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Self-Fictions and Film: Varda's Transformative Technology of the Self in *Les plages d'Agnès*

- §1 On a screen, we watch an ageing woman. A static camera films her in a medium-long shot, sitting in stockinged feet at a small table with her back to us in three-quarters profile. She is dressed in a long white hooded garment that resembles a shroud. The hood obscures her head entirely. We hear no sound. We are in a visibly old, plain room with bare dark grey stone walls and a stone floor. It contains no other furniture apart from the chair and table at which the woman is sat. On this table is placed what appears to be an old-fashioned radio, an apparatus enclosed within a casing that is brown with age. The woman faces the radio, but is immobile, sitting up straight. Still we hear no sound. After a few moments one of her arms bends, and she reaches to the radio, flicking a switch. At this point, doleful music plays. She then replaces her arm and continues to sit upright, immobile, in the chair, her face still facing forward, still screened from our view. The camera, still unmoving, continues to take in this scene for a few moments longer until a cut abruptly withdraws this vision from our view.
- §2 The woman is Agnès Varda¹, and what is described is a sequence from her film *Les plages d'Agnès*. This sequence, which introduces an entirely new and unmotivated setting and set of actions to the viewer, is the starting point for this article, because it raises a number of perplexing questions. Firstly and most obviously, what message does the sequence convey? Why the silence? Why the bare stylised interior in contrasting colours? Why the non-naturalistic costume? Why – in short – does this sequence so strongly mark itself out as being a fictional invention, a performance? What place can there be for such performance, and such fiction, in a film such as *Les plages d'Agnès* (2008), which recounts in the first person the life-story of its director²?
- §3 This is an article about what happens when self-fiction goes to the cinema. In the first place it will be necessary to consider what identifies a specifically *cinematic* self-fiction. Yet a more important preoccupation for this article will be the question of what a cinematic self-fiction might achieve. This involves paying attention to what the *cinema specifically* may help it to achieve. Thus the literary theories of *autofiction* which have grown up in France will constitute a starting point for my reflections, but it will be necessary to look beyond them to develop a theoretical approach to cinematic self-fiction which is able to take into account the specificities of Varda's filmic medium, and the nature of her project in *Les plages d'Agnès*. Michel Foucault's theorisation of what he calls "the technology of the self" will prove productive in this regard, not just for understanding how the cinema treats and produces selfhood, but also for understanding how the autofictional transformations of the self wrought by and in *Les plages d'Agnès* can serve more than a straightforwardly ludic or deconstructive purpose. Behind Varda's self-fictions, a Foucauldian ethos of care of the self can be found at work.

Autofiction, cinema and the technology of the self

- §4 Before analysing Varda's self-fictions, a word or two will need to be said on what exactly a cinematic self-fiction is. "Self-fiction" is one way of translating the French literary term *autofiction*, which Serge Doubrovsky is universally credited with inventing to describe a very specific form of self-writing, in which a correspondence between narrator and author is established all the better to subvert autobiographical expectations – chiefly those relating to the author's sincerity and the narrative's veracity³.
- §5 However, applying Doubrovsky's definition to the cinema is fraught with problems, chief amongst which is the central importance that his model accords to the author. The concept of the author as sole creative instance responsible for producing a particular work translates with difficulty to the cinema, and although the concept of the *auteur* film-director may exist, it is now widely regarded with suspicion in film studies, since it overlooks the critical roles of producers, screenwriters, cinematographers and actors, to name just a few of the personnel who may legitimately stake some claim to "authorship" of a film⁴. An additional problem is that a film's narrative is (usually) both visual and verbal, and no one single person is responsible for it (even when the film's director is classified as an *auteur* – as Varda is). As a result, Doubrovsky's very precise definition of *autofiction* becomes unworkable in the cinema.
- §6 More productive for the analysis of films is an alternative conceptualisation of *autofiction* devised by Vincent Colonna⁵. It purposefully delineates a much broader genre, defining *autofiction* in such a way that work in the medium of film may easily qualify for this label (indeed Colonna himself envisages this, citing Jean-Luc Godard and Nanni Moretti amongst a list of examples of producers of *autofiction*⁶). Part of Colonna's thesis is that *autofiction* is no modern literary genre, but can be found in the classical writings of ancient Greece and Rome, in particular in the extant work of Lucian of Samosata. For Colonna, *autofiction* designates any text involving "la fabulation de soi", and it resists close definition because it is not a genre so much as a "posture", or attitude, taken by the author in the act of writing⁷. Therefore, "[i]l n'y a pas une forme d'autofiction, mais plusieurs [...]"⁸. What all its forms share, however, is what Colonna considers the defining feature of *autofiction*: the idea of transformation. He declares: "[l]e seul trait dessinant la frontière domaniale de cette grande forme d'affabulation [i.e. *autofiction*] est la *métamorphose de l'auteur*, qui est multiple"⁹. Whilst Colonna's model of *autofiction* also (like Doubrovsky's) refers to the author, it is nevertheless more compatible with the analysis of films, due to its emphasis on the *effect* produced by the deliberately non-mimetic approach common to all *autofiction*. This effect is that produced on the author's own self, which finds itself unapologetically modified in the course of the creative act that generates *autofiction*. What is nevertheless missing from Colonna's account is an explanation of the significance or implications of these transformations of the self; furthermore, he is not concerned to explain *how* the transformation of the self might come about: it is simply the product of the author's imagination. These limitations mean that further work needs to be done when applying his insights to the cinema, since, in a visual

medium, the transformation of the self cannot be only a matter of *thinking* it differently.

- §7 Colonna's notion of what *autofiction* does coincides strikingly with the understanding of another theorist who, like Colonna, looks to the classical world to understand how the self makes itself comprehensible to itself and to others. Near the end of his life, Michel Foucault, perhaps best known for his extensive study of the external discursive forces that strive to mould individuals' selves, had turned his attentions elsewhere. Looking to the Classical world, he noted the value placed in ancient Greek society on the "rapports à soi" which individuals might develop, and identified the existence of an ethos of "care of the self" ("le souci de soi")¹⁰. "Care of the self" can be understood as "l'attention qu'il convient de porter à soi-même"¹¹. This attention is designed to avoid "tous les troubles du corps et de l'âme"¹². This attention, or concern, for the self involved not simply a particular attitude toward the self, but also a set of practices which the individual would undertake in order to perfect what Foucault calls (glossing the Greek "*technē tou biou*"¹³) "l'art de l'existence"¹⁴. In an essay entitled "Technologies of the Self", Foucault explores in more detail these practices which individuals might deploy to regulate themselves and their conduct¹⁵. "Technologies" is a term Foucault uses in this essay to mean a set of practices (or, "techniques", to use another Foucauldian term) which are used to achieve a specific end. "Technologies of the self" are therefore systems that create the self. In the ancient world, technologies of the self advanced the cultural imperative to take care of the self, for, as Foucault explains, they are enabling, and they work directly on the individual:

[T]echnologies of the self [...] permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality.¹⁶

- §8 Like *autofiction* (as theorised by Colonna), technologies of the self are transformative: they further the care of the self by allowing the self to produce a self that is other to the one that existed before these technologies were brought to bear on it. Foucault cites a number of these "operations" which individuals perform on their own selves, locating the origins of these transformative practices of the self in the Classical world, just as Colonna does with his model of *autofiction*. This is no mere coincidence, for what is striking about Foucault's exploration of the production and transformation of selfhood is that he cites the activity of *writing the self* as a particularly important technique within the technology of the self that existed in the ancient world. The implication is that *autofiction*, if Colonna is indeed correct that it originates in the Greco-Roman world, first functioned as one of the available techniques within an ancient technology of the self. Furthermore, Foucault's theory of the writing of the self as a transformative practice within an ancient technology of the self enhances our understanding of the role transformation plays in *autofiction*. The transformations of *autofiction* are not simply metamorphoses that the author creates on a whim, to create a fictionalised avatar of their own self (or an *autofiction*). Rather, it is the act of self-inscription itself, when practised as a

tekhnè (or technique) of the self, that brings about a transformation in the self and how it understands itself. From this perspective, what makes *autofiction* fictional is that the self who self-writes as a means of self-improvement will never coincide exactly with the self it wrote.

- §9 Even more striking is the ease with which Foucault's concept of the technology of the self accommodates the cinema. If the word "technique" – following the etymological Greek sense in which Foucault uses it – "désigne à la fois la technique et l'art" of doing something, and if a "technology of the self" is a system comprising multiple "techniques of the self", then the cinema, as an art form whose art is realised through the use of multiple mechanical techniques and apparatuses, can be considered a technology of the self in the Foucauldian sense¹⁷. *Mise-en-scène*, editing, lighting, camera work: all function as techniques for rendering the self, all contribute to cinema as a technology of the self. Where the cinema offers a portrait of a self and an account of that self's experience, as it does in *Les plages d'Agnès*, the resulting film functions as a Foucauldian *technique* to make sense of who that self is.

***Les plages d'Agnès*, Varda's cinematic technology of the self, and performance**

- §10 As a film-maker, Varda is known for her careful attention to film style (what she calls *cinécriture*¹⁸), and the techniques that produce it. Sandy Flitterman-Lewis has noted Varda's "consistent refusal to take cinematic language for granted. Through a variety of strategies she contests its traditional status as transparent reflection of an already constituted "reality" by foregrounding the meaning-production process"¹⁹. This attention is especially present in her biographical film-making, where, prior to *Les plages d'Agnès*, Varda had already demonstrated complex insights into the work of the cinematic portrait.
- §11 'Quelquefois je me demande si le seul portrait réel, c'est le masque mortuaire.' With these words, which Varda pronounces in her film *Jane B. par Agnès V.* (1988), a self-conscious cinematic portrait that Varda realises of the English actress Jane Birkin, Varda confides an insight that the cinema can function as a technology of the self in the Foucauldian sense. With this observation, which comes nearly three-quarters of an hour into the film, and is made in voice-over, accompanying a beautiful shot of a death mask, the film-director seems to be announcing that her enterprise in *Jane B.* is destined not to succeed, for a portrait of a living person will always fail to offer a "real" likeness. Such a likeness, she suggests, can only be produced after death. Even then, producing this "real" likeness requires direct contact with the physical body belonging to the subject of the portrait, which is exactly what is involved in the process of creating the mould from which the death mask is produced. Unlike the technology behind the death mask, the technology of the cinema is not suited to the task of creating a portrait, Varda implies, for reasons that stem from the ontology of the medium. For Varda, no film will record – any more than any painting does – the reality of the subject whose portrait it has the task of rendering. Moreover, her words in *Jane B.* indicate that the cinema is incapable of creating a portrait because a portrait, in the singular, is something which it

lacks the ability to produce; rather, the cinema offers “vingt-quatre portraits par seconde, ou par heure”, as Varda observes in *Jane B.*²⁰. The specificities of its medium mean that the cinema does not capture a “real” likeness of a person, but rather generates a proliferation of separate portraits, each one less than “real”, each one inevitably, in a sense, a fiction. It transpires that this is precisely the goal of Varda's film project with Birkin: to use film and this film project to generate multiple selves for her subject, using the cinema as a technology of the self to create her anew, to bring multiple new Birkins into being in a way that lays the ground for *Les plages d'Agnès*.

§12 Like another of her cinematic portraits, *Jacquot de Nantes*, *Les plages d'Agnès* is composed of interweaving strands, one of these strands comprising footage from Varda's earlier films. In an echo of a procedure used in *Jane B.*, Varda often edits together this vintage footage with new footage shot for *Les plages d'Agnès*, so as to reveal what inspired a particular *mise-en-scène* featuring in the sequence taken from the older film. The other strand comprises Varda's autobiographical narrative, which, on the surface, conforms to autobiographical conventions. In it she recounts her childhood, her studies and early career, her subsequent marriage, motherhood, her developing career as a film-maker, her friendships, professional and personal struggles. The last phase of her personal history focusses on her relationship with her husband, the film-maker Jacques Demy, his sudden illness and AIDS-related death, her subsequent mourning and present-day life without him. However, whilst Varda's audio narrative is flowing and coherent, visually it is (like *Jane B.*) heavily fragmented. This is not only due to Varda's technique of interweaving different strands of film-making within her cinematic portrait: the visual narrative is also punctuated – in a way again reminiscent of *Jane B.* – with numerous images of painted portraits, particularly from the surrealist art of Magritte and Picasso. Furthermore, as if in reply to the painted portraits which it captures, *Les plages d'Agnès* offers its own portraits of Varda: composite shots, which include multiple portraits of the film-maker combined within the single viewing frame provided by the screen – complex images facilitated by the digital post-production techniques of contemporary cinema. As in *Jane B.*, cinema is contrasted with other orders of representation to highlight the specificities of its medium, and the different representational possibilities belonging to different artistic mediums. Once again, Varda's characteristic sensitivity to film-making technique shows how cinema operates as a technology of self, as she draws attention to the work she as a film-maker does in bringing together different techniques in *mise-en-scène* and editing, combining these to fashion the filmic representation, and thus directing the audience's attention to a Foucauldian process of self-fashioning that is underway in *Les plages d'Agnès*.

§13 The emphasis on self-fashioning is accentuated by Varda's anti-mimetic stance when it comes to representing her past in *Les plages d'Agnès*. Whilst there are certain sequences in the film which reconstruct episodes from Varda's past, using doubles to represent the younger Varda (such as one illustrating her reading on the banks of the Seine during her student days), these are (as I have discussed elsewhere)²¹ distinctly anti-naturalistic representations, typically shot in an exaggerated colour palette that connotes nostalgic exaggeration

rather than accuracy, thus alerting the viewer to the transformations inherent to the operation of memory, and to the fictionalisations of the past self that may result. As she re-traces her girlhood, Varda continues to offer her viewer such reconstructions of her childhood, albeit marked with a vibrant, non-realist aesthetic reminiscent of the films of her late husband, this approach being sustained into the scenes where Varda starts to recount her life under the Vichy regime. In one memorable sequence, this almost Demy-esque aesthetic is troublingly employed to illustrate Varda's recollections of singing "Maréchal, nous voilà!" at school, with a chorus of schoolgirls in blue gingham dresses standing to attention in a playground and giving full voice to this uncomfortably *Pétainiste* anthem. Yet, with a further recollection of Varda's drawn from the Vichy era, these reconstructions of the past come to an abrupt stop. During a sequence that comprises the only truly naturalistic reconstruction of the past in the whole film, whereby the film-maker recounts her wartime experience of witnessing Jewish children being rounded up for deportation by French gendarmes, Varda suddenly calls into question this process of creating filmic reconstructions. Not only does she interrogate the ethics of attempting to recreate this sorrowful and shameful period filmically "même en fiction" (to quote Varda's voice-over). She also questions the constructive purpose of doing so. Murmuring in voice-over that this filming "donne des frissons", Varda indicates an attitude that seems to inform her broader approach in the majority of this film to filming herself and conveying her experience – her technology of self. Varda exhibits here an apparent concern for the effect her film-making activities – and specific film-making techniques in particular – have on her sense of personal well-being. Although she will not shirk in *Les plages d'Agnès* from talking about difficult or even painful moments in her life – as the account she gives of losing Demy to AIDS attests – she is not interested as a film-director in using techniques of film-making in *Les plages d'Agnès* that will in themselves cause her upset as the film is made.

§14 What we will find in the technology of self that Varda adopts for the rest of the film is a rejection of mimetic modes of film-making that privilege naturalistic reconstructions and a realist aesthetic. No further attempts are made to give the illusion of a film-maker unproblematically stepping back into her past – the only non-problematised "stepping back" in *Les plages d'Agnès* is in fact the slow, deliberate, and within the film entirely uncommented walking backwards that Varda does periodically throughout the film, often speaking to camera about her personal history whilst doing so²². Stepping backwards into the past is thus made strange by Varda at the very moments that her spoken words might suggest to the audience that this is straightforwardly her (and our) trajectory. Instead of the re-creations of the self in the past that might be implied by a backwards look, we find something quite different: a form of self-fashioning where the accent is on the overt performance of the self in the present moment of filming, in a way that highlights the place of transformation and fiction in a technology of the self which is resolutely forward-looking.

§15 The presence of the mode of fiction in *Les plages d'Agnès*, already signalled (as I have discussed) through use of exaggerated lighting and colour in the *mise-en-scène*, becomes ever more insistent as increasing emphasis is given to the idea of "acting out" in the film, with much of this acting out done by Varda

herself. An early instance of this in *Les plages d'Agnès* comes where Varda reprises a role from *Jane B.*, that of a mute old woman on a beach, advancing steadily and somewhat menacingly inshore with the aid of a zimmer frame. However, Varda also acts out new roles, often quite overtly acting out a role as herself. One example comes in a sequence where she is filmed on a beach fanning herself and sitting, voicing her pleasure at being “à l'abri de tout”, inside an installation that takes the form of a whale built using a wooden frame covered in canvas. Varda's spoken narrative, provided in voice-over, had earlier informed us that, as a young woman, Varda had been sheltered from many of the realities of adult life, including the monthly workings of a woman's body, and so one of the ways that we can understand this scene of Varda inside the whale is as a performance of this younger self, enjoying being cloistered in her youthful innocence. Numerous similar incidences of overt performance or *mise-en-scène* of the self feature in *Les plages d'Agnès*, as Varda highlights and exaggerates the transformations of her self, thus exploiting a key characteristic which she had, in *Jane B.*, already identified in cinema as a technology of the self. This relates to the transformations to which cinema inevitably subjects any self which it renders, transformations that stem from the ontology of the medium, since its inherently multiple portraits introduce distorting fictions, regardless of the film-maker's intention.

§16 One such staging of the self occurs in a sequence that borrows from Varda's film *Quelques veuves de Noirmoutier* (2006) and installation *L'île et Elle*. This shows Varda – alongside various other women whose husbands have died – not simply as a widow, but actively acting out *being* a widow. The film-maker is shown, dressed in mourning black, sitting on a kitchen chair which has been incongruously placed on a beach. She sits facing the camera, staring ahead, saying nothing. Here, setting, costume and props all highlight that Varda is performing – that is, she has transformed herself into a performer, whose performance involves acting out the state that Varda owns as being her own, but from which she nonetheless in part distances herself via the deed of her performance.

§17 Varda's frequent elaborate and stylised performances thus open up a space of fiction within *Les plages d'Agnès*, since the strong coding of these performances as performance encourage the viewer to conclude that either the performance itself is a fiction (Varda is “only acting”, “playing”), or else that which it signifies is. In this way, using highly stylised and self-conscious performances of her self, *Les plages d'Agnès* destabilises the connection between Varda's self and its filmic representation, emphasising the process of transformation that intervenes between the two. They thus endorse Colonna's insight that *autofiction* is a work that involves the authorial self becoming transformed in the process of its elaboration. Yet just as the beaches are multiple in *Les plages d'Agnès*, so are the transformations, and so are the fictions (for in her film, Varda offers us not self-fiction, but *self-fictions*, in the plural). So too are the *purposes* of her self-fictions.

Transformative Self-Fictions and the Care of the Self

- §18 So far, our analysis of *Les plages d'Agnès* has built on Colonna's concept of the self-fiction as transformative of the self and adapted it for the cinema by understanding that transformative aspect from a Foucauldian perspective, which is to say understanding cinematic self-fiction as a technology of the self. This means conceptualising the cinema as a system comprising multiple techniques that work, in different ways, upon the self, and which bring about changes to the self upon which they work.
- §19 Yet we should not forget that there is a further, vital element to Foucault's concept of the technology of the self: the notion that the techniques which the self performs on its own self are put into practice because the transformations they bring about have some beneficial effect on that self. The technology of the self is not only transformative but ameliorative, and its deployment testifies to a concern on the part of the individual involved to better their situation in some way, a concern characteristic of an ethos that values care of the self (and not necessarily knowledge of the self, which is associated – positively or negatively – with written autobiography)²³. To read *Les plages d'Agnès* as a film that practices a technology of the self, then, is to read the film as one which goes beyond a ludic deconstruction of autobiographical forms in order to harness their performativity and exploit the free rein provided by self-fiction for a constructive purpose.
- §20 It is in this light perhaps that we can make sense of some of the more puzzling sequences in Varda's film. Varda's fleeting (and somewhat transgressive) caresses of a statue of Buddha that has been placed on a beach is unconnected to any other sequence in the film and is not explained in the voice-over. Yet the image of Buddha connotes spiritual well-being (even though Varda's treatment of the statue risks offending religious etiquette), whilst the gesture itself performatively reintroduces a sensuality and an experience of touch that constitute one of the privations associated with widowhood. Indeed, arguably it is where *Les plages d'Agnès* enters into the territory of Varda's relationship to her widowhood that we see the impulse toward the care of the self most in evidence.
- §21 Varda's loss and mourning of Jacques Demy have inflected much of her work since Demy's death in 1990, as *Les plages d'Agnès* itself reminds us, by incorporating in its narrative sequences from *Jacquot de Nantes* (1991) and *Quelques veuves*. Also relevant are two further films which Varda has devoted to the life and cinema of Demy since this date: *L'univers de Jacques Demy* (1995) and *Les demoiselles ont eu 25 ans* (1993). The latter revisits, on the occasion of the twenty-fifth anniversary of its release, the cast and eponymous setting for Demy's musical film *Les demoiselles de Rochefort* (1967)²⁴. The themes of grief and mourning so very evident in Varda's study and performance of widowhood in *Quelques veuves* are, if understated, already central to Varda's *Les demoiselles*. Both films make a strong association between mourning and silence. In the sequence from *Quelques veuves* discussed before, we noted Varda's silence. In saying nothing, she distinguishes herself from the other widows alongside whom she is shown in the film: these women all speak of

their loss of their husbands directly to the camera (some of these interviews also feature in *Les plages d'Agnès*); Varda does not: as she says in voice-over in *Les plages d'Agnès*, “je fais partie du tableau et je me tais”.

- §22 In *Les demoiselles*, silence is more viscerally shown to be a part of Varda's response to the loss of Demy. As the film shows, part of the tribute that the citizens of Rochefort elect to pay to Demy's film is their decision to name a street in their town after him. Varda's *Les demoiselles* documents the ceremony at which, in the presence of her and her children, Demy's newly re-baptised road is officially unveiled in its new identity. When it comes to the ceremony itself, and the moment where Varda is asked to officiate, she immediately looks for support. As attention focusses expectantly on the film director, she moves to cover her face, shaking her head. Silence visibly grips her, and after another has taken the role in her place, and the new street sign is unveiled, the camera settles again on Varda, now in close-up. A tear in her eye substitutes for the expected deed and words.
- §23 This association between the emotion of grief and silence holds the key to another sequence of *Les plages d'Agnès*, one which I identified at the start of this article as being especially enigmatic. This is the sequence where Varda sits silently before a table, her body rigid, her only gesture being to turn on a radio that plays a simple, sad tune. Coming after the section of the film where Varda narrates her account of Demy's death, and immediately before *Les plages d'Agnès* makes the borrowings from *Quelques veuves* that I have described above, this sequence appears to represent another performance of mourning. However, instead of re-enacting certain commonplaces belonging to a public discourse of mourning (as she does in the sequences where she appears as one of the widows of Noirmoutier), in this part of *Les plages d'Agnès*, Varda is able, by creatively exploiting the cinematic technique of *mise-en-scène*, to find a new and personal articulation of mourning. (It is striking that an all-white costume is substituted here for mourning black, for example.) Filming in fictional mode, free from the constraints of naturalistic representation, allows for the visual discourse of mourning to be transformed.
- §24 Yet it is not only the discourse of mourning that Varda's film-making transforms here: it is Varda's relationship to her own mourning. Moreover, this is a transformation that comes about performatively, secured by the very process of making *Les plages d'Agnès* itself. Varda's acts as a film-maker and performer create a space that can admit both mourning *and the performance of mourning*. In this regard, Varda's decision to elaborate her cinematic technology of the self by using the mode of self-fiction is crucial, for – as witness the silent sequence of Varda in front of her radio – this mode (which is the mode of invention, of creative transformation) allows for the controlled invention and production of a performance of grief, in contrast to the uncontrollable grief that overcomes Varda in Rochefort. In overtly performing mourning, Varda opens up (even if only temporarily) a distance between her self and the act of mourning. Whilst confirming the continuing importance that mourning has for Varda, the visual performances of mourning and grief which are instigated by the making of *Les plages d'Agnès* also performatively decentre more overwhelming forms of mourning and grief from the film-director's personal

compass. In Rochefort, Varda was shown during the filming of *Les demoiselles* to be struck dumb and paralysed by grief, powerless to articulate herself; in *Les plages d'Agnès*, grief still fleetingly retains the power to overwhelm the film-director (as we see in the chapel at Avignon, where Varda's emotion rises at the thought that death has taken so many of her friends and collaborators, as well as Demy²⁵). However, the act of performing her mourning and grief, both in the ritualistic commemoration in the chapel, and elsewhere in the film, is an act which also confirms that these states *can* be acted out by her. These techniques ensure that Varda can wrest back the power of articulation, so that grief, even though evidently still present, no longer consumes and petrifies the whole self. Working amelioratively on Varda's *rapport à soi*, the technology of self that Varda adopts for *Les plages d'Agnès* can thus be seen as commensurate with the ideal of "care of the self" as described by Foucault.

§25 This is not the only way in which the film-making process in *Les plages d'Agnès* itself contributes to an amelioration of the film-making self's well-being in a way that corresponds to Foucault's concept of a set of beneficial and transformative practices developed in order to improve the self's relation to itself. Varda's use of the cinematic techniques of fiction as a way to deal with mourning, and so open up a space within the self that would not be consumed by mourning, clears the way for this self to re-orient itself, and engage with other concerns – including a concern for the self – in a way that is impossible when seized by grief. As the narrative of *Les plages d'Agnès* draws closer to the present moment of filming, we find that the most pressing concern articulated by Varda is no longer the loss of her husband, but how to deal with its repercussions, in particular, how to live (and grow old) alone. This is raised especially poignantly in one of many interviews filmed for *Les plages d'Agnès*, one which takes Varda to the United States, where she meets a pair of old friends. The man and woman she meets are a long-married couple, who are now beginning to live out their old age together. The location where they are interviewed is a beach. They arrive separately, each of them dragging behind them a garden chair, so that two of its legs touch the ground and leave a track behind in the sand. They leave together, filmed in long shot, still dragging their chairs. We thus see two parallel chair tracks forming in the sand, which, in keeping with Varda's anti-mimetic technology of the self, metonymically stand in for a continuing shared journey through life. This experience of a long-standing and ongoing sharing of life's journey is precisely what Varda has lost as a result as a result of Demy's death. In the accompanying voice-over, she acknowledges this, speaking of a "petit pincement de jalousie" and "vague à l'âme". Whilst these emotions, like Varda's earlier grief, are stirred by the death of Demy, the focus here is not Demy himself, but the consequent state of solitude in which she finds herself as a widow, one that she admits, later in the film, to finding difficult to bear: "c'est quand-même mieux de vieillir à deux", she observes wistfully in a voice-over accompanied by a photographic portrait of her being held protectively by a young Demy. Once again however, the film-making processes involved in the realisation of *Les plages d'Agnès* potentially contain within them a remedy to this unwanted solitude, a remedy which once again allows Varda to use her film-maker's art, her cinematic technology of the self, in the service of the "care of the self".

§26 At the outset, I referred to the suspicion with which the notion of the film-director as an “author” is now often received within film studies. One of the objections to this way of thinking about film directors is that they do not bear sole responsibility for their work, nor is theirs the only influence determining how the finished film will turn out. Consistent with her previous work, Varda's cinematic self-portrait in *Les plages d'Agnès* is far from hiding the role of her collaborators (in fact, at the start of the film Varda carefully captures their reflections in mirrors and on film, naming them all as she passes among them). Indeed, it is the way in which the film pushes her towards her collaborators, towards others, that can be read as its final operation as an ameliorative and transformative technology of the self. Whilst many of her collaborators in *Les plages d'Agnès* are made present in the film via the documentary mode in which they are interviewed – this includes several old friends, colleagues, former neighbours and members of her production team – the mode of fiction still has its role to play. It is in the mode of fiction that Varda, almost at the end of film, appears with her family, imaged in a dream-like tableau in which she, dressed in black, stands initially excluded from a family grouping, comprising her two children, and their families, all dressed in white. In voice-over, she says, “je vais juste vers eux”, and then performs this action on camera, slowly walking towards and joining the family circle, thus showing herself, once again, concerned performatively to bring about a state of being – only this time one which implicates both herself and others. The mark of fiction here is significant: Wilson has noted that this sequence recalls one from Varda's earlier feature film *Le bonheur* (1965)²⁶. This allusion demonstrates what is at stake in this new orientation towards others which takes hold at the end of *Les plages d'Agnès* (both in this tableau and in the final scene, showing Varda's celebration with friends and family of her eightieth birthday): it is the very Foucauldian re-orientation of an emotional trajectory that has gone from “frissons”, via grief, to “jalousie”, and now to happiness²⁷.

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NOTES

¹ **Filmography** (all films are directed by Agnès Varda unless otherwise stated)

Le bonheur, 1965
Les demoiselles de Rochefort, (dir.) Jacques Demy, 1967
Jane B. par Agnès V., 1988
Jacquot de Nantes, 1991
Les demoiselles ont eu 25 ans, 1993
L'univers de Jacques Demy, 1995
Quelques veuves de Noirmoutier, 2006
Les plages d'Agnès, 2008

² Questions of performance, reconstruction and staging, which will be amongst my preoccupations in this article, are also discussed by Kelley Conway, whose interpretations of these aspects are very different from the ones I propose. See her “Varda at Work: *Les plages d'Agnès*”, *Studies in French Cinema*, 10.2 (2010), 125-39.

³ On the development and different definitions of *autofiction*, see Jean-Louis Jeannelle, “Où en est la réflexion sur l'autofiction?”, in *Genèse et autofiction*, ed. by Jean-Louis Jeannelle and Catherine Viollet, Louvain-la-Neuve, Academia Bruylant, 2007, pp. 17-37.

- ⁴ For a discussion of the problematic nature of the concept of the author in the cinema, see C. Paul Sellors, *Film Authorship: Auteurs and Other Myths*, London, Wallflower, 2010.
- ⁵ I refer to Colonna's revised conceptualisation, featuring in his *Autofiction et autres mythomanies littéraires*, Auch, Tristram, 2004; hereafter: *Autofiction*.
- ⁶ *Autofiction*., p. 18.
- ⁷ *ibid.*, p. 13.
- ⁸ *ibid.*, p. 72.
- ⁹ *ibid.*; my emphasis.
- ¹⁰ This discussion is based on Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité*, III: *Le souci de soi*, Paris, Gallimard, <Tel>, 1984, pp. 53-94.
- ¹¹ *ibid.*, p. 57.
- ¹² *ibid.*
- ¹³ *ibid.*, pp. 60-61.
- ¹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 60.
- ¹⁵ Foucault, "Technologies of the Self", in *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman and Patrick H. Hutton eds, Minnesota[?], University of Massachusetts Press, 1988, pp. 16-49; hereafter: "Technologies".
- ¹⁶ "Technologies", p. 18.
- ¹⁷ Denis Viennet, "Technologies of *infantia*: de l'(in)humain à l'ère cybernétique", in *Tekhnè, Technique, Technology*, Greg Hainge, Julianna de Nooy and Barbara E. Hanna eds, special issue of *Australian Journal of French Studies*, 48.2 (2011), 201-14 (203).
- ¹⁸ See Alison Smith, *Agnès Varda*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1998, pp. 12-53, for a discussion of *cinéécriture*.
- ¹⁹ Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, *To Desire Differently: Feminism and the French Cinema*, 2nd edition, New York, Columbia University Press, 1996, p. 38.
- ²⁰ Varda's remark alludes to the established norm for the speed of projection of a film, which is 24 frames per second.
- ²¹ See my "La Vie rêvée d'Agnès Varda: Dreaming the Self and Cinematic Autobiography in *Les plages d'Agnès*", in *L'Autobiographie entre autres. Les nouvelles tendances de l'écriture de vie en langue française au XXI^e siècle*, Fabien Arribert-Narce and Alain Ausoni eds, Bern, Peter Lang, forthcoming
- ²² Varda walks backwards, but always looks forwards.
- ²³ On the imperative of care of the self versus knowledge of the self, see especially "Technologies", pp. 22-26.
- ²⁴ Hereafter, it will be *Les demoiselles ont eu 25 ans* (and not *Les demoiselles de Rochefort*) that will be abbreviated as *Les demoiselles*.
- ²⁵ For a discussion of this sequence in particular, and Varda's relation to Demy's death through art more generally, see Emma Wilson, *Love, Mortality and the Moving Image*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, pp. 21-40; hereafter: *Love*.
- ²⁶ *Love*, p. 40.
- ²⁷ I am grateful to Shirley Jordan, Kerstin Pfeiffer and Emma Wilson for dialogues on *Les plages d'Agnès* and mourning.