CHAPTER FOUR: SOCIAL REALISM AND AGNÈS Varda's CINÉCRIPTION

SANS TOIT NI LOI / VAGABOND (1985)

The director Agnès Varda celebrated her eightieth birthday in 2008 with the film Les Pages d'Agnès/The Beaches of Agnès (2008), in which she stages herself, combining an original self-portrait with a personal reflection on the world. Throughout her career, Varda has been associated with films that explore the boundaries between documentary and fiction. She likes to blend reflections on the world we live in with a more aesthetic personal enquiry on artistic creation. This singular approach to film-making started over half a century ago with her first film, La Pointe courte, in 1954, which prefigured some French New Wave styles and motifs and gained her the nickname of 'grandmother of the New Wave'.

This chapter focuses on Varda's most commercially successful film since the New Wave, SANS TOIT NI LOI/Vagabond (1985). This is an important film on many counts: despite its small budget, it has been widely distributed, unlike many of Varda's other films which are still viewed as marginal in form and content; it has been extensively discussed critically for its original engagement with a non-linear narrative structure and as an example of Varda's unique method of 'cinécriture', which links writing and film-making; and it addresses important social issues and themes, including a meditation on homelessness and freedom in modern society, which marks the engagement of the film-maker with the real world. In addition, SANS TOIT NI LOI is an example of women's film-making, which illustrates the role played by Varda in making the feminine perspective more visible. Since she has sometimes referred to herself as a feminist, a short section at the end of the chapter will briefly outline some feminist Film Studies responses to SANS TOIT NI LOI.
INTRODUCING THE DIRECTOR, THE AUTEUR AND THE WOMAN

Born in Belgium and brought up in Sète in the South of France on the Mediterranean coast, Varda studied art history at the École du Louvre, then worked as an official photographer for the Théâtre National Populaire. This is how she became acquainted with a group of directors known as the Left Bank group, which included Chris Marker and Alain Resnais. The latter encouraged her to direct her first film, even though she had no previous filming experience, and helped her to edit it. Varda had not seen many films in the 1950s and she certainly was not a cinephile like the other directors associated with the New Wave, being more attracted to photography and painting. This did not stop her from making one of the most remarkable films of the New Wave, Cléo de 5 à 7 (1961), exploring feminine identity issues with innovative use of space and narrative.

In 1962, she married the director Jacques Demy, and although their careers were separate, the two film-makers are often linked in cinema histories. Both worked with producer Mag Bogard and composer Michel Legrand in the 1960s; Varda followed Demy to the United States at the end of the 1960s and gained a certain recognition of her own in America; more importantly she made a film tribute to the life of Jacques Demy just before he died, Jacob du Nant (1990). She also contributed actively to the promotion and restoration of his films in the 1990s through her production company, Cimé-Tamaris, which since the 1950s has functioned like a family business and has given her the relative creative freedom to shoot and edit her own films independently. Varda has been based in the rue Daguerre near Montparnasse for more than fifty years, and her house has often featured in her films. It is also her workplace and the headquarters of the production company.

Varda’s films are considered to be the very opposite of classical, and she is frequently viewed as an eccentric, very personal film-maker whose background is as much documentary as fiction cinema. She has made many short films on the margin of the normal production circuits. As Sandy Flitterman-Lewis has suggested, she has throughout her career developed independence and originality, a highly personal vision, a continuing research into the language and syntax of film and a sustained attention to forms of narrative organisation (1990: 31). For example, her cinema is marked by intertextuality, often drawing on still photography literary and pictorial references. Her films also normally incorporate an element of fun and levity, derived from her whimsical and mischievous personality, which contrasts with her serious themes and political commitments. She is known for her experimentation with narrative forms: Cléo de 5 à 7 shared some of the preoccupations of Jean-Luc Godard’s early cinema — its literary feel, its chaptered structure and culturally eclectic exploitation of film language (Orpen 2007: 13). There are common features in Varda’s filmography, namely her engagement with issues that concern her directly and her tendency to focus on female characters. In the 1970s, her films were characterised by more overt feminist influences, which may explain the attention that she receives from feminist critics (see, for example, Flitterman-Lewis 1990). L’Une chante, l’autre pas/One Sings, the Other Doesn’t (1976) brought together fictional characters and documentary elements, actors and non-professional participants, with Varda exploring intermediary filming strategies which would be used later for Sans toît ni loi.

From the 1980s, Varda has increasingly become involved as one of the characters in her films (in voice-overs for example), but she always places herself in relation with others, as the parallel portraits in Jane B par Agnès V. (1988) illustrate. This taste for staging the artist within the narrative culminated in 2000 with the feature documentary Les Glaneuses et la glaneuse/The Gleaners and I, which probably reveals as much about Varda herself as about the people she meets and the subjects that she sets out to address. In this film, she reopens the reflection on social insecurity and marginality addressed in Sans toît ni loi, this time from the angle of consumption and waste, while including herself as subject and creator of the film more overtly than she has done before. Les Plages d’Agnès constitutes yet another step towards a definitive self-portrait of the woman and artist, in which for once she is the main focus of attention.

From this rapid overview of her career, Varda emerges as an atypical French independent auteur and artist — she has recently shown her photographic work in various visual culture exhibitions that she calls ‘installations’. Yet she claims that when she started making films, she was hardly interested in style or driven by experimental intentions (Varda 1954: 38). However, what is immediately evident when watching any of her films is that her style is very distinctive, and her approach to film-making forces the audience to become active participants in the viewing process rather than passive spectators. She expects her cinema to be ‘read’ and interpreted. Although Varda has become an emblematic figure of French cinema, she still remains a marginal figure within the national film industry; many of her films having recently become available on DVD only because of her own initiatives with Cimé-Tamaris.

Sans toît ni loi, Varda’s most commercially successful film since the New Wave, attracted 1.3 million spectators in France, was widely distributed internationally and equally widely discussed by critics. The film was awarded the Lion d’Or at the Venice Mostra Film Festival and the Prix Méliès in 1985. Sandrine Bonnaire, who plays Mona, was only seventeen when she was offered this important early role, which earned her a César for Best Actress. Varda had seen her in her first role in Maurice Pialat’s A nos amours (1983).

SYNOPSIS

Sans toît ni loi retrace the disturbing story of Mona, a homeless young vagabond, who hitchhikes through the wintry French countryside of the south of France and is found dead in a ditch one morning. She appears to have been living rough for some time but nobody knows much about her. The accounts of the various people who met her in the weeks preceding her death form the basis of an attempt to reconstruct the jigsaw
of the last three weeks of her life, try to work out who she was and where she was heading. They include David (Patrick Lepczynski), another homeless hippy, nicknamed ‘the wandering Jew’. Yolande (Yolande Moreau), a working-class housemaid who dreams of eternal love, the ex-hippy (Sylvain) with a philosophy degree turned goatherd who lives on the margins of society and tries to give Mona some work, Assoun (Assouna Yahiaoui), the Tunisian seasonal worker who prunes vines, Madame Landler (Macha Méri), the tree specialist and academic who tries to help Mona, and her assistant Jean-Pierre (Stéphane Freiss).

**GENESIS OF SANS TOIT NI LOI**

Throughout her career, Varda has adopted an unusual approach to the pre-production of her films, involving preliminary documentary research on location and overall control at most levels of production, including casting. This forms part of what she calls the ‘cinédocumentaire’ process, by which we will return later. Several distinct stages have been identified in the genesis of Sans toit ni loi. The project started from real-life material, a ‘fait divers’ related by a policeman to the film-maker about a young man who was found frozen to death in 1984. The story prompted her to start an investigation into young people who live on the road, and who sometimes are found dead amidst general indifference in our modern society. The idea behind the film was to act as a mediator between the audience and homeless people, who were rarely talked about in the 1980s, before the term ‘sans domicile fixe’ (SDF) became an expression commonly used in the French media.

At a second stage, the main character of the film became a female vagabond called Mona. This change was largely inspired by the young women that Varda met on the road as part of her enquiry, especially a young hitchhiker she picked up called Sétila. Varda spent a lot of time talking with this outsider in 1984 and hired her to help provide some first-hand real experience to some scenes she was planning to use in the film and to give Bonnaye some advice on how to play her character. Sétila also has a small role as a vagrant in the squat and station scene (see DVD bonus feature).

An important part of the groundwork for the film was to find secondary characters, who for the most part are played by non-professional participants, usually met during the preparation trips (e.g. the Tunisian worker Assoun, and Sylvain the ex-hippy turned goatherd). Varda did not organise a casting session for Mona’s role and only contacted Bonnaye a few weeks before shooting started without auditioning her. The other cast selection was directly linked to the choice of location, in a region that Varda knew well, as she spent part of her childhood in Sète. More specifically, the project started in a setting that Varda had known for many years and had wanted to use in one of her films: the small hilltop with the two cypresses seen in the first shots of the film during the credits – and the place where Mona dies. ‘Places inspire me as much as emotions,’ says Varda. The film was shot on location in the Languedoc region, in Nîmes and surrounding villages in early 1985, often using the real homes of the participants. Shooting was described as a physically trying and difficult time (see DVD bonus feature). Varda financed it through Ciné-Tamaris and subsequently received financial support from the French national television channel Antenne 2, along with further backing from the Ministry of Culture. Sans toit ni loi did not benefit from the Centre National de Cinématographie (CNC) subsidy ‘Avance sur recettes’. The CNC usually allocates subsidies according to the merits of the script, and there was no traditional screenplay for this film prior to shooting, only locations, characters and a three-page narrative outline. The next section considers the narrative structure and characterisation of the film in more detail.

**NARRATIVE STRUCTURE AND CHARACTERISATION**

In an unusual strategy of character development which undermines a traditional psychological approach, Varda uses the last three weeks of Mona’s life as a narrative pretext to reflect on freedom and marginality. In the opening scene of the film, which acts as a prologue, a fixed shot reveals a field, and in the distance a small hilltop and two slender cypresses. This is the backdrop for the opening credits before the camera tracks slowly forward towards a worker moving through branches. After another tracking shot, the camera stops over a ditch, revealing a young woman’s body, dead on the frozen ground. A voice-over (that sounds like Varda’s) names the corpse, Mona Bergeron, and explains that the film is constructed as a flashback, in an attempt to find out more about her life: not why she lived the way she lived, but more importantly how she lived.

Mona is introduced in an extreme long shot emerging naked from the sea, in a manner which seems directly inspired by Botticelli’s painting ‘The Birth of Venus’, showing that Varda loves incorporating visual references into her cinema. From the start, Mona eludes everyone, including the narrator, who immediately places herself on a level with the audience: ‘I know little about her myself, but I think she came from the sea.’ In interviews, Varda describes her character as a strong presence and a rebel, potential prey, but certainly not a victim. From the initial scenes, it is made clear that Mona rejects social structures, wants to be alone and that she has chosen this lifestyle. Yet, the film does not
provide psychological explanations for this choice, and Mona’s past is hardly mentioned:

You bump into her, know nothing about her, and all you can catch is what she is now. As a writer, I chose to forget about the writer’s position and acknowledge that I don’t know or understand her totally. I invented a character who eludes me. (Varda in Insdorf 1986)

Mona is a rebel who refuses to conform, to be helped or to say thank you. Unlike the goatherd she meets on her journey; she is not a product of 1968 and the Hippie Flower generation. Rather, she represents a form of non-ideological non-conformity, a young woman who lives in the 1980s ‘without roof, with no rules’, as suggested by the film’s French title. It is significant that this was the decade when French society became more aware of the homeless (the SDF) and more generally social exclusion (‘la fracture sociale’), a phrase that was later used in the 1990s by Jacques Chirac in his presidential campaign. As René Prédal notes, Mona says ‘no’ to everything, just as many homeless people rejected the emergency structures and hostels organised by the social services (2003: 46). She wants to be left alone (it’s alright, alone) and she does not want to be conscripted by a routine, social conventions or work – except during the moments spent with Assoun, with whom she feels relaxed, possibly because he does not judge her. Even when she has sex, it is without emotion or affection. She rarely talks, and this gives special significance to the first words that she utters when she is picked up by a truck-driver who comments on the deserted roads at that time of the year. ‘There’s me,’ Mona replies, asserting her identity and her existence (Prédal 2003: 46). However, the fact that Mona does not give much away through language does not mean that she does not communicate anything, as her reactions illustrate. She can express anger and rebellion, and often reacts aggressively. She laughs with Aunt Lydie, cries when Assoun tells her she has to leave. As the portrait develops, she increasingly becomes a resisting figure and a survivor.

Mona’s exclusion is represented graphically in the film – with her dirty struggling hair, leather jacket, heavy rucksack and the stench she gives off. Her vagabond look becomes more emblematic at the end of the film when her turned-down broken boots and blanket seem inspired by old photographs and medieval drawings, giving her a more abstract and timeless dimension. Mona is deliberately presented as unpleasant, aggressive, and disconcerting, as a way to prevent identification and empathy from the audience. She inspires rejection among the people who meet her in the film. For example, the man who closes his shutters on her tells her to look for a tobaccoist elsewhere (‘allez plus loin’). Mona’s longer encounters with Yolande and Madame Landier are based more on conflicting feelings of curiosity, attraction and rejection. Lying in her bath, Madame Landier reports on the phone that she has picked up a vagabond: ‘You can’t imagine how she stank. When she got into the car it suffocated me. Everything stank, her sleeping bag, her rucksack, her…’ Later, Jean-Pierre adds ‘She scares me because she repels me’. However, in an earlier scene with his wife Eliane, he had unwittingly indicated that Mona attracted him as well. Varda herself suggested that Mona used her dirty appearance as a statement of her marginality.

[...] I learned how dirty they [the homeless] were, so the filthiness became a second subject; it’s not only that they don’t have water, but that it’s a second way of being subversive, separating themselves from others. Just to speak to them, you have to cross that space. (In Insdorf 1986)

Even those who try to help Mona keep their distance, as if they were at the same time attracted and repelled by her. The goatherd gives her an old caravan outside the farm, and although Madame Landier drops her off and gives her some money before coming home, she does not invite Mona into her flat.

As Carrie Tarr has explained, Mona ‘defies any fixity of knowledge and identity’. She is even ‘denied a subjective perspective’ (2001: 235). Her fragmented and multi-faceted portrait emerges through the subjective memories of the other characters and the different testimonies that they provide on her. She induces the people who meet her to reflect on freedom, loneliness and rejection. More than the singular personal destiny of Mona, this is the true subject of the film, explicitly introduced by Varda in a note on methodological and authorial positioning at the beginning of the film:

The people she had met recently remembered her. Those witnesses helped me tell the last weeks of her last winter. She left her mark on them. They spoke of her, not knowing she had died. I didn’t tell them.

The twenty-five testimonies listed in the screenplay seem partial and fragmented because they rely on memory; but they are also subjectively coloured by the personality and desires of each witness. They are staged using varied modes of address and filmic conventions. Some direct comments are made in documentary-style talking to a fixed camera with minimal framing. Yolande appears on four occasions, David once. Assoun remains silent. Some indirect comments are made within the diogenes of the film and incorporated into conversations with other characters. For example, Madame Landier asks Jean-Pierre to find Mona, because she is retrospectively worried and ashamed to have left her alone. Flitterman-Levis has also identified some intermediate form which further-blends documentary and fiction that she calls the ‘modified direct address’ (1990: 304-5). The girl telling her parents about her desire to be free, the unhappy wife talking to her husband; the goatherd talking to his wife, and Madame Landier talking to Jean-Pierre about her guilt illustrate this strategy. They all address the camera, hence the audience, in frontal close-ups, but they are actually talking to one of the diegetic characters.

Through their testimonies, the characters reveal something about themselves, as in a mirror effect. For instance, David thought that he could retain Mona, but was abandoned once his provision of marijuana had run out. Yolande transferred her ideal of romantic ‘eternal love onto a deceptive snapshot of Mona and David sleeping in each other’s arms; Assoun, who provides the last testimony, remains silent; as for Tante Lydie, she does not
take part in the commentaries. In this game of mirrors, the spectators too learn more
about the people who react to her than about Mona, and they are also questioned about
their own feelings. As Varda cheekily asks, ‘Would you give Mona a ride? Would you let her
sleep in your car? Would you give her money? It’s not the question but the questioning
that matters’ (in Insdorf 1986). She forces the spectator into a state of introspective
questioning that goes beyond the specific case of Mona.

This jigsaw puzzle construction of Mona’s character weaves a fragmented, non-linear
circular narrative, built around flashbacks and an episodic structure. There is no suspense,
no hope regarding the outcome of Mona’s homeless journey. Her death is revealed in the
first minutes of the film when she is discovered in a ditch, and the spectator is witness to
a brief investigation by the gendarme, who concludes that the death is by natural causes,
despite the disturbing marks of dried blood on the face and clothes. This is followed with
a flash scene of windows and walls with red marks being cleaned, which will be explained
only at the end of the film. The apparent episodic nature of the film is cemented by a
number of narrative bridges which, once they are gradually revealed, help the audience
put together some pieces of the jigsaw. For example, Yolande, the caretaker of the
chateau, Paulo, Tante Lydie and Eliane are initially introduced in isolation, and the spectator
only realises little by little that Yolande is Paulo’s girlfriend and the caretaker’s niece, that
she is employed by Tante Lydie, who is the aunt of Eliane’s husband Jean-Pierre, who
works with Madame Landier.

The film’s complex temporal structure oscillates between the present and the past,
driven by constructed, yet subjective authorial desires rather than by chronological
considerations. Time is in turn condensed and expanded in the film, due to the delayed
testimonies of some of the characters. However, this does not prevent an explicit
descending character trajectory showing Mona develop from a confident, rather happy
traveler at the beginning of her travels into the physically worn-out vagabond in tattered
clothes who arrives in the village in the middle of a violent ritual ceremony, to which we
will return later. This downward journey is suggested metaphorically by the gradual loss of
material possessions: Mona successively breaks the zip of her boots then wears the soles
through; she loses her duvet in the squat fire, and ends up with just a blanket to protect
her from the cold. The journey towards death is also represented symbolically in Mona’s
successive positions, standing, sitting with a sandwich and lying on a street bench and in
the ditch; three images used as promotional posters of the film and placed alongside
each other (in the Paris metro for example). The unusual narrative and temporality of the
film also suggest a number of modernist and postmodern influences, whereby precise
contexts are not provided and temporal markers are blurred; but we do not have the
space to develop this here. Let us merely note that the postmodern feel is reinforced by
some of the thematic elements, often found in road movie narratives using motifs of
wandering and solitude (see Prédal 2003: 44). The postmodern can also be related to
the blurring of genre conventions — in this case documentary and fiction — which will be
discussed in the next section.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE BLEND OF DOCUMENTARY AND FICTION: ENGAGING WITH THE
‘REAL’ WORLD

Varda uses several familiar strategies borrowed from the documentary film and ‘cinéma
vérité’, but she also appropriates these to develop her own authorial project as we
have seen, some characters address the camera directly, and some scenes using non-
professional participants acting as themselves seem improvised (but, in fact, they are
not). She enjoys filming ‘real’ people in their familiar spaces, using their own objects and
wearing their own clothes. A typical example is the episode with Assoun, who is filmed
in his real home and workplace. However, as a service sheet/diary extract published in
Cahiers du cinéma reveals, Varda’s authorial presence and the staging of the scenes are
evident at all times. Successive takes are shot in every case to achieve the specific visual
and sound effects that the director has in mind. The minute description of the shooting
script of the scenes showing Mona learning to prune, Assoun cooking the chips and the
two of them eating illustrates Varda’s working method, which is not as improvised as her
interviews sometimes suggest. Unlike the documentarist Nicolas Philibert, whose fly-on-the-wall method is discussed in chapter seven, she controls her camera and the shooting
plan at all times in this film; she does not let the camera run randomly to try to capture
unexpected shots (Varda 1985: 11–15).

Varda’s cinema thus projects an individual image of reality, in the sense that the texture
of her filming can be linked to that of a documentary, but not the intentions behind
the project or the filming method. The film is made of ‘sensations’, for example detailed
shots of the bark of trees, sardines eaten with fingers, potatoes, tent sticks. These are
shared with the audience, not so much with a view to ‘explaining them’, but rather to
‘communicating them’ (in Mérigueau 2003). What also really interests Varda in ‘reality’ is
anything that does not seem realistic (in Landrot 2003). As an artist, she is receptive to
the artistic representation of beauty and to the way this beauty, which is often made of
ordinary objects or scenes, is emphasised. This does not mean that Varda eschews
political and social commentary. Although she does not see herself as a militant film-
maker, she overtly strives to attract attention to important situations which are ignored
or met by indifference by society generally. She likes to think that sans toi ni loi helped
to raise consciousness on homelessness in the 1980s, and the film certainly did achieve this
objective in France.

Like many Varda films, sans toi ni loi engages directly with the world, and therefore it
complies with the definition of art/uteur cinema advocated by some French critics in
favour of a cinema which offers a better understanding of the real world (see Kagarlitski
2001 and the section on French critics in this book’s Introduction). The themes addressed
with varying degrees of importance in the film include social exclusion; homelessness;
social responsibility; youth and the limits of freedom; sexual identity and personal dignity;
and of course, death:
I find it disturbing that in this age of technical progress and sophisticated heating, there are still people who are so cold that it kills them. Those who die from the cold have no home, and usually no family; they die alone. It's a terrible death. (Varda in Insdorf, 1983)

Varda's words strangely echo the solidarity message of the 'Restos du Coeur', an association launched in late 1985, thus after Varda made her film, by the comedian Coluche and a group of artists and funded mostly by public donations to provide free meals for people who needed them. The association has expanded ever since and is in operation every winter in all major cities in France. A more recent example of an initiative against homelessness is the action of Augustin Legrand and his more political association to find accommodation for homeless people. His organisation, set up in 2006, is called Les Enfants de Don Quijote. However, it must be noted that homelessness was not as present in the news in France in 1984 when the film was produced as it is nowadays. For example, the 1987 edition of Francoscopie and the Quad 1989 do not index SDF or homelessness, and the first serious investigation of the French official organisation INSEE on this issue was not published until 2001.

A number of contemporary films have treated the theme of homelessness in French cinema in different ways: in the 1980s, a few comedies such as Marche à l'ombre (Michel Blanc, 1984) addressed the issue, as well as a more realistic fiction, Une époque formidable (Gérard Jugnot, 1989), and Leos Carax's spectacular project Les Amants du Pont Neuf (1991); from the mid-1990s, the issue was addressed in more political and social realist terms in films such as La Vie révée des anges (Erick Zonca, 1998) and the Belgian film Rosetta (Luc and Jean-Pierre Dardenne, 1999), which incidentally both received prizes at the Cannes festival. More recently, the homelessness motif has inspired other original projects such as Enfermés dehors (Albert Dupontel, 2006) and Versailles (Pierre Schoeller, 2008). These films may well have helped to raise awareness on a serious social problem, but successive governments and social initiatives seem to have been unable to respond proactively or to find effective solutions. Homelessness debates reappear every year in France, usually just before Christmas, when the first homeless people are found dead in the streets during the first cold spells.

In Sains tout ni loi, Mona's choice to live on the roads and her homelessness are directly associated with freedom. The motif of freedom is explored from different perspectives using the reactions of the other characters to her life on the margins of society (see Sercceau 2009:125). In this respect, Mona acts as a mirror for their conceptions, or sometimes idealised constructs, of freedom. For example, Katy, the young girl who shows her the pump, envies Mona's freedom and tells her parents: 'I'd like to be free.' The goatherd, on the other hand, has experienced pure freedom and the road in a previous life (probably in the wake of the May 1968 hippy and beatnik movements). However, he has returned to a self-sufficient, sedentary lifestyle with a wife and children. He warns Mona of the dangers of trying to reach complete freedom and suggests a compromise: 'I chose the middle road between freedom and loneliness... If you want to stay alive, you must give up a little bit.' He adds later when she does not seem to respond to his advice: 'You're not a drop out, you're just out.' As this section has suggested, Sains tout ni loi therefore uses a number of narrative and generic strategies to engage with the real world. To complement the analysis, we now need to consider more specifically the mise-en-scène of the last three weeks of Mona's life.

MISE-EN-SCÈNE: STAGING HOMELESSNESS AND LIFE ON THE ROAD

As we have seen, the narrative structure and character construction of Sains tout ni loi are experimental. Varda is more interested in contrasts and multiple viewpoints than in linearity and strict chronology. Her visual style reflects this taste for contrast and opacity. The mise-en-scène strategies, the choice of setting and the sometimes self-conscious cinematography and dialogue all contribute to the original form of realism, which consists of constructing from the outside a portrait that is both fragmentary and contrastive. The first point to note is that Mona mainly exists through her movements ('je bouge') and the spaces in which she is placed, because Varda deliberately chose these spaces prior to shooting and assigned them a precise meaning:

I'm tired of the fact that French films never have space, as if the entire universe of the French cinema were psychological, internal and enclosed. If you look at French films, what do you see? Psychological conflicts, perverse love relationships... I wanted to see a French landscape. (In Insdorf, 1986)

The film was shot on location in the Languedoc region in the south of France, in various villages around Nimes in the départements of Gard and Hérault, spaces associated with numerous Mediterranean clichés, but quite distinct from the Côte d'Azur or Provence. Varda notes that this region has rugged landscapes. The winters there are colder and the summers hotter than in nearby Provence. The wintry scenes of the open fields that Mona walks through contrast with the usual colourful representations of France immortalized by many impressionist paintings, for instance. The two cypresses on the hilltop may remind us of Van Gogh and Cézanne, but the colour schemes immediately prevent any further association.

The use of colour is distinctive in Sains tout ni loi and assigned specific functions of creating a cold wintry atmosphere and suggesting mood changes in the character. Critics have often commented on the beauty of the landscapes of the film, mostly due to unusual light and close attention to detail (see Bergala 1985; Flitterman-Levis 1990: 307–8). The tones are brighter and warmer (pale oranges and pinks) at the beginning of the film, although already reflecting the winter season. Mona's first walking scenes evoke through colours and bright open spaces a relatively carefree travelling lifestyle. Later in the film, the paler tints of winter are contrasted with the bright and warm colours used for the indoor scenes (Eliane's flat, for example). In the last part of the film the images are generally darker including some recurring blue and black tones which suggest that
Mona has no chance of surviving the cold. In the last scene, the light retains a purple tone, also captured by her blanket, as she is about to fall in the ditch. The motifs of water (cold blue) and fire (bright orange) are also associated with an aesthetic use of colour that characterises Varda's visual style and illustrates her meticulous image composition. Another motif present in many of Varda's films, and associated with death, is the beauty of things and people in the process of decomposition, a 'withering' perceived as a way of capturing truth. In this respect Mona responds to Cléo's illness in Cléo de 5 à 7 and prefigures the portrait of the dying Jacques Demy in Jacques d'Amour.

The work on narrative composition and character construction is complemented by clear strategies of cinematography often carried out by Varda herself. "She is more interested in camerawork than actor direction", Bonnaire noted. "A better wryly". (1985: 10). The camera frequently follows Mona from a distance, catching her in sweeping glances, but rarely resorting to close-ups, preferring to underline Mona's movements and gestures. In this respect, the episode of the 'Fête des Paillasses' contrasts with the rest of the film and provides a rare dramatic climax. It is a medieval ritual involving masked participants who chase and scare people, covering them in dregs of wine. Mona arrives in the middle of the ceremony already physically weakened and worn out. She is terrified by social codes that she does not understand. The camera is closer to the characters, creating a more abstract, surreal effect and exacerbating the violence of the episode. This scene stands out from other moments when Varda deliberately creates a distance by moving away from the action, as illustrated by the recurrent tracking shots and more particularly the rape scene.

The use of tracking shots is, in fact, part of a novel cinematographic device used to structure the film, namely the use of twelve tracking shot movements which show Mona moving from place to place. These tracking shots not only underpin the narrative structure of the film, even though they are not placed at regular intervals in the narrative, but they also represent an aesthetic statement. They have been amply commented on by film critics and the director herself (see DVD bonus feature). Numbered from one to twelve, the tracking shots usually linger on open outdoor spaces in which Mona is seen walking (see Prédal 2003: 104-105 and Flitterman-Lewis 1990: 295-7). The first, located soon after the beginning of the flashback narrative, shows Mona hitchhiking near the beach; in the second, she is seen walking along a wall in a village smoking a cigarette; number eight in the woods includes the rape; the last one takes her to the small hill with the cypresses near the ditch where her body will be found.

The tracking shots work as a form of filmic punctuation. Varda wanted the episodes of meeting to be structured around Mona's journeys across the wintry spaces of the south of France. She opted for a composed, aesthetic representation of Mona on the move, highlighted by a recurring musical theme that contrasts with the documentary feel experienced at other moments of the film. This non-diegetic music, composed by Joanna Bruzdowski on variations around her piece 'La Vita', is different from the more modern upbeat extracts heard in the diegesis (e.g. Rita Mitsouko and the Doors).

The tracking shots are conspicuous and have a distancing effect. They are signalled by cuts or in-camera fades to increase the impression of authenticity and the idea of discontinuity. However, they also function as a linking device, echoing one another with recurrent visual details. For example, the end of number ten and the beginning of number eleven are linked by the presence of a phone box. Special attention is given to sounds in the tracking shots (footsteps, rustling noises of fabric). They have little dramatic use, yet they are more than mere narrative transitions between the different encounters or a functional editing device. They represent an alternative to linear narrative and continuity editing to cement a progression in the different episodes of the film, thus underpinning its creation of meaning. They help to organise the unusual temporality used in the film and suggest their fluidity of movement, the ineluctable nature of Mona's journey towards her fate and death.

The tracking shots emphasise Mona's movements, yet far from confirming her freedom, they often heighten her isolation and signal all the social spaces that she cannot access because of her status as an outsider (see Prédal 2003: 106). Mona is often seen walking alone high walls, deserted roads, past closed gates. She also walks from right to left on the screen, which goes against the normal film reading habits of Western audiences, from left to right. As a result, watching the tracking shots requires an effort on the part of the spectator: Not only is Mona going against the flow, but her inverted movement (mirroring the flashback narrative) makes it harder for the audience to understand the character from the external descriptions proposed. The tracking shots are also less focused on Mona than it may initially seem: frequently, the camera is already tracking across a landscape when Mona moves into the frame and the shot continues moving after she has left the frame. For example, in tracking shot number four, Mona appears from behind a wall and immediately disappears again to hide from an approaching police car. On several occasions, Mona leaves the frame for a few seconds before reappearing. This filmic strategy illustrates how difficult it is to keep the elusive Mona within the frame of the camera. She embodies marginality and cannot be contained within the frameworks set by society — or film directors.

Varda's images are carefully composed, as is the dialogue of the film, mostly written out and adhered to, according to various sources, although it was sometimes written in the last minutes before shooting began (see Vasse 2009: 35). Varda often uses language metaphorically, and she often plays with words and their sounds; 'bread for bread' (du bleu pour du pain), says Mona wryly to Madame Landier, who offers her money before leaving her. As for the goatherd-philosopher, he judges Mona by using a play on words: 'she is useless and by proving she is useless she helps the system she rejects. It's not wandering, it's withering' ('C'est pas l'errance, c'est l'erreur'). So Sans toît ni loi illustrates how Varda's cinema places images, camera movement, editing music and dialogue at the centre of the creative process of film-making, her distinctive cinécrure.
VARDÀ, SANS TOIT NI LOI AND CINÉCRITURE

The term ‘cinécrìture’ has already been mentioned on several occasions in this chapter to describe Vardà’s working method and her artistic approach to film-making. The phrase was coined by the director herself to describe her working process:

I threw this word in, and now I use it to refer to the film-maker’s work. [...] a well-written film is also a well shot film, with well-chosen actors and locations. The composition, the movements, the points of view, the rhythm of the shoot and the editing have been chosen and thought out in a similar way to the words of an author. (Prédal 2003: 85)

In view of this definition, Vardà’s approach can be related to Alexandre Astruc’s conception of ‘caméra stylo’ (Astruc 1948), presented in the late 1940s and further developed in the 1950s in the context of ‘auteur theory’ (politique des auteurs) by the Cahiers du cinéma critics (see Introduction). It can also be related to Jean-Luc Godard’s early critical writings on the role of cinema in the 1950s and 1960s. But we must not forget that SANS TOIT NI LOI was partly written in the traditional manner with a script that pre-dated the shooting. ‘Cinécrìture’ can therefore also be understood as an alternative to the sacrosanct French ‘scenario’ as the foundation of a film, but not as a synonym for improvisation. As we have seen, Vardà mixes in her films elements of fiction (through character interactions and episodes) and a documentary texture (the sociological enquiry, for example) and stages herself as one of the protagonists of the film. Unlike Louis Malle, who often was viewed as a self-effacing auteur-director (see chapter five), Vardà emerges as a highly visible auteur in several different ways: she writes some of her dialogue on set; she stages herself and speaks in the first person in the film; and she makes her filming project explicit to all. She has no inclination to document Mona’s past or merely to develop the anecdotal side of her story in a realistic but neutral narrative. She is more interested in generating questions than providing answers, involving herself and the audience in this questioning. As we have seen, the writing of the dialogue in particular was very much performed on set for the day. This often influenced and re-centred the project, depending on what had happened the day before (Landrot 2003), but it did not reduce Vardà’s control.

Vardà describes her stories as ‘thin’, stressing that her work consists of deciding how she uses them, in other words how she narrates the films (Fitterman-Lewis 1990: 286). The credits reference Vardà as the author of the screenplay and director in an unusual way: ‘ciné-written [cinécrìte] by Agnès Vardà’. She suggests that her film ‘oscillates between inner world and outside world’. In this context, ‘cinécrìture’ does not just refer to the screenplay, but also the filming processes, including the selection of technical crew and actors, the editing style, the voice-over commentary, and the choice of sets, season for filming, sound and lighting. Vardà tends to resist an intellectual or theoretical interpretation of her films. She has, however, developed the concept of ‘cinécrìture’ herself. SANS TOIT NI LOI had ‘to be captured’, as the working title used for the film, ‘À Saisir’ (to seize), suggests. In other words, Vardà’s ‘cinécrìture’ is based on two opposing principles: her strong authorial control discussed above on the one hand, and the more unpredictable capturing of fragments of truth on the other.

Finally, SANS TOIT NI LOI is dedicated to the nouveau roman author Nathalie Sarraute, who is clearly identified as a source of inspiration. Her literary work explores characterisation and fiction narrative in terms which recall Vardà’s film and her attempt to capture through prisms and mirrors what Mona refuses to say and show, and what other people thought they saw in her. Similarly, Sarraute rejects realistic chronological narratives and often combines the minute observation of details and subjective narratives. As the critic Claude-Marie Trémois noted when the film came out, both artists favour the moment, the short-lived tenuous link between people and also the notion of ‘‘errance’ (‘wandering’ in English, quoted in Prédal 2003: 83).

A BRIEF NOTE ON FEMINIST READINGS OF THE FILM

René Prédal rightly notes that feminist concerns are not the central element of SANS TOIT NI LOI. Jill Forbes refers to Mona as ‘the opposite of a female cinematic icon’ (1992: 93). Susan Hayward also suggests that the films of Vardà have often been criticised and ignored by feminist critics. She was, for example, dismissed by the American feminist critic Claire Johnston in 1976 as ‘reactionary and certainly not feminist’, probably due to the way Vardà represents femininity in physical terms rather than as a process of historical development. L’Une chante, l’autre pas was accused of proposing too optimistic a representation of women (see Hayward 2000: 269–70). However, amongst the considerable critical responses inspired by SANS TOIT NI LOI, there are several feminist studies of the film, including essays by Sandy Fitterman-Lewis and Susan Hayward, both published in 1990, and by Alison Smith (1996 and 1998), which provide enlightening, if subjective, analyses by placing the film within a feminist theoretical framework. These essays all agree that the film constitutes an example of a film-making, and that Vardà expresses a feminine cinematic voice by her consistent use of central female protagonists and thematic choices. For Fitterman-Lewis, SANS TOIT NI LOI is ‘part social investigation and part feminist inquiry’ in which ‘she interrogates ‘“femininity’” and its cultural representations’ (1990: 286). She also sees the focus on the female body in the film, combined with the ‘disruption of patriarchal logic’ and ‘dispersion of patriarchal gaze’ as other signs of a feminist approach (1990: 306). Carrie Tarr also comments that Mona ‘redeline[s] the way woman is looked at and more importantly concludes that the film may implicitly criticise the “post-feminist notion that feminism had achieved its goals”’ (2001: 235).

Vardà was one of the rare self-proclaimed feminist French directors in the 1970s. However, when asked if she saw herself as a feminist in 1983, she indicated that she wasn’t always very clear about discrimination and it is not exactly [her] image (in Sabine 1983). In this light it may be more productive to focus on Vardà’s free feminine
STUDYING FRENCH CINEMA

look on the world, on her engagement with real problems which directly affect women and on her feminine artistic sensitivity than limit the interpretation of the film to the expression of feminist ideologies. Nevertheless, Sans toit ni loi can be related in its realistic approach and documentary form to a number of other films by women directors, especially in the 1990s. Y a ura-t-il de la neige à Nobi? (Sandrine Veysey, 1997) comes to mind as another story set in the rural south of France and focusing on the struggle of a mother of seven children who lives in poverty on the margins of society. Laetitia Masson’s film A vendre (1999) also presents strong female characters on the move by using a complex flashback narrative (see Tarr 2001: 236–9).

CONCLUSION

Sans toit ni loi depicts a character who escapes from the grasp of the people who meet her in the last three weeks of her life. More importantly she also eludes the director trying to capture her life on film. Varda uses cinématographie to demonstrate that it is impossible to film a person’s life, and keeps her distance from her subject through a strategically constructed experimental narrative. This enables the audience to access an element of truth about Mona and/or the questions of freedom and marginality raised in the film, but not to know Mona’s life or understand her. The film lends itself to numerous interpretations, but it is above all about the ways in which people project their own stories onto others. It explores the interaction between the self and ‘the other’, revealing in the process a number of desires, attitudes and prejudices. It is also an original and innovative example of auteur cinema after the New Wave.

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

Sabin, J. ‘Agnès Varda’ (Interview), Cinema Papers, 42 (March 1983), 34–5 and 83.