2. The Incipit of BEACHES OF AGNÈS (Les plages d'Agnès)

An Installation in the Form of a Self-portrait

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Abstract

Agnès Varda's recent death at 90 was received by various newspaper or site titles: "Influential French New Wave Filmmaker" (*The New York Times*), "Beloved French New Wave Director" (*The Guardian*). Paying tribute to Agnès Varda by analyzing BEACHES OF AGNÈS, her 2006 autobiographical film, José Moure draws attention to the fact that it has the singular form of a *narrated puzzle* from which (the film itself intermingled with its "making of") a new kind of documentary emerges. (Dominique Chateau, in chapter 14, completes the tribute by considering Varda's forays into the world of contemporary art.) Through her most recent films, as well as her exhibitions, Agnès Varda can be considered a major figure in post-cinema.

Keywords: Varda, installation, self-portrait

In 2006, twenty years after having painted the filmed portrait of Jane Birkin in JANE B. BY AGNÈS V., and eight years after a few appearances in THE GLEANERS AND I, as she approached her 80th birthday, Agnès Varda decided to devote herself to an autobiographical project, BEACHES OF AGNÈS. This project would be placed under the prestigious double patronage of Montaigne for the autobiographical essay and Rembrandt for the self-portrait. "It's a strange idea," she admits,

to stage oneself and to film a self-portrait when you're almost 80 years old. This idea began to form in my mind one day, on the Noirmoutier Beach, when I realized that other beaches had stood out in my life. The beaches

became the pretext and the natural chapters of the film. I wanted to share with my family and a few other people some of the facts and projects from my life's journey. And even more: to turn the mirrors towards others, towards those who had shaped me, whom I had met, whom I had loved.¹

Beaches – already very present in the multimedia exhibition *L'ÎLE ET ELLE* (THE ISLAND AND HER), which she presented at the Cartier Foundation in 2006 – constitute the main theme of this singular film by a visual filmmaker, co-produced by Ciné-Tamaris and Arte France cinema.

Agnès Varda divides her work into five chapters which follow the order of the beaches that are linked to different periods in her life and places of memory and/or sources of inspiration for her creations (the Belgian beaches, the beach of Sète, the beaches of Los Angeles, a beach in Noirmoutier, and the imaginary beach represented by the rue Daguerre in Paris where she lives and works). She films herself in mid-invention, in the process of putting up installations on each of these beaches, using heterogeneous material (photos, paintings, extracts from her films, images of installations, reconstructions ...), following the thread of sinuous memory with all its gaps, proceeding by means of collages, digressions, associations of ideas, analogies, *mise en abyme* ... Agnès Varda stages herself, paints herself, tells her story in a narrated self-portrait in the form of a puzzle. Midway between sincerity and representation, as she plunges into the past, always from the present, she invents an original type of self-documentary where the film, a specular space for exhibitions and installations, is both the work itself (the self-portrait of Agnès Varda as a woman, filmmaker, and visual artist) and its “making of.”

The pre-credit sequence that opens *BEACHES OF AGNÈS* illustrates, in an emblematic and very original way, the creative process that underlies Agnès Varda's approach. This sequence, inserted as a prologue to the film and known as the mirrors sequence, ensures a programming function by means of its strategic position and singular status. It announces the rules of the game and the poetics of this attempt at self-representation that is film. Here, the filmmaker first presents her project with the help of young students from a film school in Louvain. She sets up a dozen mirrors of various sizes and styles on a windy North Sea beach. It is as if the significant events in her life that she is about to narrate are seen as several images reflected by mirrors scattered on a beach, as if, in this free play of fragmentation of shapes and reflections created by the mirror installation, something of the art of self-portraiture were at stake, somewhere between wind and tide, between sky and sand.

1 Varda's quotes come from *LES PLAGES D'AGNÈS* (2008).

The sequence lasts about three minutes. It consists of 25 shots framed by a shot of the logo of the production company, Ciné-Tamaris, which initiates the film, and the first shot of the credits, which interrupts the mirror installation sequence, firstly, by a written credit and, secondly, by “a few living, spoken credits to thank the team of young people who carried the mirrors.”

How Does One Talk about Oneself?

Between Autobiography and Self-portrait

After the production company's logo, Ciné-Tamaris, the film opens with two introductory shots in 16:9 format, which were shot when the film was finished. The filmmaker felt the need to add an introductory scene in which she presented her autobiographical project. “I wrote this monologue in a few days while on vacation in Noirmoutier,” explains Agnès Varda, “and I asked Melvil Poupaud, a family friend, to handle the camera. He did a hand shot in two takes, and got up to do a crane effect. These two shots were taken on one of the Noirmoutier beaches.”

Shot outside, in the evening, the foreground shows Agnès, accompanied by left-right camera movement, walking backwards on a deserted beach, and then heading toward the camera that lifts as she approaches. “I play the role of a plump and talkative little old lady, who tells her life story. Yet it is the others who really interest me; it's them I like to film. It is the others who intrigue me, motivate me, challenge me, disconcert me, fascinate me,” says Agnès, coming forward while facing the camera.

This first shot sets out the principles of the film to come: to inscribe the figure (Agnès) as a character in a logic of creating distance in the form of an assumed diegetic word (“I play the role of a plump and talkative little old lady”); to inscribe it in a maritime landscape (the beach) that structures the five chapters of the film; and, finally, to inscribe it in a double movement, both retro- and introspective. The retrospective movement is represented by the right-left travelling shot and the “character” walking backwards, thus getting ready to travel back in time, into her past and her memory; the introspective movement is represented by Agnès's advance toward the camera. She looks at the spectator and addresses him/her directly, testing a specular practice of the self which is both “objectifying” (the image) and “subjectivating” (the voice). The second shot, which shows Agnès in a medium shot in front of the camera, extends the announcement of the autobiographical and artistic project: “This time, to talk about me,

I thought: if people were opened up, we would find landscapes.” But the voice is no longer diegetic; it seems to have detached itself from the figure presenting herself to the eye of the lens in all her fragility, turning her back on the infinite surface of the sea, while the soundtrack, accompanied by the sound of the waves, already seems to evoke an immersion into memories.

Here, the affirmation of self-representation (talking about oneself) involves placing the figure of the artist at the center of the image: not in the posture of the filmmaker (she is filmed by another person), but in that of the character or model. The subject poses as the object, while the subject of the enunciation poses as the subject of the utterance. Inscriptions in landscapes (beaches as a connection between sea and land) and in temporalized spaces create tension between autobiography and self-portrait. It is a question of both telling and representing oneself, of affirming *in situ*: “this represents me, this is me.” If autobiography (talking about oneself, talking about one’s life) belongs to the literary genre of retrospective narrative and is located on the side of narrativity, however disjointed, the self-portrait (recomposing or decomposing one’s face), inherited from painting, moves the introspective project toward the performative moment of creation, toward a more fragmentary form. This hesitation between autobiography and self-portrait, between talking about parts of her life and showing representations of herself, runs through the entire film. The questions that Agnès Varda tries to answer, already in this prologue, include: “How does one talk about oneself?” and “How do you represent yourself in a visual proposal?”

Setting up the System

An initial answer to these questions is provided by the third shot, which introduces the sequence known as the installation of mirrors on the beach. The direction of this sequence was entrusted to Didier Rouget, Agnès Varda’s first assistant since JACQUOT DE NANTES (1991), who directed the filming on the beach of Knokke-le-Zoute in August 2006, following which, Varda understood that it would be difficult for her to delegate her directing choices, and took control.

The scene opens with a wide-angle shot in daylight, outside. On a deserted and windy North Sea beach, a small digital camera is placed on a tripod, the lens facing the sea. Agnès, in a red burgundy raincoat, at a slightly low angle, enters from the right of the frame and heads toward the camera, repeating the course she took in the two previous shots, but from behind, while continuing in an “off” voice the monologue she started on another

Shot 3 of BEACHES OF AGNÈS (Agnès Varda, 2006)

beach, at another time of the day, in another outfit, in the two previous shots: “If I were opened up, they would find beaches.”

The effect of the break between the first two shots and this third shot is marked not only by a change of place (the Belgian beach of Knokke-le-Zoute) and light (daylight, outside) as well as by the dissociation between sound and image (the “in” voice in the first shot is now “off”) but also by changing the image format from a 16:9 to a 4:3 ratio. This is the format that Agnès Varda adopts throughout the film to paint her filmic self-portrait.

Thus, the system is revealed and set up: a beach, a camera and a character, Agnès, designated as a filmmaker. The self-documentary and its “making of” can now begin.

The Installation of Mirrors or the Plastic Adventures of a Self-portrait

The continuation of the prologue (shots 4 to 25) proposes a strange ritual of placing mirrors on the beach. Using the principles of plastic installation to the benefit of cinematographic production, Varda, wrapped in a scarf that floats on the wind, imagines a sequence in which, with the help of young assistants, a collection of mirrors, the very instrument of the self-portrait,

are placed on the ground, mirror by mirror, reflecting not only herself but also the North Sea, the beach, the dunes, the sky, the bodies and faces of her assistants and the kite surfers who pass and disappear. This constellation of mirrors generates a myriad of reflections, glimmerings, split images, frames and *trompe l'oeil*; the filmmaker, herself, admits to not knowing what it means and associates it with “a reverie” or “something imaginary.”

Through this highly visual and poetic ballet of mirrors dancing around Agnès as though they were trying to capture and retain her elusive and fragmented image in a puzzle, an entire poetics of the self-portrait according to Varda is sketched and reflected here. In the course of a non-chronological, slightly trembling succession of hand shots, the spectator witnesses a vertiginous deployment of frames and unpredictable mirror games that question representation and identity, and give rise to a fragmented world, in perpetual re-composition.

A Matter of Frames: Between Cinema and Painting

Agnès precedes two assistants carrying a wooden frame and shows them where to put it. The camera, carried shoulder-high, follows their progress on the sand as well as their hesitations (shot 4). By means of a shutter effect, two people carrying a huge inverted mirror suddenly mask the action, merging the two shots (shot 5). By once again revealing the setting, the characters and the wooden frame have been conjured away, as if by magic. Instead, we see a mirror on an easel and, at the foot of the easel, a partially, reflected female assistant. A right-left lateral camera movement accompanies the march of those carrying the mirror, followed by Varda, who supervises the setting up of the mirror by means of words and gestures.

A reverse-angle shot (shot 6) shows the face of the mirror with Agnès's reflection facing us from the center, and her back to the sea and sky. The spectator is totally “despatialized” by this image-within-an-image which suddenly depicts the front (in shot) and back (reverse angle) in the same frame *en abyme*. Appearing for the first time as a reflection, as in a cinemascope screen, Varda is shown to advantage by her placement in the center of the image, which gives it its power: she is master of both space and frame.

In a wide-angle shot of the beach (shot 7), with an easel in close-up, in the right-hand part of the image, Agnès and a female assistant bring a mirror with golden molding and place it on the easel, the same one we already saw being set up in shot 5, thus showing the non-chronological nature of the sequence of shots during this sequence. At the same time, the mirror, associated with the easel, refers to the idea of the self-portrait in painting,

Shot 6 of BEACHES OF AGNÈS (Agnès Varda, 2006)

Shot 7 of BEACHES OF AGNÈS (Agnès Varda, 2006)

Shot 9 of *BEACHES OF AGNÈS* (Agnès Varda, 2006)

and to the pictorial reference in which Agnès Varda inscribes her approach of self-representation.

The moment the mirror is placed on the easel, Agnès, in a close-up shot (shot 8), motions her assistant off-camera and, with her head down, enters into a first, tense, face-to-face encounter with her own reflection.

The installation of the frame on the easel continues in a wide-angle shot (shot 9) reflected in a slender mirror planted in the sand; the bottom part of the frame emphasizes the line as a reflection of the horizon. A third assistant has come to assist the two women. The installation once again has a “despacialization” effect on the spectator. The oscillations of the mirror placed on the unstable easel generate changing reflections and suggest the fragility of the images produced by the space-fragmenting device. In this *mise en abyme*, the mirror with golden molding, a frame-within-a-frame, becomes an animated painting projecting a “pictorial” image of sky and clouds, devoid of characters, standing out flatly in another, more cinematographic reflection. The largest of these mirrors evokes a cinemascope screen in which space widens and which is not only animated by the three protagonists’ desynchronized gestures inherited from burlesque cinema but also by a red kitesurfing kite. Here, painting and cinema seem to overlap in a game of doubling frames and specular images that interpenetrate one another while interpenetrating and cohabiting within Agnès Varda’s aesthetic project.

Shot 10 of *BEACHES OF AGNÈS* (Agnès Varda, 2006)

A medium close-up shot (shot 10) shows Agnès Varda from behind while, with the help of two assistants, a small mirror with moldings is placed on a framework of crisscrossed wooden logs planted in the sand. By means of this small mirror placed on a makeshift easel, the reference to the self-portrait continues. Incidentally, because of its inclination, the mirror only fleetingly captures bits of unidentified bodies followed by a corner of gray sky, as though Agnès's face refuses to be captured in the reflection.

A Certain Idea of the Portrait: Veiling/Revealing

The following shot (shot 11) marks a return to the first wooden frame from the beginning (shot 4); this installation is, in a way, the common thread of the sequence. The assistants, who have reinforced the base by means of a wooden stake planted in the sand, remain doubtful as to the solidity of the setup. Agnès regains possession of the frame and uses all her authority – voice, intonation, gestures – to convince them: the north wind is their best support; “that’s the idea ... it’s holding up, isn’t it? When the north wind is like this, it shouldn’t fall.” Left alone in the image, she is pushed around by a gust of wind, which makes her scarf take flight, transforming her into a chimeric creature with imprecise contours and in perpetual recomposition.

Shot 12 of BEACHES OF AGNÈS (Agnès Varda, 2006)

A reverse-angle shot (shot 12) connected to the scarf flying in the wind, shows Agnès in a half-set shot in the foreground, with objects (ladder, bed structure) in a heap at her feet. In the background the assistants are busy carrying new mirrors. The film thus reveals what goes on behind the scenes and becomes its own making-of. The wind shakes Varda's scarf, masking and unmasking part of her face in turn. With her left hand, she adjusts the scarf to cover her face completely. Here we touch on the singular nature of the project: a documentary film that has another side to it, one that plays around with what is real and with its own staging, and assumes responsibility for both. In a joking tone, which is more than a declaration of intent, Agnès addresses the camera and the person filming her (Didier Rouget, her first assistant) and delivers her poetics of the portrait: "I think I do the thing with the scarf a little bit on purpose. But it's funny, isn't it? Because I have such high hopes that at some point it will do *that*, and that will be *all* that you'll have filmed. You see, that's my idea, my idea of the portrait; my idea of the portrait is to be in buggered mirrors and behind scarves."

In quick succession, the next two shots illustrate this idea of the portrait as a veil, as a mask. Firstly, Agnès's reflection is almost erased in a spotted mirror (shot 13) and then in a mirror lying on the sand, like a puddle of water, her face is partly covered by a scarf (shot 14). Here, as in the entire sequence, the mirror is closely linked to the theme of water, as they share the same

Shot 14 of *BEACHES OF AGNÈS* (Agnès Varda, 2006)

characteristics: both reflect and shimmer. However, unlike Narcissus, when he faced his own reflection, here it is the sand mirror which reflects the veiled face. There is no choosing between the oval portrait being sketched here and that of Edgar Allan Poe.

Thus, by masking the features of her face, the scarf reflects Varda's desire to retain gray areas in her portrait, to erect a barrier between the public woman and the private person. "Even if we show everything, we don't reveal much," Jane Birkin already commented in *JANE B. BY AGNÈS V.*, quoted in *BEACHES OF AGNÈS*. Placed at the opening of the film, this scarf-covered face announces future reconstructions of works characterized by veiled faces, to which Varda refers, evoking her relationship with Jacques Demy, in particular, Magritte's *The Lovers*.

Childhood Memories or the Mirror as Proustian Madeleine

While reflecting veiled, erased or fragmented faces, the mirrors, or at least their frame, help the filmmaker to bring out fragments of memories of her childhood in Belgium in the form of reminiscences.

Varda has her back to the sea, staring at the wooden frame whose installation opened the sequence. In order to catch her words, the camera makes a transitory movement toward her, a movement of introspection and retrospection that

Shot 17 of *BEACHES OF AGNÈS* (Agnès Varda, 2006)

opens the story of childhood: "It reminds me of the furniture that was in my parents' bedroom in Brussels" (shot 15). By means of a reverse-angle shot, the wooden frame reveals itself to be a memory-mirror in which a crouching Varda is reflected, as well as the cameraman filming her (shot 16). The cameraman becomes Minotaur, tracking Varda-Ariane in the tortuous labyrinth of her memory. For the filmmaker, the wooden molding becomes Proust's Madeleine: it brings to life the memory of the furniture that once adorned the parental room: "The bed was a little like that and Mom's wardrobe was like that ..."

The immersion into memory that becomes sonorous is achieved through the shot of a new frame (shot 17) erected on the sand. At its center is a reflection of the mirror with golden moldings placed on an easel, representing in a kind of animated painting a young man (an assistant) walking on the dune. The *mise en abyme* image combines three elements – sea, sky and earth – causing a new vertigo of perception in the viewer by means of a succession of frames-within-the-frame inside a false depth which, in the style of Magritte, seems to say, "This is not a painting." The soundtrack gives life and substance to the filmmaker's Proustian reminiscence with the sound of the squeaking wardrobe mixed with the sound of the waves: "but it's not the sound, that squeaking sound of the wardrobe that I liked so much."

A wide-angle shot (shot 18) reveals Agnès Varda to the camera, in the background, drowning in the middle of an installation of screen mirrors,

Shot 18 of *BEACHES OF AGNÈS* (Agnès Varda, 2006)

oriented differently and reflecting fragmented images. As in a kaleidoscope, three of them, in turn, reflect the refracted and fragmented image of two kite surfers pulling their sails on the beach that Varda is filming. The soundtrack, in *off*, evokes a ritual: Varda's father listening to records on the family record player: "At home, there was a crank record player. On Sundays, Dad listened to Tino Rossi and Rina Ketty."

With the emergence of childhood memories, the shots show an ever greater fragmentation, orchestrated by the installation, whose setup has been shown by the sequence up to this point. A high-angle close-up shot (shot 19) reveals a mirror on an easel capturing the bottom part of the reflectors, a mirror and a kite's canopy. Disparate and fragmented elements, a diagonally transformed skyline: everything contributes toward visual vertigo, while off-screen, Agnès's voice continues to list the musical memories of her childhood: "And during the week, Mom sometimes listened to Schubert's *Unfinished Symphony*."

Between a List of Memories and the Fragmentation of Self-images: The Unfinished Self-portrait

While a wide-angle shot (shot 20) shows the installation of an imposing, standing mirror on the sand by three assistants, the first notes of the allegro

Shot 20 of *BEACHES OF AGNÈS* (Agnès Varda, 2006)

Opening credits of *BEACHES OF AGNÈS* (Agnès Varda, 2006)

moderato of Schubert's *Unfinished Symphony* can be heard and, in *off*, provide a melancholy accompaniment to the scene: "As a child, I never heard classical music, except for that piece, whose title I liked." Facing the triptych-shaped mirror, Agnès unfolds the wings one by one, thus allowing a volley of images to cascade from this Pandora's box. The images multiply her face, which is caught up in a perpetual Cubist recomposition of reflections that reveal the incompleteness of every portrait (shots 21, 22, 23, 24, 25).

Here, fragmentation no longer has a playful dimension: in front of her image, Agnès seems to experience a feeling of strangeness and otherness. By intensifying the cinematographic effect of the scintillating mirror, the installation has led to fragmentation, which expresses Agnès's vertigo of identity and the artist's inability to connect the various aspects of her life in the form of a continuous and linear narrative, and to present her image as a composed and finished self-portrait.

Now the credits can begin to roll ...

Translated by Naòmi Morgan

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