the waste on the streets [...] Sea birds, [...] those who were smashed up real good by Total Fina Oil, those who will get smashed up real good by this over-consuming

society [...] it's for them that I'm an activist" (Varda 55:25-55:32). Interspersed with this man's emphatic ethical tirade, Varda shows extended footage of marine life being cleaned of oil slick. It is through the presentation of the intertwined speech and visual imagery that Varda suddenly catapults her work into the realm of social and political criticism. Her concern with this man is not a primarily aesthetic one; rather, her inclusion of his speech and augmentation of his ideas with her own curated visual imagery have an effect indicative of a political manifesto. This, I argue, punctuates a poignant example of how Varda's style flows effortlessly between individual, intellectual and social. No one is given primacy over the other, rather there is a constant interplay leading to a simultaneity of scope and scale throughout the film. In this sense, both the essayistic, artistic and autobiographical elements are all present at once.

Additionally, much like how Rascaroli identifies video as a key medium for audiovisual self-portraiture because of the particular benefits of immediacy and flexibility offered by new DV technology, I argue that Varda's ability to represent the self while also moving beyond the self to the intellection and social scales is afforded particularly by her embrace of new technology. This argument is bolstered by the work of Maryse Fauvel who, in her article "Nostalgia and Digital Technology: *The Gleaners and I* and *The Triplets of Belleville* As Reflective Genres," discusses how Varda's embrace of new technology, particularly the handheld DV camera, allows for a new type of filmmaking which is characterized by an unmediated immediacy between the filmmaker and the external world. Fauvel writes on Varda, "Her DV camera allows the development of an organic relationship between the film-maker and all steps of creation (filming and editing), allowing the rejuvenation of the art of making documentaries" (Fauvel 220). In this sense, Fauvel identifies Varda's camera as almost an extension of herself, an organic relationship afforded by the advancements in portability and easy

editing made possible by the handheld digital video camera. The result, according to Fauvel, is that the underlying processes of the making of the film become explicit, moving to the forefront as subjects in and of themselves. She writes, “It is the link between ‘shower’ and the ‘shown’ – i.e signifier (documentarist) and signified (the shown) – that is revealed” (Fauvel 220).

Fauvel goes on to critically examine this link between signifier and signified, or subject and object, in Varda’s film. She notes the new meaning that is possible because of the ease of filmmaking with the digital camera, particularly the ability to effortlessly include events and shots that were unplanned as they unfold naturally. Furthermore, Fauvel also points to the DV camera’s ability to serve as an “other” through which Varda can examine and represent a portrait of herself. This all culminates in Fauvel’s conclusion where she states, “This technology makes it even simpler to stress the film-maker’s subjectivity, to include her gaze, and even to act herself as a protagonist (contrary to so-called objective documentaries)” (Fauvel 221). Here I argue that Fauvel can be placed in conversation with Neroni, particularly her use of the Lacanian gaze as a conceptual tool. If the Lacanian gaze is the projection of the self onto the external in such a way where external objects take on meanings tied to the self, while also acting upon the self and pushing into a broader understanding of the external world, the DV camera is the medium in which the gaze is able to be captured and imparted to the viewer. If the camera can be seen almost as an extension of the filmmaker, it is because of this close relationship that the interaction of the Lacanian gaze is able to be captured and imparted to the viewer. That is to say, by making explicit the relationship between the subject and the object, the DV camera allows the viewer to experience the interaction and use it to construct a portrait of the filmmaker’s self while also using it to form a broader understanding of the external subject.

In many ways, it is the very end of Varda's film which cogently shows both the role of digital video technology in her filmmaking process, while also making explicit her film as both a work of self-portrait and an essay which considers the social context of her subject. She exclaims, "It's past 2 o'clock. I've done my shopping and I linger on until the market is over. I notice a man with a large bag eating on the spot. I would see him now and then, always with his bag, always eating. The day he was eating parsley I went over to him" (Varda 1:10:38-1:11:08). Here, going about her day to day activities, a man catches Varda's interest. It is because of the portability and immediacy of the digital video camera that she is able to immediately capture him as he elicits her interest, day after day until she decides to speak to him. This is a clear portrait of herself, imprinted upon an object who catches the attention of her internal psyche, able to be captured the moment she imbues it with meaning by her embrace of new technologies. It is when she talks to him, follows upon her impulse, that she is able to glean from the interaction a larger depiction of the political, social and economic systems of the external world that worked to produce this object. What starts as a conversation about parsley morphs into a multi-week expedition, unearthing that while he has a master's degree in biology, he sells papers and gleans through trash to get by. Already here, we see a turn towards a depiction, and in some senses even a critique, of the social.

However, Varda does not stop here; she explores further finally discovering that this man, who has nothing, extraordinarily volunteers in the shelter he lives in to teach migrants, who also have nothing to read and write. She says of this encounter, "Meeting that man is what impressed me the most. And the time it took to find out about his nocturnal and voluntary activity in a suburban basement" (Varda 1:16:08 -1:16:25). It is this encounter, in my view, that most fully realizes the purpose of Varda's project in *The Gleaners and I*. The process of the filmmaking is

front and center: it is as much about uncovering herself as it is about uncovering her subject and the external forces which he operates in. More than that, it is an encounter that is only possible because of her embrace of new technology and commitment to her particular method of filmmaking.

In the end, *The Gleaners and I* is certainly a film of self-reflection and self-depiction. In it, the viewer can re-construct a portrait of Varda given in psychological fragments, incomplete moments, and surprising tangents. Even so, though Varda says her project is to film one hand with the other, this is not the whole story. Though the hand may be the immediate subject, Varda's film expands beyond the self, without losing the self. With the aid of new media technologies, it uses the self to mediate on the social while also using the social to ruminate on the self. The result is an artistic work which makes explicit its creation as a work of art, drawing attention to the process of its generation. In doing so, it operates in the realm of both the self and the social, allowing the viewer to engage with both – in this sense it is neither fully an essay film nor entirely a work of audiovisual self-portraiture. Thus, though Varda films one hand with the other, what results is not confined to a depiction of the hand, but rather pushes beyond it to show the simultaneity of self and social.

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