

Abstract submission for Gender Equality and Sustainability: Agnès Varda's Sustaining Legacy.

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Abstract:

Agnès Varda leaves a remarkable legacy and an endlessly compelling body of work behind her. With the "gleaning" idea at the centre of *The Gleaners and I* (2000), Varda cultivates a rich metaphor through which she conceptualises her method, frames her worldview, and brings a heightened significance to the physical practice of gleaning itself. She transforms gleaning, and the attitude towards sustainability that it encompasses, into a progressive philosophical outlook; to glean is to find meaning and importance in what might seem ephemeral. What she implicitly advocates, though, is the great fulfilment in seeking metaphoric connections within our experiences. For Varda, gleaning is an inherently metaphoric act, where what she gleans becomes imbued with new meaning. This search for metaphors in the world around her is integral to her approach to the documentary project.

Metaphor permeates documentary in some complex and profound ways, yet this conjunction of a genre—documentary—characterised by the pronunciation of its truth-claims, and a concept—metaphor—built around a necessary falsehood, holds a dissonance. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's influential conceptual metaphor theory proposes that much of how we understand our experience of reality is shaped by metaphoric structures and, as they put it, 'metaphors may create realities for us'.¹ Varda is therefore a perfect case study to analyse the role that metaphor plays in documentary's rendering of the real world. Her reality, as it is mediated through her documentaries, is one enveloped in metaphor. This paper will examine her work through this lens of metaphor, with a particular focus on *The Gleaners and I*, in order to better understand her unique method as a documentary-maker. Broader questions will be addressed about how documentary negotiates metaphor, and how our deeply embedded metaphoric conceptualisations shape, and are shaped by, our experience of reality.

Bibliography

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¹ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p.156.