



*Film as Autobiographical Essay;
Mirror, Reenactments and Voice in
The Beaches of Agnès (2008) by Agnès Varda*

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ABSTRACT

MASTER OF ARTS IN VISUAL CULTURE

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This thesis provides a formal analysis of Agnès Varda's documentary *The Beaches of Agnès* (2008), focusing on how the formal elements in the film such as voice-over, reenactments and the use of mirrors create a sense of self-awareness in the film.

Through Agnès Varda's extensive body of work it is possible to see the historical movement of the essay film, from its relation to the French Cinema from the 1950s through its growth and expansion to the digital world. Varda incorporates the traditional categories of fiction and nonfiction film, poem, cinema and photography through her different essay films, including *Jacquot de Nantes* (1991), *The Gleaners and I* (2000), and *The Beaches of Agnès* (2008).

The category of "essay film" has in recent years become one of the leading non-fiction hybrid forms. Essay films are characterized by a subjective and personal style. They cross the borders between fiction and nonfiction through self-reflexive techniques. In this context, *The Beaches of Agnès* has an important meaning, which is analyzed and contextualized with relevant theories on documentary and essay film.

The findings open up a general discussion of the essay film, and the meaning of self-awareness in cinema. It opens up a debate about the meaning of subjectivity and objectivity in documentary, and it contributes to a deeper analysis of Agnès Varda's artistic career and a further study of the essay film as film genre.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Introductory Outline of the research

Since the 1990s, essay films have become one of the most original and popular forms of documentary filmmaking. Essay films vary in style, structure, and theme. They have their origins in the tradition of filmmaker Chris Marker, a tradition that combines and re-creates the literary essay with the photo-essay, within the spatial and temporal dynamics of film. The essay film is characterized by its expressive subjectivity, which is usually seen in the voice or actual presence of the filmmaker, one of the most identifiable characteristics of the essay film.

Reflexivity is also one of the characteristic features of the essay film, together with personal content, which tends to challenge the borders between fiction and non-fiction cinema. Reflexive techniques have challenged the notion of objectivity that prevailed in the documentary formats from the 1980s and which originated from the observational documentary styles from the 1960s, and the idea of avoiding the filmmaker's participation during the film.

The use of self-reflexive techniques in films has always existed, however it has recently been noticed in a tendency towards the autobiographical / performative and self-reflective styles, in which the film indicates its own processes of production, and by introducing reflexive elements the filmmaker acts as an interpreter of reality rather than an objective recorder of the real world. As Jay Ruby explains, to be reflexive is not only to be self-conscious, but to be sufficiently self-conscious to know what aspects of the self is necessary to expose to the audience so that they are able to understand the final construct.¹

In an autobiographical work, the self is the center of the work and the author clearly has had to be self-conscious in the process of making the product. However the performative style emphasizes the filmmaker's expressiveness and his engagement

¹J Ruby, "The Image Mirrored: Reflexivity and the Documentary Film" in *New Challenges for Documentary*, Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 2005, p. 156.

with the subjects in the film, while mixing a broad range of footage materials, such as interviews, archives and staged material, while it also addresses the audience in a vivid way.²

There are also other formal elements like the authorial voice, the use of personal footage, reenactments, sounds, music and other components that have an important role in building self-awareness and subjectivity in essay films. As described by Timothy Corrigan,

“Essayistic subjectivity – in contradistinction to many definitions of the essay and essay film – refers then not simply to the emplacement or positioning of an individual consciousness before and in experience but to an active and assertive consciousness that tests, undoes, or re-creates itself through experience, including the experiences of memory, argument, active desire, and reflective thinking.”³

To differentiate the essay film from other film practices, it is essential to recognize its literary heritage. There are a series of different labels that describe the essay film in categories such as “meta documentaries”, “personal documentaries”, “subjective documentaries” or “reflexive documentaries”, however the essayistic according to Timothy Corrigan indicates an encounter between the self and the public domain; as he explains, “the literary heritage of the essay film illuminates, most importantly, a unique engagement between the verbal and the visual that has emerged from a long history of self articulation in a public sphere.”⁴

My research will focus on Agnès Varda latest documentary *The Beaches of Agnès* (*Les Plages d’Agnès*) from 2008. Agnès Varda is a French film director born in 1928 and one of the most influential and creative artists of the French New Wave. Her films, photographs, and art installations are focused on feminist issues, documentary and social commentary, and are characterized by an experimental and auteur style. Through her films is possible to see the historical movement of the essay film from its relation to the French Cinema from the 1950s through its growth and expansion to

²B Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, Indiana University Press, Indiana USA, 2001, p.152.

³T Corrigan, *The Essay Film: From Montaigne, After Marker*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2011, p. 31.

⁴ Corrigan, p.6.

the digital actual world. Varda incorporates the traditional categories of fiction and nonfiction film, poem, cinema and photography through her different essay films, such as *Jacquot de Nantes* (1991), *The Gleaners and I* (2000), and *The Beaches of Agnès* (2008).

This research consists of a formal analysis of *The Beaches of Agnès*, as an interesting example of an essay film in the form of a self-portrait. I analyze the film through its formal elements, such as the use of mirrors, re-enactments, and voice-over, amongst others, that contribute to its self-awareness and are useful for a further study of the meaning of the essay film. I look at some of Varda's previous works referenced in *The Beaches of Agnès* that contribute to a deeper analysis of the film.

The central methodological concepts are focused on the main elements mentioned above. I begin by finding, through specific scenes of the movie these elements, in the context of the essay film and with the help of relevant theories and studies in the field. I then open up a general discussion of the autobiographical essay and the meaning of self-awareness in the film, and analyze the relation between self-reflection and self-reflexivity throughout *The Beaches of Agnès*.

1.2. Background of the research topic

The reflexive tradition in cinema began with Dziga Vertov in the 1920s with his film *Man with Movie Camera* (1929), where Vertov created a reflexive cinematic language and described his role in the film as a “supervisor of the experiment.”⁵ Chris Marker's film *Letter from Siberia* (1957) and André Bazin's description of it as an “essay film” that same year; are also important historical indicators of the emergence of the essay film, from the literary and photographic tradition and the postwar culture in which it developed.⁶

The intention and possibility of expressing subjectivity through film had its origins in the films of French pioneers like Louis Delluc and Jean Epstein, directors influenced

⁵Corrigan, p.51.

⁶Corrigan, p.50.

by the poetic impressionism, and who wanted to express their internal self and personal dreams in their films.⁷ However it is in the late 1940s where emerges a clear idea of cinematic subjectivity in French film theory, which later developed in the New Wave auteur theory of the second half of the 1950s. It is in this context that the theory of an essayistic use of the camera appeared in the cinema.⁸

The first explicit contribution to the essay film is made by Hans Richter in an article published in 1940 called “Der Filmessay, Eine neue Form des Dokumentarfilms”, which was published in 1940 in *Nationalzeitung*, where he announced a new intellectual but also personal and emotional kind of cinema.⁹

Later Alexandre Astruc in his famous article “The Birth of the New Avant-Garde: The Caméra-Stylo” published in *L'Ecran Francais* on 1948, made an important contribution with his notion of the *caméra-stylo* or "camera-pen" and the idea that a director should use his camera like a writer uses his pen.¹⁰ He announced the birth of an authorial cinema that was able to develop in different discourses, including the essayistic one. Astruc wanted a new cinema that could express thoughts and feelings just as literature did. The need and desire for personal expression through film became possible with the arrival of lightweight portable cameras, which created a relationship between the reflexivity of the developing essay film, its exploration of subjectivity and the idea of cinema expressing ideas.¹¹ Yet, the most relevant contributions on the cinematic essay include the work of avant-garde French directors like Chris Marker, Alain Resnais, Agnès Varda and Jean Luc Godard.¹²

The first person essay documentary production developed together with *cinema vérité* films, and the first person and autobiographical cinema of the New Wave of the 1950s and 1960s with the emergence of the personal “cinema of authors”. The essay gave filmmakers a flexible and new way of writing with cinema, able to challenge different experiences and subjects of various kinds. It opened a space for

⁷ L Rascaroli, *The Personal Camera: Subjective Cinema and the Essay Film*, Wallflower press, London, 2009, p. 24.

⁸ Rascaroli, p. 24.

⁹ Rascaroli, p.24.

¹⁰ Rascaroli, p. 25.

¹¹Corrigan, p. 65.

¹²Rascaroli, p. 25-28.

filmmakers to express their personal vision about the world, as in the style initiated by Jean Luc Godard, Resnais and Chris Marker in France, and by Pier Paolo Pasolini in Italy.

According to Laura Rascaroli, it was until 1969, when Argentinian filmmakers Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, in their manifesto "Toward a Third Cinema", where they talked about the essay film as one of the fortunate film languages for the growth of a Third cinema, when the term "essay film" became truly accepted.¹³

During the 1970s and 1980s the need for objective facts became a requirement for journalism, and the documentary style was adopted for reportage, but since the 1990s there has been a lot more attention to the category of "essay film" as a leading non-fiction hybrid form, characterized by a subjective and personal style. It is in this context and historical background where Agnès Varda's film *The Beaches of Agnès* has greater significance and importance, which is interesting to analyze contextualizing the film and investigating it with documentary theory that is relevant to this topic.

1.3. Theoretical framework and current state of research

There are a number of different theorists who have made extensive studies on "essay film" and documentary film. Among the most prominent and which I use in my research are Bill Nichols who has made a wide body of research about the contemporary study of documentary film, the work of Stella Bruzzi, especially for the study of authorial voice and narration along with other elements that she analyzes in her book *New Documentary*.

Timothy Corrigan has also relevant work about the Essay Film in his book *The Essay Film: From Montaigne, After Marker*, where he gives an overview of the history of the essay film and its different essayistic modes, and which I use to analyze some of the formal elements of the essay film and its background, context and actual situation.

¹³Rascaroli, p. 28-29

I also use the works of Laura Rascaroli as she has been writing about subjective cinema and the Essay Film. In her book *The personal Camera* she explores the essay cinema and its forms, and talks about notions of spectatorship, authorship and subjectivity, which are important elements in these research. Among other references I look at the work of Jane Chapman, who has also relevant work regarding authorial voice, reflexivity and new documentary formats.

Agnes Varda work has been widely studied as an avant-garde filmmaker, photographer and artist. However there has never been made a deeper analysis of *The Beaches of Agnès* from 2008 in the context of the Essay Film.

Different theorists and critics have tried to define the field with different contributions. Some of the relevant theorists working on this are Philip Lopate who claims we must differentiate between reflective self-conscious style and the truly essayistic one; the earlier mentioned Timothy Corrigan, Michael Renov, Stella Bruzzi and Paul Arthur who attempts to define the essay form in a clearer way and talked deeper about the authorial voice and other formal elements.

It still remains a much clear investigation of the relationship between the essay film and other subgenres and to analyze more about the implications of inserting reflective elements in a filmic work, as well as the effect that subjectivity has in the spectator.

1.4. Chapter Summaries

In Chapter two, I discuss and analyze the use of voice in *The Beaches of Agnès*; how it is used, what kind of voice it is, and how does it act in creating a sense of reflection and self-awareness in the film. I use the theories of Stella Bruzzi and Bill Nichols, among other references like Laura Rascaroli and Timothy Corrigan.

In Chapter three I analyze through specific scenes from the movie the use of reenactments, how are they manifested, what do they represent and how do they built a sense of self-awareness in the film. I use the theories of Bill Nichols and Timothy Corrigan among others, to analyze the use of reenactments in the film.

In chapter four, I analyze the use of mirrors in the film, what do they symbolize and represent, how are they used and what role do they play increasing a sense of self-awareness in the film. I use the theories from Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener in their book *Film Theory: An Introduction Through the Senses* to give an overview of the uses of mirror and how they are represented and used in the film.

Finally, the concluding chapter opens up a discussion about the relevance of this research for the documentary field. I discuss my discoveries and stress the importance of the thesis research.

2. Voice-over narration in *The Beaches of Agnès*

When speaking about Agnès Varda's films, it is necessary to mention the question of authorship, particularly since her authorial presence is a distinctive characteristic of both her documentary and fiction films. Through her voice-over narration, her physical presence and her personal reflective style, she introduces herself in many of her films.

When we hear the term *voice*, the first thing that comes into our mind is likely to be the use of spoken words. However, Bill Nichols has a particular conception of the meaning of "voice in documentary":

"By voice I mean something narrower than style: that which conveys to us a sense of a text's social point of view, of how it is speaking to us and how it is organizing the materials it is presenting to us. In this sense, voice is not restricted to any code or feature, such as dialogue or spoken commentary. Voice is perhaps akin to that intangible, moirélike pattern formed by the unique interaction of all a film's codes, and it applies to all modes of documentary."¹⁴

For him, the "voice" of the documentary film does not refer to spoken words, voice-over narrations or dialogues. Nichols' "voice" refers to the whole perspective that the filmmaker is using when creating the film. The voice of the documentary speaks with all the resources available in the film, which has to do with the way that sounds and images are arranged and selected within the film. Therefore Nichols' argues that documentary voice is somehow similar to film style, since they both depend of cinematic techniques like the way the film is edited, how shots are framed and composed, the editing of sounds, the order of events, the footage used, the speech, the lighting, the music selected, the sound effects, the commentary and the documentary mode that was chosen to organize the film.¹⁵

¹⁴B Nichols, "The voice of documentary" in *New Challenges for Documentary*, ed. Alan Rosenthal. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998. p. 19.

¹⁵B Nichols, "The voice of documentary" in *New Challenges for Documentary*, ed. Alan Rosenthal. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998. p. 48-63.

Nichols proposed six different modes of documentary that represent diverse ways of using techniques of cinema to make documentary films, and to classify the different ways in which we present the voice of the documentary in cinematic terms. The six modes he proposed are the expository, the poetic, the observational, the participatory, the reflexive and the performative. According to Nichols most of the films integrate more than one of these modes and each mode varies in the way that the filmmaker uses it and the historical period when it was used, as they can also coincide and be mixed in different ways.¹⁶

In addition, Nichols explained that documentaries are a representation of the world and not a reproduction of reality, which gives them a voice of their own. So, the voice of the film makes us aware that someone is proposing his or her own perspective about something. In this sense, everything we hear and see is part of the world that the filmmaker wants to talk about and represent. It is the point of view of the film director, which shapes the representation of reality.

The voice of documentary for Nichols also refers to the strategies chosen to present situations and arguments in a specific way. These may include the choice between different sounds, recording natural sounds or the construction of a soundtrack, the structure that has been followed for the film, and how that has been used to plan and organize the film.¹⁷

Nichols takes into account not only the compositional elements, but also the feelings transmitted in the film. He refers to the voice of documentary as something intangible, which creates a more personal and reflexive approach to its meaning and also reaffirms the documentary's subjectivity. He explains, "The voice of documentary can make claims, propose perspectives and evoke feelings. Documentaries seek to persuade or convince us by the strength of their point of view and the power of their voice. The voice of documentary is each film's specific way of expressing its way of seeing the world."¹⁸ Nichols shows how the voice of the documentary can propose different ways of seeing things and evoke different feelings in the audience. Therefore gives a more intimate meaning to the voice of the documentary and takes into account its power to establish different points of view.

¹⁶B Nichols, *Introduction to documentary*, Indiana University Press, Indiana USA, 2001, p. 143.

¹⁷Nichols, *Introduction to documentary*, p. 67-93.

¹⁸Nichols, *Introduction to documentary*, p. 68.

In contrast to Nichols perspective, Stella Bruzzi elaborates a critique of Nichols' division of documentary modes. She believes that all modes of documentaries have always existed in different times and have always mixed different styles. According to her, the way in which these modes have been theorized becomes negative, since it ignores differences between documentaries while imposing a false and rigid chronology of the documentary history.¹⁹ In fact, Nichols himself now admits this, by commenting that the modes overlap and interact with each other.²⁰

Throughout her analysis Bruzzi questions and challenges the way in which voice-overs have been simplified in the most basic and conventional model known as the "Voice of God". This kind of voice manifests as a masculine authoritative and 'anonymous' narration that tells a series of historical events to an audience. By discussing on how we have been taught to believe in the image of "reality" and how we have learned to interpret the voice of the narrative, Bruzzi emphasizes the various ways in which distance between image and sound, archetypal male narrators and different types of narration have modified the use of classic voice-over in time. According to her, there needs to be a different relationship between sound and image.²¹

Bruzzi believes that is more important to develop a different relationship between newer documentary forms, and move away from the documentary endless search for the truth, as she thinks that it is impossible to ever present reality objectively.²² Bruzzi's approach is interesting since she moves away from the traditional documentary arguments of reality representation, to create a more open recognition of 'hybrid' forms that communicate meanings about the world. She also argues for a better recognition of the growth of the women's voice in documentary during the past ten years.²³

Apart from Nichols' and Bruzzi's idea of documentary voice, there are other authors who give different approaches to the filmic narration and the meaning of voice in

¹⁹S Bruzzi, *New Documentary; A Critical Introduction*, Routledge, London, 2005, p 47-72.

²⁰B Nichols, "The voice of documentary" in *New Challenges for Documentary*, ed. Alan Rosenthal. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998. p. 48-63.

²¹Bruzzi, p. 64.

²²Bruzzi, p. 47-72.

²³Bruzzi, p. 48.

documentary. Timothy Corrigan and Patricia White explain that “voiceover” refers to the voice that originates from a narrator that could be present in the scene but who is not visible on screen, and which can act as the organizing source behind the film's images, such as in a documentary film, a commercial, an experimental video or an essay film.²⁴ In both fiction films and documentaries the narrator can be represented in different ways. “Narration” can refer to the camera and soundtrack as well as the overt narration of a voice-over.

The use of voice-over consists of an extra-diegetic soundtrack that is inserted to the film, and it gives information and evidence to the spectator that is not directly available in the internal world of the film. In a fiction film the voice is usually that of a character in the narrative, while in a documentary film the voice is usually that of a disembodied narrator, or sometimes an embodied narrator as the case may be. The disembodied narrator has also become a convention in fiction films in different forms like the mockumentary style, which uses parody pretending it is actual footage, but which in fact are staged or acted to create the appearance of an honest documentary, as well as leaving the doubt that they are not true.²⁵

On the other hand, it is interesting to note that since the 1970s there has been a marked tendency to shift the focus from an authoritative voice towards more personal voices and individual perspectives in documentary film. Self-reflexive documentaries of more recent times have challenged the difficulties of the observational direct styles by involving the filmmaker in the film and using different techniques like voice-over narrations and personal footage to express a point of view. In the particular case of *The Beaches of Agnès*, one of the first things to notice is that it uses a female voice. Agnes Varda emphasized in earlier years the feminist voice in several of her films, like in her short film *Réponse de femmes* (1975) where she opened up ideas about the feminist movement and women's feelings about their bodies and thoughts.

²⁴T, Corrigan & P, White, Chapter 5 “sound”, *The film experience; an introduction*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2nd edition, 2009, p. 184-220.

²⁵Nichols, *Introduction to documentary*, p. 17.

Additionally, *The Beaches of Agnès* uses a poetic voice-over narration to speak about what the sea means to Varda and the role of ‘beaches’ in her life.²⁶ From the beaches of Belgium where she was born; Sète, in the south of France, where she lived as an adolescent during World War II and Noirmoutier island, where she and her ex husband Jacques demy lived together.

The film’s opening scene begins with a shot of the beach and loud classical music in the background. Varda is shown walking backwards while saying: “I’m playing the role of a little old lady, pleasantly plump and talkative, telling her life story. And yet, it’s others who intrigue me, motivate me, ask me questions, disconcert me, fascinate me; others I like to film” She continues while looking at the camera and says: “This time to talk about myself I thought; if we opened people up, we’d find landscapes, If we opened me up, we’d find beaches.” Walking in the sand and looking through her camera, Varda is followed by a group of different people from her crew, setting up mirrors of various shapes and sizes on the beach, like making an installation (see figure 1). She is telling them to place them facing to the sea, reflecting the water and herself. While moving the mirrors around, she remembers moments of her childhood and reconstructs them through her narration, reenactments and the use of sounds and music. As she mentions that one of the mirrors reminds her of her mother’s room in Brussels and that she liked the sound that the door made, a matching sound comes in the background as a reconstruction of her memory. She remembers the music she listened to and talks about her feelings reviving different moments of her youth.

²⁶When discussing poetic aspects of documentary, and what Nichols terms the “poetic mode”, it is interesting to mention that the poetic experimentation in cinema resulted from the avant-gardes from the twentieth century in which Varda was a key figure, and the poetic style played a fundamental role in the emergence of a documentary voice. It was within this context that the purpose of a strong point of view took form and the filmmaker’s way of seeing things became more important.



Figure 1: Varda creating mirror installation.

Varda then arranges the mirrors, and through the camera tripods, which are placed as a frame, we see the view to the sea, and people walking on the sand with music on the background while the credits come out. Later a shot of one of the hanging mirrors, with the sea reflected on the back and the title of the movie. The director appears again framed by the tripods and looking at the camera, and while reflecting people with a small mirror she says, "I'm adding some living spoken credits to thank the young people who carried the mirrors." The mirrors move and the background music comes in again with Agnès sitting on a chair and saying "The north sea and its sand is the start for me.... of what I more less know of myself." Varda talks about her life, where she was born and what her original name was, while writing her name in the sand. She says "I was conceived in the city of Arles, so they called me Arlette", later she tells she changed her name to Agnès when she was eighteen years old.

Later on, different frames with photos of her childhood are placed on the sand, and an external narrator interviews her and asks her things about her childhood, as if she is nostalgic about it or if it is an inspiration in her life. Varda shown framed by one of the photo frames, while responding to questions and telling her life story. She appears lying on the sand talking about her childhood while holding her pictures. She talks about her brothers, her family, as she narrates how it felt to be the middle sister. While looking at a photo of herself with her brothers and sisters when they were kids and playing at the sea, she says; "I'd love to see a little girl In this stripped bathing

suit”, while her granddaughters are filmed reacting that moment and Agnès interacting with them. She questions the idea about reviving a moment like that and what it means to her.

Her commentary is constituted by the voice-over narration heightened and reinforced by different compositional elements and music along the film. By speaking about her childhood stories, feelings and doing reconstructions of her life, she creates a personal and intimate narration. This relates to what Stella Bruzzi calls "voice quality" which refers to the female voice as a more personal and deep, and less definitive or authoritative voice.²⁷

The relationship between the images and Varda's comment is also rather complex. On the one hand due to its personal auteur voice, but on the other hand there is a strong interconnection between film and memory. Varda uses her memory as a tool for evidencing her story. She relies on her own thoughts and recollections during her life, as well as on her personal photos, older films, family interviews, and childhood experiences. She walks backwards along the beach while she speaks, like a metaphor for the exploration she does into her memories and the past. She says: “These Belgian beaches were all I knew, all my childhood vacations” and continues, “Imagining myself as a child is like running backwards”. The use of memory holds a crucial importance for the meaning of the voice-over in the film. As Agnès imaginatively remembers what she lived and how she felt, she creates the components of the speech along the film. As viewers as well, while the film unfolds we identify and realize Agnès life and artistic carrier by understanding her memories.

To complement these ideas is interesting to refer to Laura Rascaroli who talks about the voiceover in the essay film. She agrees with Bruzzi's argument about the counterproductive side of reducing the voiceover to the authoritative voice of God, and she proposes instead to pay attention to the aesthetic values of the voiceover commentary.²⁸ Rascaroli highlights the issues related to the construction of authorship and authority and the practical aspects of voiceover in the essay film. Therefore giving importance to the relation between sound and image, and the

²⁷Bruzzi, p. 65.

²⁸L Rascaroli, *The Personal Camera: Subjective Cinema and the Essay Film*, Wallflower press, London, 2009, p. 44-63.

authorial subjectivity between narrator and the audience. Voice-over according to her not only transmits information but also offers a better quality of sound. Rascaroli stresses the importance of considering what the voice says and how it says it, and argues that the expression of meaning and subjectivity in the cinema are not the only subjects of the voice-over.²⁹

Rascaroli explains that in essay films, the expression of a personal reflection of a situation arising from the author's own voice and not anonymously, approaches the audience not with the goal to present a series of events in chronological order as it is in reportage or classical documentary styles, but to provide and build a deep and much personal reflection.³⁰ In the literary essay the author's voice is obvious, but in the essay film the author's subjective voice can manifest at different levels and through different techniques like montage, camera movement and shift throughout different moments and sounds within the film. She explains that the voiceover is a key element for understanding the subjectivity in essay films because it is a part of the narrative's subject, which is his/her own point of view.³¹

In *The Beaches of Agnès* the voice manifests itself through different techniques like the camera movements, re-enactments, the external voices of Varda's friends, her personal footage, the music, and other aesthetical elements to create a personal reflection along the narration. The voice-over in *The Beaches of Agnès* becomes a key element to understand its auteur and subjective quality, and due to its form of expression as a self-portrait, it creates an opportunity for self-reflection and self-expression within the film.

Furthermore, Rascaroli explains that a common role performed by the voiceover in the essay film is to interpret the visuals and analyze them from a critical distance. She talks about describing the voiceover as metacritical, as she says "In the metacritic activity of the essayistic, indeed, the outer world is not the only object of analysis and appraisal; this activity self-reflexively extends to the act of production of filmic meaning".³² Rascaroli tries to explain that the meaning of a documentary is

²⁹Rascaroli, p. 49.

³⁰Rascaroli, p. 44-63.

³¹Rascaroli, p. 49.

³²Rascaroli p.52

not solely produced by the commentary, but by the interaction and relation between voice and visuals and its aesthetic characteristics.

The authorial voice in *The Beaches of Agnès* is strong and noticeable. It invites the spectator to participate with the film through the dialogue, which is created through Varda's personal footage and images together with her narration. The personal and emotional way in which Varda tells her story creates a more intimate encounter between her narrative and the audience. In that sense, the voice of a documentary serves as evidence of both a perspective and an encounter. For example in one of the scenes Varda talks about her appreciation to a family who adopted her when she was young and she talks about her dreams of being in a circus, as she states;

“This whole mise-en-scene is simply my way of expressing gratitude to the Pontus family who adopted me,” she continues “As a teenager I daydreamed. I imagined joining a circus. Reality meant little to me. I knew absolutely nothing about life. I didn't ask questions.”

As Varda narrates her life, the reflexive and personal tone of the content of the narration forces us to believe in what she is saying. By speaking directly to the camera, her personal voice establishes credibility in the film, as she uses her personal experience, which cannot be really questioned or doubted. As a personal portrait, it emphasizes Agnès Varda's style as an auteur, reflecting her personal creative vision and voice.

Among other studies that have been made on the essay film, Paul Arthur argues that, “Since film operates simultaneously on multiple discursive levels--image, speech, titles, music-- the literary essay's single, determining voice is dispersed into cinema's multi-channel stew. The manifestation or location of a film authors “voice” can shift from moment to moment or surface expressively via montage, camera movement and so on.”³³ Therefore, the essay film is understood as the expression of an authorial voice that inserts a dialogue, and the dialogue between the spectator and the film, is created through both visual and verbal language. Arthur explains that the filmmaker's authorial presence is a quality shared by all essay films. This is achieved

³³P Arthur, “Essay Questions”, *Film Comment* 39:1, 2003, p. 59

through the onscreen presence of the filmmaker, voice-over, and his or her personal point of view and style applied during the film.

In addition he says that the personal commentary is generally constituted by the voice-over narration and improved by music and other compositional elements. He mentions the work of various women, including Agnes Varda, who adopted the essay as a creative effort. He explains, “The conjunction of language and image, fundamental to film grammar, is a key ingredient of the essay film. In some sense all great essays are about complex relationships between words and pictures, the mechanisms by which speed can annotate, undermine, or otherwise change the signification of what we see – and vice versa.”³⁴ The way that *The Beaches of Agnès* uses the language together with the images it’s a key element in the emotional and personal quality of the film. For example, when Varda talks about her childhood, we can see images of her when she was a child or reenactments of the situation she is telling us, which creates a strong connection between the narration and the visuals.

In the last part of *The Beaches of Agnès*, Varda incorporates in the film, an installation she created for the Cartier Foundation, called “L’Ile et Elle” (The Island and She)³⁵, which consisted of a series of video installations that referred to Noirmoutier Island in France. At the same time, Varda expresses the loss of her ex husband Jacques Demy, while we see pictures of him, reflected on a video projection. In addition, towards the end of the film, Varda sits inside of a cabin she made out of old film strips from her film *The Creatures* (1965), and says directly to the camera, “What is cinema? When I am here it feels like I live in cinema, that cinema is my home. I think I have always lived in it.”³⁶ The voice and the visuals create the complexity of the scenes.

In the next chapter, I will analyze the use of the reenactments in *The Beaches of Agnès*, as part of the self-reflexive elements Varda uses to tell her life and narrate her story. By analyzing the reenactments and other important reflexive elements from the film, I will exemplify and discuss more of the essay film characteristics.

³⁴Arthur, p. 60

³⁵A Varda, “L’Ile et Elle” (The Island and She), Cartier Foundation, Paris, 2006.

³⁶The celluloid cabin she constructed of strips of old film, is a reference to her film *The Creatures* (1965).

3. Reenactments in *The Beaches of Agnès*

Reenactments are a common technique for representing past events in cinema. They have been used in film for a long time, but their use has been expanded in recent years, especially by experimental filmmakers. Reenactments remain within the narrative structure, for example in films where the filmmaker uses his or her own biography as the key source of inspiration. In *The Beaches of Agnès*, Varda uses her own experiences and feelings, while she restages some important moments of her life. Reenactments do not have to be realistic recreations as in feature films, but can recreate past events in different creative and stylized forms.³⁷

Reenactments have also been a way for documentary filmmakers to challenge the cinema verité style of previous years. Errol Morris is one of the most prominent directors among others, who have challenged the verité style, and with his film *The Thin Blue Line* (USA, 1988) he was considered the filmmaker who revived interest in the reenactment.³⁸ Jonathan Kahana explains that in different parts of the world, filmmakers have used reenactments as a way to revive traumatic histories through interviews and restaging methods.³⁹ One prominent example of this is Werner Herzog's film *Little Dieter Needs to Fly* (US, 1997), which represents and restages the experience of an American pilot veteran of the Vietnam War.

Other directors of academic and art circles during the 1990s were using reenactment in a completely different way, recreating previous works of documentary and avant-garde artists. An example is the new version that Jill Godmilow made of Harun Farocki's *The Inextinguishable Fire* (1969), into *What Farocki Taught* (US, 1998), which received much attention and recognition for redoing and valuing the work of filmmakers' from earlier periods.⁴⁰

Today there is still a debate going on about the uses of reenactments in documentary. Though it is rather limited I will mention some of the different views in relation to this discussion. One of the few contemporary historians of documentary who has

³⁷J Kahana, "What now? Presenting Reenactment," *Framework* (online, (Spring and Fall 2009) 50.1-2, (non-paginated)

³⁸Kahana, (non-paginated)

³⁹Kahana, (non-paginated)

⁴⁰Kahana (non-paginated)

paid attention to the concept of reenactment is Brian Winston, who proposed a definition of documentary based on reenactment. Winston speaks about reenactment in semiotic terms, as a language out of which different stories, intended to be true, are shaped and contrasted with one another.⁴¹ He analyses the use of reenactment in the 1930s and 1940s by filmmakers like Joris Ivens and Humphrey Jennings, and talks about reenactments from two perspectives. On the one hand he talks about documentaries in which there is almost no intervention by the filmmaker, and on the other hand he talks about documentaries where the situations were completely designed and fabricated by the filmmakers. Between these two extremes, the degree of intervention by the film director varies considerably. Going from simply ask someone permission to film his/her life, to ask someone to act and dramatize an event that may have never happened, or which the person does not have any personal relationship with.⁴²

Due to the critical interest in the concept of reenactment and based on the arguments of Winston, Bill Nichols has been writing about the importance of reenactments in documentary. Throughout his publications, he argues that filmed reenactments can be found at different periods of history and have always existed in film, even since the first feature-length documentary, *Nanook of the North* (1922).⁴³ Nichols discusses how reenactments play a fundamental role in documentaries and argues that reenactments have particular ‘fantasmatic’ and reflexive qualities. He proposes a classification of the kinds of reenactment in terms of their degree of self-reflexivity. This range of types goes from less reflexive forms like docudramas, historical dramas and crime television, to more stylized and self-conscious forms that are expected to be found in experimental films, essay films and video practices.⁴⁴

On the basis of anthropology and emphasizing Freudian psychoanalysis, Nichols talks about reenactment as something hidden in the history of documentary: a “fantasmatic subject.”⁴⁵ He believes that all aspects of representation in documentary have fantasmatic elements, and it is the characteristic feature of these elements that

⁴¹Kahana (non- paginated)

⁴²Kahana (non- paginated)

⁴³T, Corrigan, *The Essay Film: From Montaigne, After Marker*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2011, p.196.

⁴⁴B Nichols , *Introduction to Documentary*, Indiana University Press, Indiana USA, 2001, p.196-198

⁴⁵Nichols, “Documentary Reenactment and the Fantasmatic Subject,” p. 73.

matters to him. His argument is based on the idea that reenactments “retrieve a lost object in its original form even as the very act of retrieval generates a new object and a new pleasure.”⁴⁶ This means that when faced with the reality in this way, the viewer experiences a sense of repetition of the original event, which is what Nichols referred to as a power that pursues the text. He argues that the representations involve a pleasure related to the recognition of a past event, while also showing that they are not a representation of a new one, but rather a strange combination of both, past and new experience. What he calls the “fantasmatic” are the new elements created and that resulted from the new representation, and that did not exist in an initial representation of the event.⁴⁷

Since one of the main features of a documentary film is the authentic material of the person or actual event, the use of representations often trigger the idea of deception and falsehood. Nichols explains that when the difference between reenactment and enactment goes unnoticed or unrecognized, it initiates a question of falseness and deceit.⁴⁸ In fact, it would be impossible to recreate an event in its original form, without creating a new event with new implications. The viewer always perceives a different experience.

Ivone Margulies takes a different perspective in her analysis of reenactments, which concerns the public life of the essay film. She recognizes the capacity of reenactments to be a public experience, which engages in a tradition of “exemplarity”, where reenactments build ethical stages needing an evaluative judgment. Through the repetition of events, the reenactment creates another body, place and time.⁴⁹ Timothy Corrigan builds on Nichols and Margulies arguments to describe his own perspective. He argues that a reenactment involves an aesthetic lived experience, and creates both a subjective and fantasmatic reformation of the aesthetic. Therefore, the viewer experiences instability between the subjectivity (as lived experience) and the need for social ethics (such as the need to rediscover a value).⁵⁰ According to Corrigan, reenactments in essay films not only describe or

⁴⁶ Corrigan p. 196.

⁴⁷ Nichols, p.73-77.

⁴⁸ Nichols, p. 73.

⁴⁹ Corrigan, p.197.

⁵⁰ Corrigan, p.197.

document aesthetic or filmic practices, but also engage within an essayistic ground, which creates the activity of thinking as a cinematic process.⁵¹

There is a variable range of views on the effects and meanings of reenactment, practiced in a wide range of moving images and forms of representation, it is interesting therefore to explain and define the term itself, as it is multilayered and more complex than what one might think. In the Oxford English Dictionary, the word enactment is a concept in which dramatizing and staging are already significant elements, even before adding the prefix “re”. The dictionary entry explains:

"To enact is to effect a permanent change in a social or institutional body."⁵²

Kahana notes that this definition is from the fifteenth century and it implies a decision or establishment of something. However he notes that some later definitions from the early modern period put more emphasis to the relationship and effect upon an audience. For example “To work in or upon; to activate, influence. Also, to implant, inspire (a feeling, etc.) into a person.’ And ‘To represent (a dramatic work, a ‘scene’) on or as on the stage; to personate (a character) dramatically, play (a part). To perform (a ceremony).”⁵³ However, the Oxford English dictionary definition of reenactment is fairly short, as it only says: “1. To enact (a law, etc.) again.”, “2. To act or perform again; to reproduce.”⁵⁴

In addition, reenactments are used in documentary to represent not only historical events, but also people that already died and experiences from the past that is no longer available to the camera. Therefore, the images and footage used plays a very important role in describing the people and moments represented. In *The Beaches of Agnès*, Varda uses different footage like old photos, sounds, interviews, objects and videos, to revive and recreate different moments and different people that have had an important role in her life. The trace of her late husband, Jacques Demy, her parents, friends and the different dreams and experiences of her life, remain in the footage she uses. The people and situations are reconstructed through the available resources Varda shows in the film.

⁵¹Corrigan, p.181-197.

⁵²Kahana (non paginated)

⁵³Kahana (non paginated)

⁵⁴ Kahana (non paginated)

Reenactments in film are raised in a new way by the most recent forms of documentary, docu-drama and metafiction, where the real and the imaginary are treated in the same ontological level. Therefore, *The Beaches of Agnès* with its personal content and auteur style dramatizes both, memories that Varda has of things that have happened in her life, which could potentially be documented with photos, videos and interviews, and the memories of her feelings. In contrast to more traditional documentaries, *The Beaches of Agnès* does not value the real over the imagined. I will describe the different reenactments that occur throughout the film, which interact with the arguments discussed above.

The film's first reenactment begins when Varda appears lying on the sand talking about her childhood and holding some pictures. She talks about her brothers and her family, as she narrates how it felt to be the middle sister while she says, "I felt independent in the middle." She adds, "I don't feel a strong link to my childhood. It's not a reference in my thought processes, it's not an inspiration". Then while looking at a photo of herself with her brothers and sisters when they were kids and playing at the sea, she says, "I'd love to see a little girl in this striped bathing suit and another in the one with the big straps". In that moment, her granddaughters are filmed reacting, in the beach, wearing swimsuits exactly as the ones in the photos, and playing as Varda remembers and as it looked in the photos. She appears in the scene, interacting with them while she questions the idea about reviving a moment like that and what it means to her. She says, "I don't know what it means to recreate a scene like this. Do we relive the moment? For me it's cinema, it's a game." In this case we are able to see a moment from Varda's life restaged, and Varda herself questioning her feelings and thoughts inside of the scene, which creates a personal reflection and awareness in the process of understanding the movie.

In the next scene, Varda says, "Imagining oneself as a child is like running backwards. Imagining oneself ancient is funny, like a dirty joke". At that time, the camera shows an old lady whom is supposedly Varda, walking on the beach between a passage of stones. Later, Varda appears walking the same passage, which is a reference to what she explained. This reenactment is different to the last one, as it relates to something that Varda imagined with a metaphorical approach, and not a past event. In reference to Nichols types of reenactments mentioned earlier we could

say it's a stylized reenactment, but it also helps create a bond between the narrative and the viewer. It is not the representation of a past event, but the representation of an imagined thought.

Later on, she talks about her childhood in school, she says "In school two things were mandatory: vichy pinafores, and singing for old Marshal Pétain", In that moment the camera shows a group of girls, wearing school uniforms and singing the song Varda used to sing. The narration is complemented with images from her childhood and music. Later she continues, "Another game, near the boats: fishing for gobies." The camera shows two girls fishing, just as Varda describes it, which makes the viewer revive what she is narrating. Then she appears sitting in the same place, and says, " I remember this quay well. It was our playground", while the young girls are filmed once again, representing Varda's memory. She describes how she came back from school with her brothers. The camera shows a woman representing Varda's mom, and some kids reacting as if they were Varda and her brothers coming back from school.

She combines the reenactment with photos from her childhood, which strengthens the connection between what she is saying and what we are looking at. During this long reenactment, while Varda narrates all this memories, the kids are playing in the boat as she describes it. She explains how she felt, "But we as kids had fun during the war, we had such fun on the boat", while we see a group of kids having fun on a boat. The narration is intercalated with photos of the real moments, the kids reacting those moments and small fragments of some of her earlier films. She makes a deep emotional description of the things she liked and how she felt, which gives a clear and personal idea of her intentions. As Nichols explains,

"Reenactments vivify the sense of the lived experience, the *vecú*, of others. They take past time and make it present. They take present time and fold it over onto what has already come to pass."⁵⁵

In this reenactment, Varda revives the moments of her childhood, which are seen through the combination of her embodied perspective and the emotional involvement

⁵⁵Nichols, "Documentary Reenactment and the Fantasmatic Subject", p. 88.

from the viewer. Therefore, the past and present coexist, in what Nichols calls “the fantasmatic”.⁵⁶

In addition, in another scene Varda remembers when she was young and used to read on the banks of the Seine River. The camera shows a woman representing Varda in her earlier years sitting right next to the river reading her books. In this reenactment is interesting to notice that while Varda describes the scene, she crosses in the river on a boat looking at the woman representing herself when she was young, like observing her own memories and life backwards. She refers to one of her movies *Nausicaa* (1970) as we see some fragments of the film where she represented parts of her life and the moment she is describing.

In this reenactment it would be interesting to refer to Corrigan's argument, that reenactments create both a subjective and fantasmatic reformation of the aesthetic. As viewers we see Varda taking part of the reenactment, as part of a past event of her own life, while she is narrating her story. She is an observer of her own memory, which creates a subjective visual experience for the viewer, but also a different engagement with her experience. It shows Varda making a self-reflection, and engages the viewer with the lived experience in a deeper way.

Later on happens when Varda talks about a difficult period of her life where she felt as if she was in the "belly of a whale". She says, “I was nervous, reserved, insecure, intimidated by everything. And I had a problem to solve: how to enter the world of men, who frightened and intimidated me.” The camera shows Varda in that moment inside a fabricated long black tent in the shape of a whale. She appears lying on some pillows and saying “I feel safe in the belly of this whale, sheltered from the world, sheltered from the coastal wind inside my coastal shelter”. Varda describes while she is inside the whale, how she is creating images, which have haunted her for a long time. This reenactment makes visible to the viewer its construction processes, and also what Varda is imagining and narrating. It is a self-reflective element, since it shows a collaborative process and Varda's reflective intentions. As mentioned earlier it is a different kind of reenactment, which has to do with restaging Varda's own feelings, and imagined thoughts.

⁵⁶ Nichols, “Documentary Reenactment and the Fantasmatic Subject,” p. 88.

In another very personal reenactment scene, Varda talks about her teenage years and how she felt like in a circus. She says, “As a teenager I daydreamed. I’d imagine joining a circus. Reality meant little to me, and I knew absolutely nothing of life”, while the camera shows images of trapeze artists swinging above the sand, and circus music (see figure 2). Varda sits on the sand and looks at them, while she participates in the reenactments and takes part of them as viewer. She questions and narrates the scenes through voice-over narrations, and in some parts speaking directly to the camera.



Figure 2: 1. Varda’s circus fantasy

Varda remembers how hard it was to park in her garage in Paris. She described how small it was that it would take her fifteen tries before she could get in. She says, “The courtyard and garage were so narrow, I had to do some tricky maneuvering” In that moment the camera shows her in a silver cardboard car, reacting going back and forth parking in a reconstructed garage. The scene represents Varda’s memories in a comical way, which illustrates the events she is telling us.

In yet another sequence, avant-garde film director Chris Marker interviews Varda about her choices in life. Since Marker refused to appear on camera, he is depicted in the film as an orange cartoon cat, which adds a comical touch to the movie. The cat is an avatar used by Marker named Guillaume-en-Egypte, which he used as part of

his video exhibition *L'Ouvroir* (2008)⁵⁷, to represent himself.

The voice of Marker has been technologically altered while he asks Varda questions about her decisions in her life and career. He asks her questions like, “Why did you go from photography to cinema?” While Varda describes how she began doing films by using her imagination. She once again mixes the scene with old photos from her life, music and a very personal narration.

In another reenactment of the film, Varda stages a fake beach on a street in Paris, right in front where her production company *Ciné Tamaris* is located. The production staff appears wearing bathing suits and doing their daily routines, representing Varda’s significant relation to the beach (see figure 3).



Figure 3: Ciné Tamaris beach representation in Paris

The scene shows some of the problems they had while staging the beach, there was too much wind and it started to rain. Varda appears and says, “We had the beach 2 days. First day: gorgeous, second day, bad news: rain, the sand is wet. Good news: we have got birds.” While some wooden white birds, which were part of the staged beach move their wings with the air, with emotional music on the back.

⁵⁷ Marker, Chris, *L'Ouvroir*, Second Life machinima, France, 2008

In yet another reenactment, Varda talks in an emotional way of her relation to Jacques Demy. She says, “It feels better to grow old together”, while an old photo, of Demy and her, appears on the screen. She continues, “That was our plan, even more so when we got back together. It was sweet and surprising”. She continues making a description of the places and things she used to do with Demy, while photos from the things she is describing appear on the screen. She keeps saying, “We looked. Together, and boom! Jacques fell ill. A fatal disease” In that moment, appears a video of Jacques Demy writing, while Varda explains his thoughts making references to family pictures and the movie she made about his childhood, *Jacquot de Nantes* (1991). Varda represents some of the moments and places where she filmed Demy’s film, and she represents through her imagination and feelings this time of her life. This scene represents another reenactment, which is based on her feelings, memories and imagination.

Towards the end of the film, there is another reenactment of Varda while she is sitting inside a celluloid cabin she constructed of strips of film for her film *The Creatures* (1965). She says directly to the camera, “What is cinema? When I am here it feels like I live in cinema, that cinema is my home. I think I have always lived in it”.

Throughout the movie, this series of reenactments become a key structure in the film. As Timothy Corrigan mentions, some of the reenactments illustrate an event or subject, but others require rethinking memories and situations. Reenactments therefore, are not only part of the narration, but work as small narratives within the narrative structure and imply rethinking the meaning of the events.

Timothy Corrigan refers to refractive essays, as the films that interrogate films themselves, or as he explains it, films that “create and participate in their own aesthetic principles, overlapping their representations of other artistic and aesthetic experiences with their own cinematic processes and frequently reflecting those processes as a reflection on film itself”⁵⁸.

In this case, the reenactments used in *The Beaches of Agnès* use a kind of reflexivity, where the film focuses on Agnès Varda life, but creating a reflection between the

⁵⁸ Corrigan, p. 181-198.

images and the experiences narrated. And as Corrigan explains, essay films depend on the force of public experience which questions and comments on the aesthetic experience and the subjectivity that articulates it.

In the next chapter, I will discuss the use of mirrors in *The Beaches of Agnès*, as another reflexive component, which takes part in the meaning and understanding of the film.

4. The use of Mirrors in *The Beaches of Agnès*

Mirrors have been used in cinema for different reasons and in different ways, ranging from reflection to, expression, self-analysis, vanity, and suspense, as well as to complement the use of self-reflexive strategies in film. Mirrors are symbolic references to several important concepts of perception and human experience. Cinematic mirrors have also been studied in many different ways, and I will begin this chapter by summarizing some of these approaches in order to get a better overview of the relationship between screen and mirror and how this has been analyzed theoretically. My understanding of this relevant theory is mostly based on Elsaesser's and Hagener's account, whose work is cited prominently in this chapter. This will lead into a discussion about the significance of mirrors as they are used in *The Beaches of Agnès*.

During the European New Wave, the filmmaker's documentary style was characterized by a combination of objective realism, subjective realism, and the author's comment. Self-reference became a feature of the style of many filmmakers, which was expressed through different techniques. Between the 1960s and the 1970s the concept of mirror in film theory reinforced the reflexive potential of cinema.⁵⁹

The Classical film theory period lasted from the 1930s and came to an end around the mid 1960s. Two of its most important figures were Siegfried Kracauer (1889-1966) and André Bazin (1918-1958). During this period, the screen looked like a window, it directed the spectator into something behind or beyond itself.⁶⁰ Between 1940s and 1970s, in the French magazine *Cahiers du cinéma* founded by André Bazin, different film critics like Jean-Luc Godard and François Truffaut, discussed issues about film. Modern film theory was born there, and when the critics from *Cahiers du cinéma* started to make films themselves, they created what later became the French New Wave. So, when the modern theory was developed, there appeared a new metaphor of cinema as a mirror, which changed the perception of the "inside"

⁵⁹T Elsaesser, & M Hagener, "Cinema as Mirror and Face" in *Film Theory: An Introduction through the Senses*, Routledge, New York, 2010, p. 56.

⁶⁰Elsaesser, & Hagener, p.14.

and "outside" world, making the relationship between the viewer and the screen considerably more complicated.⁶¹

Later on, in the mid 1980s, after the classic film theory was developed into the new metaphor of cinema as mirror, it appeared an interest in close-up and face, which had its origins in the theories of Béla Balázs, who belonged to the classical film theory period, and by 1924 had already emphasized the significance of close-up and face, as he expressed, "In a truly artistic film the dramatic climax between two people will always be shown as a dialogue of facial expressions in close-up."⁶²

Balázs spoke about an unmediated presence in cinema, which communicates through actions, gestures and body movements, and which is mostly evident in the close-up that became the center of his film theory. The concept of close-up introduced the idea of a spectator confronting the mirror, since it allowed the viewer to see not only aspects of the world, but to see him/herself as in a mirror, showing a face but also giving the world the chance to see back at us.⁶³ Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener explain that the mirror became a way of framing the image, and it implicated a confrontation with the viewer's own face.⁶⁴ According to them, this look at oneself in the mirror requires a confrontation with our own face, as a window into our inner world. This view is also a view from the outside, a look from another person, or "the Other."⁶⁵ Therefore the mirror concept involves a confrontation with ourselves, and with a framed view.⁶⁶

Elsaesser and Hagener distinguish four paradigms that deal with the semantic field of the mirror and its metaphorical meanings: The first has to do with the look into the mirror as a window on the unconscious, which is related to an excess of Self, which the mirror is capable of revealing. The second one has to do with the mirror as a reflective and reflexive repetition, that brings us back to our situation as spectators of an artifact and is characteristic of the auteur cinema and New Wave of the 1960s. The third paradigm has to do with the mirror of the other, which is identified as a

⁶¹ Elsaesser, & Hagener, p. 56-57.

⁶² Elsaesser, & Hagener, p. 57.

⁶³ Elsaesser, & Hagener, p. 59.

⁶⁴ Elsaesser & Hagener, p. 56 -58.

⁶⁵ Elsaesser & Hagener, p. 57.

⁶⁶ Elsaesser & Hagener, p. 57.

component of identity and intersubjective communication. And the fourth takes the mirror outside Film theory into a cognitive and neuroscientific approach.⁶⁷

Elsaesser and Hagener in their discussion about self-reflexivity, talk about the use of mirrors to reflect the viewer's gaze back onto him / herself. They explain that the mirror both distances and objectifies, but also exposes an unpleasant truth. However they claim that there is always a double meaning with regards to mirrors, since readings outside and inside of the mirror are important from a cultural and historical view, which forms the root for the distinction between the classical and the romantic aesthetic.⁶⁸

Other approaches to the meaning of the mirror, and more focused on a psychoanalytic perspective have to do with Sigmund Freud's unconscious theory, which inspired Jean-Louis Baudry to develop his concept of "cinematic apparatus", arguing that the film screen functions as a mirror through which the viewer can identify him or herself as a coherent and omnipotent self.⁶⁹ On the other hand, Christian Metz used Lacan's concept of unconscious as a language to talk about the "imaginary signifier". Metz talked about the similarities between cinema and mirror, and also was based on Lacan's concept of "mirror stage", which claimed that any engagement with a film would lead to an identification based on a mis-recognition, because the individual will never reach the wholeness that he or she, saw in the mirror.⁷⁰

Discussing the significance of mirrors in film, usually involves talking about the theories of Jacques Lacan, Christian Metz and other psychoanalytic theorists. However, in this chapter, I will develop a discussion around the notion of cinema as a form of self-expression and mirror as a reflexive element of a self-portrait. I will focus on Varda as an auteur filmmaker, but an auteur who recognizes that her films are dependent on others and on the importance of this notion in the essay film.

⁶⁷ Elsaesser & Hagener, p. 63.

⁶⁸ Elsaesser & Hagener, p. 58.

⁶⁹ Although both Baudry and Metz would have written "himself" – it was not until Mulvey's famous essay that the dominance of the male viewer and the male gaze came into focus.

⁷⁰ Elsaesser & Hagener, p. 56.

The Beaches of Agnès among its various reflexive elements uses mirrors in a symbolic and self-reflexive way, which complements the personal and poetic style as well as the depth of the film. The mirrors are mostly used in the opening scene (already discussed at some length in chapter two) where Varda and her crew set up a range of mirrors and frames of different sizes (like constructing an installation), on a Belgian beach. Varda tells her crew that she wants the mirrors facing the sea, each of them reflecting a different angle, some near the water, some reflecting one another, some reflecting herself, the crew and the people walking on the beach. As a way to reflect her life and memories through old mirrors, and makes a statement reflecting this: “Find me in old spotty mirrors and behind scarves.” The mirrors symbolize her self-portrait and Varda walking backwards in time through places she lived, people she cared for, her thoughts and feelings. The scene is also a reference to Varda’s artistic work, which is an installation called “La Mer...Etsetera”⁷¹, that was exhibited the 8th of April of 2009 in the Venice Biennale, which consisted in a room with huge mirrors and reflections to the sea.

Varda uses a playful way to introduce the people who helped her carry them, by reflecting their faces, one by one, through framed mirrors. She also introduces the name of the film reflected in a mirror. In this first scene she begins to talk about her life, as she expresses and makes some references to her parents, as she mentions that one of the frames and mirror reminds her of her parent’s bedroom in Brussels, while she also speaks about the music her mother liked. The mirror takes the place of the film camera.

The mirrors are also used as a self-reflexive strategy, where the film takes a distance from itself and comes closer to the spectator, while it observes itself in the process of its own making.⁷² In some moments we can see Varda framed, taking photos of the mirrors, while in other moments is hard to tell where she is in relation to her crew, and where the mirrors are in relation to the water and to one another.

In the opening scene, the mirrors are used to signify cinema as a collaborative practice, as a way to reflect not only Varda’s self-portrait and life, but also the people who helped her and that was involved in the process of making the film. As Jane

⁷¹ A Varda, "La mer... et Setera", CRAC LR de Sète, France, 2009

⁷² Elsaesser & Hagener, p. 72.

Chapman explains, “Her use of mirrors underlines the fact that though this is an autobiographical documentary, there are others involved in informing and shaping her life.”⁷³

It is also relevant to mention that Varda invented a new film language, which she called *cinécriture* and refers to filmmaking as an act of writing. It is related to Alexandre Astruc's New wave concept of *caméra-stylo* (camera-pen) from 1948 already mentioned in Chapter one, where Astruc stressed the idea that the director could express his or her own thoughts and feelings through the camera, instead of simply presenting a series of scenes. But, Varda's concept differs from Astruc's as it focuses on female authorship, and the ability of women to write with film, what she called *filmécriture*.⁷⁴

Those who developed the notion of auteur filmmakers were mostly men, and most of those who became known as auteur were frequently male too. Varda as a woman director has been working in a world of cinema conquered by men, and she has been stressing the importance of creating a new film language through her films and emphasizing on the possibility for women to write with film. Even though her concept of *cinécriture* differs in some level from Astruc's concept of *caméra-stylo*, it also shares the self-awareness of the filmmaker when directing the film, and the fact that the director is the author. She expressed, “I always get involved very precisely in my films, not by narcissism, but by honesty in my approach”⁷⁵

Although many writers, actors, artists and photographers in various ways contributed to the films of the New Wave, authorship was one of the main reasons that the directors received most of the credits to their films. It is interesting to connect this idea with the appearance of Chris Marker in *The Beaches of Agnès* (which has been

⁷³ J Chapman, *Issues in Contemporary Documentary*. Polity Press, 2009, p.131.

⁷⁴ Susan Hayward, “Beyond the gaze and into *femme-filmécriture*: Agnès Varda's *Sans toit ni loi* (1985),” *French Film: Texts and Contexts*, eds. Susan Hayward and Ginette Vincendeau, London and New York; Routledge, 1990, p. 285.

⁷⁵ “Je m’implique toujours très précisément dans mes films, non par narcissisme, mais par honnêteté dans ma démarche.” Agnès Varda and Mireille Amiel, “Propos sur le cinéma par Agnès Varda,” *Cinéma 75*, no. 204, Décembre 1975, p. 46.

already discussed in an earlier chapter), who was part of the same New Wave group to which Varda belonged, which was called The Left Bank group.⁷⁶

The Left Bank, or *Rive Gauche* was a group of filmmakers like Chris Marker, Alain Resnais, and Agnès Varda, who were related with the French New Wave, but were older and more interested in collective projects. This is seen along different scenes from the film, for example when Varda restages a fake beach on a street in Paris with all her production company staff. It represents herself once more, as a collaborative author, which incorporates and acknowledges that she works with a group of different people who influence her work in many different ways. Unlike the more well-known New Wave directors or “right bank”, like Godard, Truffaut, etc., who were more individualistic and interested in promoting themselves. The opposite of Marker, who did not want to be seen or filmed, and instead appeared represented as a cartoon character in *The Beaches of Agnès*.

In *The Beaches of Agnès*, mirrors can be analyzed from different levels that go from Varda’s own self-expression as a self-portrait, from the level of the spectator and from the level of the film as a reflection of society. The fact that the movie begins with a scene full of mirrors has a great significance, since they are used as a tool to represent Varda’s life.

The director says,

“I use mirrors because the mirror is the tool of the self-portrait. You don't have to be so self-conscious to make a portrait of yourself; it's an artistic act.” *The Beaches of Agnès* uses mirrors also as an aesthetic element of Varda’s auteur style. Therefore, to elaborate a discussion around mirror, self-expression and self-reflection in cinema, it’s interesting to take a closer look on the relationship that exists between auteurism and self-reflexivity.

By opening the movie with a set of mirrors reflecting herself and the crew, the filmmaker makes the spectator aware of the personal content and intimacy of the

⁷⁶ T Corrigan, *The Essay Film: From Montaigne, After Marker*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2011, p.66-67.

film. The viewer is immersed into Varda's own experiences. The way that the mirrors are used creates a contract between spectator and film. The film also mirrors the hybrid nature of Varda's cinematic and artistic career, and is a way to connect with her past, like a symbol of her memory.

The mirrors used as a reflexive technique also involve a certain level of consciousness, a different visual approach and an effect on the public. In *The Beaches of Agnès*, they are used as an element of interaction between the filmmaker, the audience and the production process. Showing people helping arrange the mirrors in the first scene, invites viewers to participate in the film in a personal way. Varda reflected revealing not only the process of making her film, but sharing her deepest memories through a sensitive and honest story.

In the opening scene mentioned earlier, we can see the implications and problems of the production process. The wind covering Varda's face with a scarf, the mirrors moving with the wind, the people striving to move them and carry them. It reveals a kind of intimacy and reflection, within the personal content and as a tool for expression and reflection throughout the film, which also contributes to the meaning of the film. However, the portraits and stories mirrored, do not have uniquely reflexive intentions, but the film's reflection about the limitations and possibilities as a representational and personal autobiography.

Going back to Elsaesser's and Hagener's argument about the mirror as reflexive-reflective doubling, it is possible to describe *The Beaches of Agnès* as reflective and reflexive too. The mirrors create a personal and intimate experience, which results in self-awareness. However, the mirror is also an element of a self-portrait, since it implies looking at oneself. Laura Rascaroli notes that in self-portraits, the spectator is in the position of a third person, overseeing and overhearing. She explains: "First of all, the self portraits' gaze is a *mise en abyme* – the spectator looks, through the eyes of the author, at the author"⁷⁷ Rascaroli continues, quoting West: "The viewer of a self-portrait also occupies a strange position of looking at a metaphorical mirror that reflects back not themselves but the artist who produced the portrait."⁷⁸

⁷⁷ L Rascaroli, *The Personal Camera: Subjective Cinema and the Essay Film*, Wallflower press, London, 2009, p. 173.

⁷⁸ West, quoted in L Rascaroli, *The Personal Camera: Subjective Cinema and the Essay Film*,

This means that the viewer identifies with the film director, in this case with Varda as an author, and therefore becomes the addresser. Rascaroli explains that the self-portrait, as one of the most intimate and personal forms of expression, is also fundamental for self-analysis, since it opens up a possibility for self-reflection, self-expression and self-promotion.⁷⁹ However, it is interesting to notice that Varda uses the mirrors not as a narcissistic mirror, but as a way to invite the audience to be part of her self-reflection. It shows not only how she looks at herself, but also the world, her crew and people around her.

Wallflower press, London, 2009, p. 173.

⁷⁹Rascaroli, p. 176.

5. Conclusions

The Beaches of Agnès begins with Agnès Varda creating an installation of different mirrors. However, it also finishes the film with an installation she created for Cartier Foundation, called “L’Ile et Elle” (The Island and She), which consisted of a series of video projections that referred to Noirmoutier Island in France, as a meaningful beach in her life, and which makes coinciding references to her career, family and friends. The film demonstrates her aesthetic preoccupations through her editing, layered compositions and the constant presence of her artwork and films.

The final words Varda expressed in her last shot in the cabin created for her film *The Creatures* (1965) and already mentioned in Chapter four, question the origins of cinema and the nature of her work, as well as the way she defines cinema and life, and how she symbolizes it through art. The reflexive tendencies that develop and constitute her work stand out prominently in *The Beaches of Agnès*. The film also implies and communicates through its aesthetical and personal content, that the best place to understand Varda’s childhood, life and influences is through her films. It makes clear Varda’s engagement with the world, which not only intends to give something back to her, but to all the people and places that inspired her, through mirrors, a deep message, reenactments, dreams and a personal story.

The first time I saw *The Beaches of Agnès* these qualities surprised me. I had never heard of an essay documentary at that point, but I realized that it had a very different mission of more traditional documentaries. In particular, I was attracted to the self-reflective and personal components of the film. How much Agnès puts herself inside the film incorporating her family, friends and inspirations along her life. At the same time, this maneuver required that the film process itself be much more transparent, as much part of the story as her imagination.

During the research, I gave emphasis on the subjective quality of the essay film, since it allows the viewer to create and move to a more profound understanding of the film. Through self-reflexivity, it is possible to connect and identify with the content in a deeper way, which reveals not only the production process of the

filmmaking, but the personal, sensitive and honest nature of the sources and author, who created the film. Essayistic subjectivity, an active and assertive consciousness, recreates itself through the experience of memory, dreams, desires, and the constant reflective activity. It is important to also recognize that the possibility of expressing subjectivity, and the desire to express the internal self has existed for a very long time in the history of cinema. Therefore, the essay film could also be seen as an artistic expression of this need.

I understand *The Beaches of Agnès* not just as an essay film, but also as an autobiographical essay. As a result, the author's self-awareness and consciousness is seen as an important part of the artwork, and a fundamental element in the production and making of the final product. My purpose was to determine how the formal elements of the film, such as voice-over, reenactments and the use of mirrors, create a sense of self-awareness in the film. Through the analysis made of these formal elements of *The Beaches of Agnès*, is essential to recognize the experimental and auteur style that defines Varda's work. Through her essay films, photographs, and art installations, she incorporates traditional categories of fiction and nonfiction films, poetry, painting, video and photography. The film not only shows Varda as an artist who is constantly developing, but as an auteur filmmaker with a very personal style, and who acknowledges that her work is collaborative and depends on others.

One of the most important characteristics of the film is that it also establishes Varda's trajectory as an artist through the different references to her filmography. The film uses a wide variety of source material and footage from her past and present – from clips of her earlier films, family photographs, her own photography, interviews from people that had influenced her, video footage, reenacted material and archival images among others. Through the use of the voice-over, reenactments and mirrors, as well as through these different sources, Varda emphasizes her self-invention, which is even mentioned in the beginning of the film where she reminds the viewer that she changed her name from Arlette to Agnès.

Autonomy, self-invention and self-awareness are key elements of her self-portrait. The diversity of the material used along the film creates a multifaceted self-portrait collage, and through the chronological narrative, voice over and constant movement

from one source to another, the film reveals and explores different parts from Varda's life. *The Beaches of Agnès* proves that Varda is still reinventing herself, exploring and experimenting with different sources. Just so, through her essay film, it is possible to see cinema as a moving form that is a changing medium. In this thesis I demonstrate how the work of Varda offers a depth and emotional weight that is revealed throughout the film in a remarkable way.

I emphasize the strong reflective and personal quality of the voice-over throughout the film, and accentuate the idea of Nichols, that the voice is much more than just words and sounds. The voice-over narration in *The Beaches of Agnès*, among other elements, introduces Varda and her life story through the film, her point of view and perspective, as well as traces of her life and some of her most personal and emotional experiences. The voice is a fundamental part of her style as an auteur, a key element of the essay film, and Varda's self-portrait.

Through the voice-over, Varda makes constant references to show the importance of her relationships with people that has influenced her life, like her friends, her ex-husband Jacques Demy, her children, etc. She not only reinvents herself, but also shows one of the most important qualities that characterize the essay film and her autobiographical essay, a personal reflexive voice.

Across the narrative, I point out how Varda is not interested in a confessional narrative or narcissistic narration, but to present an exploratory effort of the way that her life and her films have been developed in a parallel and organic form, as well as to create a different relationship with the world around her. I show that there is a strong relation between the voice and authorship. Varda is seen as an auteur that acknowledges that her work depends of other people. The film moves away in moments from Varda's life, to learn more about the people that she has encountered along her life and the world surrounding her, her inspirations and dreams. The voice is subjective, intangible and filled with feelings, and personal experiences. The voice-over is fundamental in the personal reflection and point of view that the film is transmitting, as well as to make a connection between the narrative and visuals presented.

I emphasize on the ability of the essay film to open other possibilities for understanding the documentary genre, and through the analysis of the work and theories analyzed by the authors mentioned, like Bruzzi and Nichols, I recognize the importance of establishing a different relationship with new forms of documentary.

The Beaches of Agnès, not only represents past events, but also emotions, dreams and fantasies. The reenactments are used in a stylized form, which highlights again the personal auteur style of Varda. She uses her own experiences and feelings to represent some of the most important moments of her life, and engages in her representations in various ways, through self-reflection and questioning herself. I emphasize that it is essential to understand that unlike the more traditional documentary, *The Beaches of Agnès* does not value the real more than the imagined.

The Beaches of Agnès also uses mirrors as a way to reflect Varda life, but also in an aesthetic manner. By taking a closer look to the relationship that exists between auteurism and self-reflexivity, it is easier to understand Varda's intentions. She uses the mirrors in the opening scene as already explained earlier, as a way to reflect and communicate that her work is collaborative and that she makes part of her work to the people around her, but also as an aesthetical component of her self-portrait. The viewer is invited into Varda's own experiences through the first scene, which creates a contract between spectator and author. The film also mirrors the hybrid nature of Varda's cinematic and artistic career, and as a symbol of her life and memories.

Thought this research, I have found that the "essay film" has become one of the leading non-fiction hybrid forms of filmmaking in the world today, yet its definition remains unclear. As I wrote this thesis, I also discover that one of the major explorations of this thesis has been to understand why this form of filmmaking has become so popular?

One answer, I think, comes from a changing sense of the meaning of objectivity and truth, and the futile efforts for finding an objective truth. Another answer has to do with women showing their voice and breaking the authoritative voice tradition that existed for a long time.

Agnès Varda work is a paradigmatic example of the essay film and makes her useful for understanding cultural trends beyond her own film. Through her extensive body of work, as one of the most influential, creative and recognized artists of the French New Wave, it is possible to see the historical movement of the essay film from its relation to the French Cinema from the 1950s to its growth and expansion to the digital world. By analyzing the history, appearance and development of the essay film, I point out the importance of understanding their self-reflexive and subjective qualities, which tend to challenge the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction cinema.

By considering the personal content and reflective intention of the essay film, it is also possible to create a discussion around the notion of objectivity and truth, of which the documentary has been a part of for such a long time. Therefore, it is important to redefine and reassess the documentary genre, and question how the personal content of the sources and materials, as well as the narrative content and commentary, affect the way in which we engage, perceive and relate to the film. It is essential to recognize its personal and subjective point of view, which establishes its commentary, reflections, and self-questioning activity, and which gives the essay film its power and complexity.

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