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Feminism and Vegetal Freedom in Agnès Varda's *Le Bonheur* (1965) and *Vagabond* (1985)

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Abstract: This essay examines French filmmaker Agnès Varda's *Le Bonheur* (1965) and *Vagabond* (1985) for their critical invocation of the persistent and patriarchal association of women with plants. Both women and plants are thought within the metaphysical tradition to have a deficient or negative relation to freedom. Varda's films, however, link the liberation of women in postwar France to the liberation of vegetal being; her female protagonists pursue their liberation by accessing the vegetal freedom that subtends human freedom. In *Le Bonheur*, Varda uses visual irony to critique the processes of idealization that turn both women and flowers into signifiers of ideal beauty in thrall to the enchantments of happiness. In *Vagabond*, the enigmatic female drifter at the center of the film enacts a plant-like refusal of self-preservation. In both films, female liberation takes vegetal shape, as their protagonists embody a vegetal silence or vegetal indifference in defiance of the patriarchal situations they encounter.

Keywords: Agnès Varda; French feminism; vegetal ontology; plants; vegetal freedom



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Agnès Varda's production company Ciné-Tamaris (originally Tamaris Films, when it was founded in 1954) is named for the tamarisk plant found along the Mediterranean Sea, including in the coastal city Sète near to which Varda shot her first feature *La Pointe Courte* (1955). Varda has commented that her appreciation of the plant stems from its "strong, southern, and discreet" [1] nature¹. An entire corpus of films, spanning decades, is thus collected under the banner of this pink-flowering plant. Not surprisingly, Varda's filmmaking is overstuffed with vegetation. Among the many possible examples, one would include the Paulownia trees and Lebanese cedars explicitly referenced by the French soldier in *Cleo from 5 to 7* (1962); the rose petal titles of *Elsa la rose* (1965); the plants captured by Varda's dangling camera in *The Gleaners and I* (2000); and the flower that sprouts magically from a buried button in her short film *Les 3 Boutons* (2015). Varda's botanical abundance offers an opportunity to consider cinema's vegetal forms that stretch beyond mere depiction to questions of vegetal ontology.

Scholarship at the intersection of film studies and plant studies has largely focused on questions of vegetal movement and growth. The apparent immobility of plants is overcome by their cinematic reproduction, which reveals their locomotion through its malleable temporality. Oliver Gaycken [2], for instance, has documented the late nineteenth-century use of motion analysis to depict vegetal movement through the enlistment of visual devices such as time-lapse photography. Methods for the scientific observation of plant movement are an integral part of the pre-history of cinema, just as images of plant germination and growth became fascinating subject matter for early cinema. In an analysis of Percy Smith's *The Birth of a Flower* (1903), an actuality film that exhibited the flowering of ten floral species through time-lapse cinematography, Kyle Murdock [3] argues that films of this type are more than "a simple disclosure or inscription of vegetal agency" or representation that "reveals the 'truth' of plant movement". Rather, they are entanglements of human and nonhuman agencies. The depiction of plant movement, otherwise imperceptible to human vision, results from the assemblage of film's technological mediation and the plant's vitalist agency² [4].

These analyses of plant agency remain insightful into what vegetal ontology can reveal of cinematic ontology, and vice versa, but they do not exhaust that relation. Varda, for instance, is not especially interested in plant movement. Her films engage other aspects of vegetal being, especially insofar as they are relevant for the feminist concerns of her films. In her landmark 1973 essay, “Women’s Cinema as Counter-Cinema”, Claire Johnston [5] criticized the feminist credentials of Varda’s films—*Le Bonheur* (1965) in particular—because, she claimed, their “concern for nature” constituted a “retreat from history”³. *Le Bonheur*’s images of domestic happiness were indistinguishable from advertising, Johnston claimed, making Varda’s film “totally innocent to the workings of myth,” which naturalizes what is historically contingent. Heidi Holst-Knudsen [6] argues that Johnston judged Varda wrongly, that she misrecognized the ironic distanciation operative in *Le Bonheur*’s “too perfect” natural settings. Yet, as I will emphasize, Varda’s botanical interest, her “concern for nature,” is as integral to her feminist project as her films’ formal reflexivity. This essay considers how conceptions of female liberation in postwar France shaped the cinematic rendering of vegetal being in Varda’s filmmaking—in particular, in *Le Bonheur* and *Vagabond* (1985).

The philosophical question of existential freedom was paramount in postwar France, particularly in the wake of the liberation from German Occupation, but Western philosophy has generally excluded plants from the freedom available to humans. As Michael Marder [7] indicates, plants are considered to be ontologically unfree because they cannot self-determine or cannot otherwise exceed their external determinations (i.e., their growth is wholly responsive to environmental conditions). Moreover, plants exhibit no self-consciousness—which is not to say that they are not capable of communication or do not possess some form of intelligence. They have no unitary self that can take itself as the object of a reflexive conscious apprehension; the plant is not one but multiple. Their relation to the world is not internalized; rather, plant-being is entirely “superficial”, a matter of the spatial extension of surface through growth rather than interiority. By virtue of their lack of self-determination and self-consciousness, plants are positioned negatively in relation to freedom. They are alive but unfree, more than a thing but absent a will that would allow a plant “to be otherwise than what or who it is,” this becoming-other, as Marder notes, being essential to freedom⁴.

Postwar French philosophy, such as the existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre [8] and the hermeneutic phenomenology of Paul Ricoeur [9], is indicative of these claims regarding the metaphysical deficiency of plants. For Sartre, free will is constitutive of the human; man is “that which he wills himself to be”⁵. Condemned to his freedom, man is determined by the actions he takes to realize himself. Consciousness is the capacity to negate what is given, but plant-being is deficient in this regard. The plant lacks an ability to project into the future, and therefore cannot transcend the determinants of its external situation. According to Sartre, writing in *Existentialism is a Humanism*, self-consciousness sharply distinguishes the human from “a patch of moss, a spreading fungus, or a cauliflower”⁶. Moreover, in his novel *Nausea*, as Randy Laist [10] argues, plants function “as a terrifying symbol of the unfathomable absurdity and radical contingency of human being”⁷. The purposeless vitality of plant-being stands in sharp contrast to the human’s effortful quest to transcend its own facticity. Ricoeur’s philosophy of the will, as outlined in his *Freedom and Nature*, offers a more modest conception of freedom than found in Sartre. For him, willing is not simply a matter of free choice, where a subject that acts operates with sovereignty over an impassive world. Ricoeur posits instead that freedom and nature are reciprocally intertwined. The will can only realize itself in being actualized within the domain of involuntary nature (the subject that acts is situated within a world) but the involuntary offers up the resources—for example, the body’s abilities—through which the subject has the capacity to act. In being wholly determined by its external relations, plant-being is excluded from this dynamic interplay and remains confined to the realm of the involuntary.

Freedom may have been valorized in postwar philosophy, but it remained restricted in practice for women living under the Fourth Republic, in ways that would mobilize feminist

movements in France in the decades after. Women were granted political emancipation in 1946 through the right to vote, but their personal and social lives remained highly regulated as a consequence of the reassertion of patriarchal values and natalist social policy in postwar France. As Lisa Greenwald [11] notes, “married women were still at the mercy of the anachronistic Napoleonic Code, which effectively maintained their legal status as minors,” meaning that they “could not seek employment, relocate, or keep their finances and business separate without the formal consent of a husband”⁸. Diagnosing the secondary status of women in postwar French society in *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir [12] deployed the terms of existentialist philosophy to demonstrate women’s differential access to freedom. Woman, she wrote, “is not considered an autonomous being”⁹. She is defined as Other to man—supplementary to, derived from, and dependent on his subjectivity. The existential subject “posits itself as a transcendence concretely, through projects” but in having to do this continually, the subject risks “laps[ing] into immanence,” of falling from freedom into facticity¹⁰. Woman’s freedom is constrained by patriarchal society which would “freeze her as an object and doom her to immanence”¹¹. She decides and chooses, as any existential subject, but does so within the confines of her historical situation. Her liberation will result from a change in these material circumstances, and be measured—writes de Beauvoir, anticipating the irony of the title of Varda’s *Le Bonheur*—“not in terms of happiness but in terms of freedom”¹².

The restriction of female subjectivity to immanence entails an ideological conflation of woman and nature, one to which de Beauvoir was well attuned. In the section on myths pertaining to womanhood, de Beauvoir observes that woman, in her patriarchal construction, is “nature raised to the transparency of consciousness”¹³. The existential subject’s continual efforts toward authenticity and sovereignty are fraught and can easily veer toward unfreedom or alienation, but woman as Other, as intermediary between man and nature, resolves this existential restlessness. Yet, as much as woman confirms man’s freedom by the diminution of her own, she also continually reminds him of the immanence that he wishes to transcend. As de Beauvoir writes, “woman embodies nature”, and comes to represent “the horror of [man’s] own carnal contingency that he projects on her”¹⁴. Existential subjectivity posits a duality between spirit and matter, between transcendence and immanence. Man springs from nature; he originates from it and depends on it, but he wishes to overcome this limitation on his freedom. This duality between ideality and materiality is gendered one. Man “would like himself to be as necessary as pure Idea, as One, All, absolute Spirit” but “it is woman who imprisons him in the mud of the earth”¹⁵. De Beauvoir specifies this disavowal of the feminine and the natural by citing historical prohibitions, taboos, and restrictions pertaining to fertility, sexuality, childbirth, and menstruation. Within this patriarchal mythology, woman is how man accesses nature in a transfigured form. She is adorned and ornamented by artifice designed to evoke (but also neutralize the frightening excesses of) the natural: “[M]an wants woman at the same time to be animal and plant and that she hide behind a fabricated armature”¹⁶. De Beauvoir is attentive to the vegetal associations of feminine beauty. Woman, she writes, “perfumed herself so as to smell of roses and lilies”; the “vegetal mystery” of her hair is tamed in being “braided, curled, or sculpted,” making nature “present but captive”; and when she ages, “she is said to be withered, faded, like a plant”¹⁷.

The persistent patriarchal association of the feminine with nature is critically invoked in Varda’s filmmaking, as well as in a contemporaneously released short film directed by Jeanne Barbillon. The pursuit of liberation by the female protagonists of *Le Bonheur* and *Vagabond* entails discovering the vegetal freedom that subtends human freedom. These films recognize that, as Marder [7] has argued, “plant liberation is indispensable for the possibility of human liberation”¹⁸. As he indicates, the symbiosis between vegetal and human freedom has been “concealed and disavowed”¹⁹. Its disclosure, however, offers a post-metaphysical conception of freedom not premised on transcendence and ideality, overturning a metaphysical tradition in which both women and plants are understood as

having a negative or deficient relation to freedom. The foreclosure of freedom to plants is overcome, Marder argues, by stripping away the accumulated weight of metaphysics bearing down on vegetal being, and so liberated, an encounter with the vegetal “triggers the emancipation of those who come into contact with it”²⁰. Varda stages these human-vegetal encounters as a means of posing questions about the possibilities for (but also constraints on) living freely in society. For example, *The Gleaners and I* thematically links the discarded vegetal remnants of the harvest to marginalized people surviving off what society has cast off; gleaning as a practice of recovering value in what is deemed waste involves a proximate relation to the vegetal otherwise suppressed by a highly industrialized society. In *Le Bonheur* and *Vagabond*, female characters confront patriarchal limitations on their freedom, and they pursue their liberation via a vegetal freedom that may be difficult to recognize as freedom as such, since it is based on qualities, such as silence and indifference, that look like its negation.

Strands of postwar French film theory provided support for the idea that cinema could overturn metaphysical certainties, and therefore offer a space for staging human-vegetal encounters not premised on their hierarchical relation. Filmmaker Jean Epstein [13], writing in postwar France in his 1946 book *The Intelligence of a Machine*, argued that the medium’s capacity for variable movement, its deceleration or acceleration of motion, achieves an “upheaval in the hierarchy of things”²¹. The medium slides, as it were, between different levels of existence or between different assemblages of matter and spirit, breaking down the metaphysical boundaries between mineral, vegetal, animal, and human. In cinema, “all the partitioned systems of nature are disarticulated”²². The human body is not privileged, and remains capable, says Epstein, of accessing its animal and vegetal inheritances, “rediscover[ing], in the movements of the torso or the neck, the active elasticity of the stem; in the undulating of hair or a horse mane, the swaying of a forest; in the beating of fins and wings, the palpitating of leaves; in the coiling and uncoiling of reptiles, the spiral sense of all vegetal growth”²³. One does not have to endorse Epstein’s vitalist understanding of the medium to recognize the mutual affinity between cinematic ontology and vegetal ontology. Rather than being defined by some idealist essence, both realize their being in taking form, in the ways they materialize by spatial extension. Cinematic studies of plant movement already point to the entanglement of film and the vegetal and that affinity can be expanded to other avenues for the formal expression of vegetal being. Varda’s films are ultimately fruitful sites for thinking about cinema’s possible vegetal forms. Before proceeding to a discussion of Varda, however, I turn to a lesser-known short film, released the same year as *Le Bonheur*, that likewise links the vegetal to a woman’s pursuit of freedom.

Jeanne Barbillon’s 14 min *L’Avatar botanique de Mademoiselle Flora/The Botanical Avatar of Miss Flora* (1965) dramatizes the escape of a disaffected young woman named Flora (Bernadette Lafont) from the dissatisfactions of her romantic relationship with a soldier. Flora narrates the events of her life just prior to her flight into what she calls a “vegetal silence”. For nearly three months, she has lived with Charles, in Nemours, but his continual absence from their shared apartment for much of the day due to his military obligations leaves Flora feeling isolated and neglected. The tedium prompts a response resembling vegetal torpor (“I couldn’t bring myself to move”, “I didn’t do anything”). She spends much of her time lying in bed reading women’s magazines, which, she complains, write only of “cold women”. Charles is occasionally “attentive”, she says, but he is otherwise too bound to order and discipline to provide her much intellectual or sexual stimulation. Flora’s disaffection is also linked to the alienating effects of a newly modernizing France at midcentury. For example, confining herself to the apartment, she complains about the “industrial smell” of a plastic curtain. She also comments that she and Charles never eat butter, only “vegetaplast”, a margarine substitute that Flora comments will “kill you”, citing the deaths of thousands of Danish people in the previous year²⁴. Though she says she has “never lived in the countryside”, Flora remains ill at ease with her increasingly artificial and stifling surroundings.

Her escape from these conditions begins with an engagement with the vegetal. A strong fascination with plants develops as a means for overcoming her isolation. Uninterested in her neighbors (“one sad old lady and a pig merchant”), she is instead drawn to a tall houseplant with large, waxy leaves—what looks like a rubber plant. A close-up shows a bare-shouldered Flora with one of these leaves covering her chest; both the plant and Flora’s skin are dappled with water. This implies some form of intimacy, a displacement of affection perhaps in response to Charles’s inattentiveness, but it is also indicative of a relation of identity, as the aptly named Flora begins to see herself in or as a plant.

This desire for vegetation (or to be vegetation) draws Flora out of the apartment as she takes long walks along the banks of the Loing River. The riverbank is distinguished from the apartment as a site of renewal rather than stagnation. She describes this place as “almost temporal”, since it involves the dynamic interactions between earth, mud, and water. It promises “a ventral return to life” as she imagines being able to absorb the “brighter blood” of the river. When back at the apartment, in defiance of Charles’s “methodical, hygienic, [and] thrifty” adherence to routine, Flora discovers a “great silence” that is “wonderfully vegetal”. She kneels on the floor next to a pile of vegetables. A close-up shows her face obscured behind a tangle of leeks. She then crowns her head with endive lettuce and caresses her face with a celery stalk. Heaped among these greens, Flora initiates her withdrawal from the human condition: “I no longer belonged to the world”, she says.

Flora’s radical transformation is completed the next day. She returns to the riverbank, her feet clinging to the ground (“I had to pull them out of the earth”), suggestive of the movement of roots. Charles confronts her, complaining that she has abandoned her domestic duties. Flora is vegetally silent in response. “I was indifferent, frozen”, we hear in voice-over. Charles lectures her about responsibility (“we must deserve society”). By means of her vegetal silence, Flora rejects Charles’s patriarchal values. Amid their argument, he holds her hair tightly. Barbillon pans to his face, and when the shot returns to his hand, he is now gripping the branches of a tree. Flora’s self-described “useless flesh” has taken arboreal shape. Frustrated, but oddly not shocked, Charles leaves her at the riverbank, as the film’s final shot lingers on Flora’s new vegetal self.

By casting Bernadette Lafont as Flora, Barbillon situates her short film within and against the French New Wave’s complicated (and often compromised) relation to feminism. Lafont starred in many of the canonical early New Wave films, appearing in *Les Mistons* (François Truffaut, 1957), *Le Beau Serge* (Claude Chabrol, 1958), and *Les bonnes femmes* (Chabrol, 1960). These roles were representative of a newly liberated femininity—young, economically independent, sexually assertive—but, as Roland-François Lack [14] has argued, they were often dominated by a carnality that reduced women to their bodies. Lack notes the distinction between Lafont’s onscreen roles in these early New Wave films and those of the post-May 68 period, which importantly for him, enact social critique through their joining of body to voice. Films such as *La Fiancée du pirate* (Nelly Kaplan, 1969) and *Les Stances à Sophie* (Moshé Mizrahi, 1971) utilize an interplay between silence and voice as the means for asserting a feminist subjectivity through the strategic deployment of speech, as when Lafont as the embattled protagonist of Kaplan’s film turns her sexual exploitation by men in her village against their attempts to denounce her through secret tape recordings²⁵.

Barbillon’s film falls between these two periods of Lafont’s career, situated at the transition point between her initial rise to stardom in the early New Wave and the post-68 period where she became “cinema’s dominant signifier of ‘la femme 68’ in all her newness and difference”²⁶. Given this emphasis on the liberating potential ascribed to voice, what we are to make of Flora’s vegetal silence? Her silence confronts the double bind that British feminist Sheila Rowbotham pointed to in her 1969 article “Women: The Struggle for Freedom” (which, Lack notes, is featured as part of the audio track of Jean-Luc Godard’s *British Sounds* [1969]): “We are assumed to have nothing to say, find it difficult to assert that we want to say something, are observed to say nothing, and they assume you’ve got nothing to say”²⁷. Flora’s vegetal silence risks the masculinist assumption that she has “nothing to say”. Nonetheless, her becoming-plant expresses a radical indifference

to societal values and to the narrowly circumscribed place allotted to women. Though it could be mistaken for a nihilistic gesture, her sink into vegetal freedom is an escape from the alienation of her situation since what the vegetal models is a mode of living not limited by these ideological constraints. Once Flora becomes a tree, Charles can no longer make any demands of her. The film's yoking of vegetal silence to its feminist project is related to what made the feminism of Varda's *Le Bonheur* illegible to critics such as Johnston, for whom political modernism (as practiced by Godard, say) was a more recognizable form of ideology critique. Flora's vegetal silence represents a different response to the denial of freedom to women, one that locates that freedom by accessing what it suppresses, the vegetal freedom that lies at its root.

Varda's *Le Bonheur* famously opens on a shot of a sunflower. Standing in a field of other sunflowers, it confronts the viewer like an unseeing eye from the center of the frame. Varda repeatedly returns to this shot throughout the film's opening credits, alternating between it and a wider shot of the Chevalier family crossing an out-of-focus grassy field. Each insertion of this shot, interrupting the family's slow movement toward the foreground, is progressively shorter in duration, making this sequence a self-conscious play with form. In part because of this formal reflexivity, scholarship on the film encourages us to read these images of sunflowers symbolically. Both Catherine Dousteysier-Khoze [15] and Heidi Holst-Knudsen [6], for example, see the sunflower's heliotropism (it follows the sun) as metaphorical of the film's central married couple, specifically of Thérèse's (Claire Drouot) "dangerously single-minded devotion" to her husband François (Jean-Claude Drouot)²⁸. Dousteysier-Khoze extends this symbolic reading to François's relentless pursuit of happiness; like the sunflower, he is "always turned toward the sun"²⁹. Varda's emphasis, she argues, pertains more to the "sunflower-as-image" than to the sunflower itself, in keeping with the film's thematic deconstruction of "*the image of a happy family*"—that is, its ironic evocation of overly "sunny" depictions of domestic bliss that it ultimately shows to be more sinister than they appear³⁰. That the sunflower is associated, in the language of flowers, with "false riches", indicative of the empty promise of happiness, only bolsters this symbolic reading.

In his "The Language of Flowers" (1929), Georges Bataille [16] took aim the symbolic interpretation of flowers, such as the association of the red rose with romantic love. Such symbolism is a gesture of abstraction, from the base elements of the plant to its more colorful and fragrant qualities, a "displace[ment] from the pistil and stamens to the surrounding petals"³¹. The flower's corolla comes to represent ideal beauty through an act of sublimation, through a disavowal of the plant's "hairy sexual organs"³². Its efflorescence into beautiful, colorful form is a "flight of angelic and lyrical purity" that rises above "the stench of the manure pile" before returning, once it withers, to its "original squalor"³³. The purity of the flower that Bataille rejects is an effect, Marder [7] writes, of "the idealist repression weighing upon it"³⁴. Against the idealist tradition that sees the flower as innocent, Marder cites Derrida's "deconstructive counterthesis . . . that the flower is *coupable*" ("cuttable-culpable")—that is, "non-innocent, always already entangled in phallic imagery"³⁵. The cut flower "both assuages and exacerbates castration anxiety: *assuages*, because the knife spares the man's sexual organ and slits, in a sort of sacrificial ritual, a non-human being that supplants man; *exacerbates*, because, despite (or better, due to) symbolizing romantic love, it is an ever-present reminder of the possibility of castration and death"³⁶. Bataille's de-idealization of the flower is the liberation of repressed vegetal sexuality, its seemingly endless capacity for growth.

The same idealization that moves from pistil to petal with respect to the flower extends to human desire. As Bataille [16] writes, "the object of human love is never an organ, but the person who has the organ"³⁷. Thus abstracted, a "beautiful woman", he indicates, is as much a signifier of love as a red rose. The repressive idealism that converts vegetal sexuality into ideal beauty is of a piece with the prohibitions that de Beauvoir identified in relation to female sexuality and procreation. Both the figure of the woman and the culled

flower therefore provoke castration anxiety, in keeping with the conflation of femininity and nature. *Le Bonheur* strategically perpetuates this conflation, treating its female characters (Thérèse and Émilie) like flowers. Dousteysier-Khoze [15], for instance, calls Varda's characters "colourful flowers, without psychological depth"³⁸. Both Thérèse and Émilie are costumed in floral print clothing (or otherwise, outfitted in bright, deeply saturated colors), they are situated within floral environments, and they are repeatedly visually linked to bouquets of flowers.

The apparent beauty of the film stemming from this colorful efflorescence does not, as Johnston thought, compromise the film's feminist credentials but advances its critique of the repressive idealism that burdens figurations of both woman and flower alike as signifiers of ideal beauty. The liberation of women from this idealist burden begins with the liberation of the flower. Vegetal freedom subtends human freedom; as Marder [7] writes, "the emancipation of human beings is incomplete without the liberation of vegetal life"³⁹. *Le Bonheur* recruits the de-idealization of the flower in the film's overall de-idealization of happiness. The film's pointed irony is directed against the spell cast by happiness, as opposed to or in distinction from the possibilities of freedom. As Marder reminds us, it was Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer who, in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, linked the eating of lotus flowers with the "illusion of bliss" that is merely "an absence of the awareness of unhappiness"⁴⁰. Consider the vegetal analogy that Varda has used repeatedly to explain the animating idea behind the film: "I imagined a summer peach, with its perfect colors, and inside, there is a worm"⁴¹. Happiness disavows what might spoil it, admits nothing that might contradict it. It hides the worm. Varda's film is critical of consumerist promises of happiness, to mass-mediated images of the good life. The enchantment of happiness, as in the case of the lotus-eaters, conditions the subject to their unfreedom. In *Le Bonheur*, it is François who continually attests to his happiness. He insists that happiness can only be additive, refusing any limit. "Happiness adds to happiness", he tells Émilie. There is therefore no reason, as he sees it, to choose between Thérèse and Émilie. He has "enough joy for both". Indeed, François likens happiness to natural abundance. As he explains to Thérèse when confessing to the affair, "You and I and the kids are like an apple orchard, orderly and well-tended. Then I notice an apple tree growing outside the orchard flowering at the same time. More flowers, more apples. It all adds together, understand?" Marital fidelity is but a social convention that places on an artificial limit on happiness.

In *Le Bonheur*, happiness, despite its sunny promise, restricts the freedom of women. Thérèse especially conforms to the model of a devoted wife who submits herself to the desires of her husband. "Sweet, passive, uncomplaining", writes Holst-Knudsen [6], Thérèse "is the very incarnation of the myth of the eternal feminine so scorned by de Beauvoir"⁴². She is, as François calls her, a "hardy plant"—a patronizing characterization indicative of how flexible the vegetal analogy is for the patriarchal construction of women. This analogy underlines her passivity and compliant tendencies and recalls de Beauvoir's observation that the domination of women and of nature are interrelated. As all François's vegetal references are meant to reinforce, the subordination of women's free will and desire to male prerogatives is the "natural order". Varda gives this ideological viewpoint a literal (though ironic) visualization, by presenting a social dance using a tree as a framing device. The tree vertically bisects the image in the foreground, and during the long take, Varda repeatedly tracks back and forth across it. The couples participating in the dance break off and form new arrangements in a continual exchange of partners. Each time the camera passes across the tree, a rack focus brings it into sharp view, only to then reveal a changed configuration of dancers in the background. Without listing all the permutations of dancing couples, this unbroken shot starts with François and Thérèse paired together, and they cycle through new partners until François joins Émilie, before finally reuniting with his wife. The shot calls attention to itself—requiring a precise coordination of the actors, lens focus, and camera movement—but it serves a concise thematic purpose. It visually overlays social rituals of courtship onto natural forms. Framed astride and under the tree, the dancers appear as its branches or better, its hanging fruit. Varda's ostentatious formal

presentation of the scene hyperbolizes the idea of a “natural order”, as the substitution of one dance partner for another, of one woman for another, is naturalized by taking vegetal shape. The vegetal form of Varda’s direction makes apparent the ideological conflation of femininity and vegetality, with the ultimate aim of secreting out some autonomous space of freedom from this alliance. At this point, though, this scene is representative how totalizing patriarchy’s vegetal logic can be, as it subsumes all under its natural order, treating women as flowers to be culled or fruit to be plucked—that is, as signifiers of ideal beauty dependent on the repression of their fecundity. When Émilie assumes her place as François’s wife and mother to his children following Thérèse’s death (by accident or suicide?), she is seamlessly “grafted” into the family. Varda’s disturbing ending where this newly constituted family stroll through the autumnal wilderness as if nothing has changed, their clothing designed to coordinate with the natural landscape, only underlines the vegetal nature of the substitution that has taken place since in grafting, the section from the new plant will be indistinguishable from the original plant. This final substitution adheres to François’s strictly additive notion of happiness, such that Thérèse is not so much replaced or wholly dispensed with as subsumed into a vegetal hybrid (a Thérèse-Émilie figure).

The circumstances of Thérèse’s death are almost entirely occluded by the film. Having seemingly accepted the terms that François proposes regarding the affair, the couple make love in the grass and fall asleep. When François wakes, Thérèse is gone. He goes in search of her with the children only to discover that she has drowned in a nearby lake. Passersby pull her limp body from the water. It is not clear if the drowning is merely a terrible accident or whether, shocked and saddened at what her husband has revealed, she ended her own life. Mark Lee [17] sees Thérèse’s death as “submitting to a Darwinian natural order” in which her happiness is premised on “giving way to the fitter Émilie, [and] to the instinct of a dominant François”⁴³. If happiness, so conceived, is submission to the natural order, freedom is the escape from it, and it is therefore of interest that Thérèse’s death is presented as an incongruous, formally intrusive moment in the film. When François comes upon her body, Varda utilizes overlapping editing when he cradles her in his arms, overtly repeating the action as if the film were struggling to assimilate this new event. She then includes two brief flashbacks (of no more than a few seconds) of Thérèse struggling in the water, trying to grab a branch for safety. Each of these shots are haloed in the foreground by unfocused leaves. Their brevity makes her death somewhat illegible (as accident or suicide), but it is this enigmatic quality that makes this moment resonate strongly with Flora’s mysterious transformation into a tree in Barbillon’s film. Thérèse’s reach for a low-hanging branch can perhaps be read as an expression of the same desire for freedom that motivated Flora’s vegetal metamorphosis. As Marder [7] indicates, the flower “gains its freedom when, capitalizing on the internal rupture and the discontinuities within the ‘natural’ cycle, it is extracted from the universality of the self-reproducing life”, and thus liberated from this reproductive function, “on the brink of non-being, passing or withering away, it begins to signify nothing but itself”⁴⁴. The disjunctive interruption of the film’s “natural order”—the overlapping editing, the unreadable flashbacks—excerpts Thérèse, otherwise presented as only devoted wife and dedicated mother, from the enchantments of so-called happiness.

Speaking generally, *Le Bonheur* is everywhere in bloom—including in countryside scenes framed to recall Impressionist paintings, the lush garden of François’s brother, and the numerous flower bouquets placed in domestic interiors. This vegetal abundance, though, is tied to the idealist repression inherent to the beautiful. In *Le Bonheur*, shot composition resembles an act of floral arrangement. However, the film does gesture at its margins to forms expressive of vegetal freedom, to depictions of plant-being shorn of symbolic meanings and not bound by a patriarchal order. Rather than being denied the capacity for imagination, Marder [7] indicates that, citing Friedrich Schiller’s aesthetic philosophy, plants’ imagination comprises “material play . . . without any reference to shape”⁴⁵. The “echo of vegetal freedom” discernible in imaginative play can be accessed through the

sensuous engagement with materiality “lacking the principle of formal organization”⁴⁶. Is there something like this in Varda’s film? *Le Bonheur* makes distinctive use of fades that shade into a range of colors (green, red, white, blue) rather than to black. A fade to black, in the grammar of film form, has the function of effecting a transition between narrative units, but the application of color here is in excess to that functional operation. Depiction is suspended temporarily and gives way to the shapeless registration of chromatic intensity, the color of the flower’s corolla set loose onto the frame. Color is the trace of the vegetal, as prior to the industrial manufacture of color through artificial dyes the production of pigment was dependent on vegetable and mineral sources. These blossoming images shift the spectator’s attention from the referential to color’s perceptual immediacy. The final fade to color at the film’s conclusion suggestively matches the autumnal tones worn by the new Chevalier family as they stroll through the countryside. By freeing this color from its symbolically charged object, Varda strikes a dissonant note in the film’s “happy ending”, distancing the film from everything—the nuclear family naturalized and eternalized by its pastoral surroundings—that Johnston accused Varda of uncritically reproducing. Presented in this way, as color unbounded by shape, the vegetal can appear “freely”—that is, unburdened by metaphysical trappings or symbolic meanings—carrying the force of Varda’s feminist critique of postwar patriarchal values.

Varda returned to this thematic interest in the association of women and plants, of feminist liberation and vegetal freedom, in *Vagabond*. Whereas *Le Bonheur*’s feminism was couched in irony, *Vagabond* represents a more direct articulation of women’s marginalized position in society. This shift reflects the widened social and cultural presence of the women’s movement in France throughout the 1970s. Varda’s filmmaking in the intervening years consistently intersected with the social movements of the time, as seen in *Black Panthers* (1968) about the Black Power movement Varda witnessed while living in California and her musical feature *One Sings, the Other Doesn’t* (1976), which sets its story of two female friends against the backdrop of the women’s rights movement. *Vagabond* centers *Vagabond*’s narrative around a female drifter named Mona Bergeron (Sandrine Bonnaire). The film opens with the discovery of her body in a ditch, having died from exposure to the cold in the night, like a green shoot succumbing to an early frost. It then retraces the weeks in Mona’s life just prior to her death. She lives an itinerant existence, always traveling, never staying in place long, and the various characters she encounters testify to Varda’s camera what they know and think of her. In Varda’s depiction of her, Mona remains an “utterly opaque female protagonist”, in Kelley Conway’s [18] description, as these individuals make assumptions, pass judgments, or otherwise project their own biases onto this enigmatic central character⁴⁷. As Varda explained, “I decided that the people she’d met would be the ones who spoke of her. She’d be practically silent herself. And that what we learned about her would come from those who’d seen her go by, from what little they might have shared with her”⁴⁸ [19]. This narrative structure led to a representational problem for Varda; as she said, “[C]an one render silence, or capture freedom?”⁴⁹ Like Barbillon’s film, *Vagabond* confronts the difficulty of making freedom recognizable when it is assumed by a character who chooses silence over speech, who appropriates the seeming passivity of the vegetal, and who, like Thérèse, dies at the end. There is no literal becoming-plant in Varda’s film, but Mona, by discovering the plant-like in herself, discloses the vegetal freedom that subtends human freedom.

As with the vegetal analogies of *Le Bonheur*, *Vagabond* thematically links Mona to the abundant vegetation in the film. Her proximity to the vegetal measures the degree of her social exclusion. For example, as Mona travels on the road, camping and hitchhiking where she can, she gets increasingly dirty. Characters comments on the filth on her hands or the smell she emits. Though she starts the film emerging nude from the sea, her body steadily accumulates the muck of the earth. Mona is linked to the elemental earth as a mode of resistance to social convention and propriety. This association is given a more direct vegetal reference at the end of the film when Mona stumbles into a bacchanal ritual in a local village. She is accosted by men dressed in stuffed burlap sacks, with branches

jutting upward on either side of their heads, meant to resemble grapevines. They carry rags drenched in wine dregs and smearing Mona, cover her face and clothes in purple pigment. As the unfermented remains of the wine-making process, the dregs mark Mona as a vegetal castoff, underlining her marginalized position in society as a female drifter.

Plants, like women, are subject to a discourse of remediation in *Vagabond*, framed as something requiring cultivation or rescue. For example, Mona encounters a college professor named Madame Landier (Macha Méril) whose research specializes in a non-native fungus that infects and kills plane trees. Her aim is to develop a strain of the tree that will be resistant to the fungus. The plane trees are “doomed”, she tells Mona, but “to do nothing to stop the plague” is unacceptable to her. This humane interventionism is likely what draws her to Mona, who she picks up while hitchhiking. Landier provides her with food and some money and allows her to “take root” in her car. The implication is clear: Mona is a “sick tree” in need of saving. Varda emphasizes this connection in an earlier scene by panning directly from Mona, sitting in the passenger side of Landier’s car, to an infected plane tree. The colloquial name for the disease, moreover, is “canker stain”, and is recognizable by the colorful stains visible on the tree’s exterior, just as Mona will later be marked by the wine dregs. In all, these vegetal associations serve to link Mona to the discarded and marginalized elements of society, subject to expulsion or elimination, unless rescued.

Mona, however, repeatedly resists all attempts to “save” her from her itinerant wandering. She displays what Marder [7] calls a “vegetal indifference” to her situation. According to Marder, the plant is thought to be unfree because it cannot transcend need; it remains bound to “the overarching logic of self-preservation”⁵⁰. Like us, the plant “wants to live”, and it seeks nourishment just as we strive to meet the basic requirements (hunger, thirst, shelter) for life to persist, yet it can never liberate itself from this “compulsion of need” as done by humans in their projects of willing and desiring⁵¹. Freeing the plant from this metaphysical baggage, Marder argues that, as vegetal being has “no intimate, inner, unified self”, it has “therefore nothing to preserve”⁵². Not only, he writes, do plants appear “uninvolved in their own existence”, they “flourish only in ‘falling apart,’ in not keeping themselves intact, in not keeping themselves *as selves*”, as seen in the seed or fruit whose function is precisely to tear itself open or wither away for growth to occur⁵³. This is the gratuitousness inherent to plant reproduction: In the release of pollen or the dispersal of seeds, the plant is “literally throwing itself (away), potentially wasting itself”⁵⁴. Vegetal indifference inheres in this “freedom of the throw”, out of which nothing may come to fruition⁵⁵.

One way that humans emulate vegetal indifference is by means of Heideggerian profound boredom, where “human beings vegetate, careless for their being and uninvolved in the world”⁵⁶. This existential condition approximates the “absolute unconcern of the plant”⁵⁷. The virtue of profound boredom’s radically indifferent attitude is that it allows one to shed ideological frameworks and established values, functioning as a temporary nihilism that casts a shadow of meaninglessness so that meaning may be recovered. The longstanding feminist interest in boredom stems from the recognition that it characterized the affective condition of women’s everyday life under modernity. As scholars such as Patrice Petro [20] and Allison Pease [21] have emphasized, literary modernism repeatedly turned to boredom in its depictions of women to narrate the patriarchal limitations placed on women’s self-actualization as rights-bearing subjects. Pease notes that feminist reappraisals of boredom had to confront its passivity and indifference, in contrast to the rebellious assertiveness of feminist activism. She argues that “boredom in modernist literature displays the conflict women experienced between their desires and the few outlets for such desires”, and that this negative affect registered the failure or struggle of female protagonists “in realizing themselves as anything other than bored”⁵⁸. This modernist investment in boredom can be equally seen in Chantal Akerman’s feminist film *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975). Barbillon’s film gave feminist boredom

a vegetal shape. Flora's state of physical lassitude prior to her withdrawal into vegetal silence embodies profound boredom in that her environment is no longer emotionally sustaining for her.

Like Flora, Mona is a figure of vegetal indifference, especially insofar as she seems at times unconcerned about her own self-preservation, in defiance of the repeated interventions of those she meets. Consider her encounter with a goatherder and his family. Like Mona, the goatherder spent time on the road, but he cautions her that the cost of the freedom of her itineracy is social isolation. "You chose total freedom, but you got total loneliness", he tells her. "The time comes when if you go on, you destroy yourself. You head for destruction. If you want to live, you stop". He offers her some land to grow potatoes, but she does nothing with it, sleeping while the family works. He accuses her of wanting nothing, even of being nothing ("You don't exist"). After she has left the property, he will complain to Varda's camera that Mona has "no plans, no goals, no wishes, no wants". Headed for destruction, indifferent to the logic of the end, she negates the foundations of existential freedom. Even though she is continually on the move, she vegetates—or, in the goatherder's terms, she is not "wandering" but "withering".

Flitterman-Lewis [19] argues that Mona's itineracy and eventual death demonstrates "the impossibility of evasive freedom and the necessity of human connection", but alternatively, we can see the film as affirming the possibility of a vegetal freedom, rooted in the supposed metaphysical deficiencies shared by women and plants⁵⁹. Modeled on the vegetal, the freedom that Mona assumes for herself refuses the distinction between wandering and withering. What Marder [7] calls the "wandering of the seed" or the "errancy of the flower"—that is, its submission to chance over whether it ever comes to fruition—secures its freedom, since it is no longer only a transitional stage in the reproductive cycle. The flower's wandering, Marder writes, "stands for [its] insubordination to the idea of finality. Only in becoming superfluous, unproductive, and un-reproductive, is the tulip beautiful"⁶⁰. Such wandering is withering in that the flower will fall apart without being redeemed (i.e., will not come to fruition), but this superfluity is what grants the doomed flower its singular presence. The comparison of female characters to flowers had signaled, in *Le Bonheur*, the metaphysical weight of ideal beauty bearing down on both, but the vegetal analogy in *Vagabond* imagines a post-metaphysical freedom wherein Mona assumes the "free beauty" of the flower liberated from this idealism. The question of how to "capture freedom" that Varda identified as being at stake in the film is answered by plant-being. Just as there is "no transcendental ideal of a beautiful flower", no concept under which it can be subsumed, the enigmatic Mona slips free of whatever characterization the people she meets labels her with (i.e., "drifter", "lazy"). Some want to save her, some to exclude or exploit her, and others are simply fascinated by her. One young woman, for example, who allows Mona to use a water pump, admiringly describes Mona as "free" to her parents ("She goes where she likes"), and when her mother chides her that the security of home is better than the freedom of the road, the teenager asserts that being free is often better than not eating. The competing views of Mona never cohere into a representation capable of capturing her, and she thereby embodies the non-conceptual singularity of the beautiful flower. Mona's commitment to the freedom of the road even if it means loneliness, her embodiment of the idea that it can be better to be free than to eat, her acceptance that to wander may also be to wither, her resistance to any conceptual mediation that would aim to define her, being the enigmatic center of the film whose mystery is never dispelled, all underline how her character discovers her own freedom via a vegetal freedom, how she comes to approximate the alterity of plant-being, modeling a type of freedom that looks "doomed" but in its very indifference to this finality finds liberation in the superfluity of her existence.

The staging of female liberation takes vegetal shape in Varda's *Le Bonheur* and *Vagabond*. Each in their respective way, these films explore the alliance between the feminine and the vegetal to liberate both from their entanglement in and repression by a patriarchal order. Plant-being offers a model of post-metaphysical freedom premised on the immanence rather than transcendence, materiality rather than essence—a project integral to the intellectual

tradition of French feminist theory. For instance, beyond her influential critiques of the masculinist assumptions of psychoanalysis and philosophy in the 1970s, Luce Irigaray [22] has recently turned, in conversation with Marder, to plant-being to ask what might be regained by being attentive to the repressed vegetal. Like Barbillon and Varda, Irigaray discovers the encounter with the vegetal in being silent. “In our tradition, silence has been left, with undervaluation and even with contempt, to nature and to the women assimilated to nature. It is true that, without the capacity for keeping silence, I cannot meet with a tree or a flower”⁶¹. Silence permits a relation to nature, a being-with, not defined by domination, since for Irigaray, it is a mode of listening that avoids categorizing in advance. The liberated plant and the liberated woman speak a language audible to each other but not to a phallic order that would only, in order to render them beautiful, cut them off at the stem.

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Notes

¹ Quoted in Morghan [1] p. 182.

² See also Sarah Cooper [4] which similarly references *The Birth of a Flower*, as well as the more recent film *Little Joe* (Jessica Hausner, 2019), to elucidate cinema’s “techno-flowers” that emerge from “the encounter between a real flower and the film apparatus,” between nature and technology, where neither has mastery over the other.

³ Johnston [5] p. 39.

⁴ Marder [7] p. 119.

⁵ Sartre [8] p. 22.

⁶ Sartre [8] p. 23.

⁷ Laist [10] p. 164.

⁸ Greenwald [11] p. 42.

⁹ de Beauvoir [12] p. 5.

¹⁰ de Beauvoir [12] p. 16.

¹¹ de Beauvoir [12] p. 17.

¹² de Beauvoir [12] p. 17.

¹³ de Beauvoir [12] p. 161.

¹⁴ de Beauvoir [12] pp. 163, 167.

¹⁵ de Beauvoir [12] p. 164.

¹⁶ de Beauvoir [12] p. 178.

¹⁷ de Beauvoir [12] pp. 177–178.

¹⁸ Marder [7] p. 142.

¹⁹ Marder [7] p. 138.

²⁰ Marder [7] p. 142.

²¹ Epstein [13] p. 3.

²² Epstein [13] p. 3.

²³ Epstein [13] p. 29.

²⁴ This is likely a reference to a 1960 incident where Unilever caused a public health crisis involving its newly reformulated margarine Planta. The consumer food product featured a new commercial emulsifier to aid its spreadability, but this led to an outbreak of skin ailments that caused hundreds to be hospitalized and a handful of deaths in the Netherlands and West Germany.

²⁵ Varda, too, in her short film *Réponse de femmes* (1975), features women testifying to their objections to being reduced to sexual objects or confined to the role of motherhood. Several of these women appear nude before Varda’s camera but their speech reframes and reclaims these displays of nudity from their objectification by male desire.

²⁶ Lack [14] p. 359.

²⁷ Quoted in Lack [14] p. 363.

²⁸ Holst-Knudsen [6] p. 510.

²⁹ Dousteyssier-Khoze [15] p. 99. See also DeRoo, R. Unhappily Ever After: Visual Irony and Feminist Strategy in Agnès Varda’s *Le Bonheur*. *Studies in French Cinema*. 2008 8, 189–209.

- 30 Dousteyssier-Khoze [15] p. 100, original emphasis.
- 31 Bataille [16] p. 11.
- 32 Bataille [16] p. 12.
- 33 Bataille [16] p. 12.
- 34 Marder [7] p. 148.
- 35 Marder [7] p. 148.
- 36 Marder [7] p. 148.
- 37 Bataille [16] p. 11.
- 38 Dousteyssier-Khoze [15] p. 99.
- 39 Marder [7] p. 149.
- 40 Quoted in Marder [7] p. 147.
- 41 Interview, “Agnès Varda on *Le Bonheur*,” *The Criterion Channel*, accessed June 7, 2022
- 42 Holst-Knudsen [6] p. 522.
- 43 Lee [17] pp. 93–94.
- 44 Marder [7] p. 143.
- 45 Quoted in Marder [7] p. 145.
- 46 Marder [7] p. 146.
- 47 Conway [18] p. 7.
- 48 Quoted in Flitterman-Lewis [19] p. 303.
- 49 Quoted in Flitterman-Lewis [19] p. 285.
- 50 Marder [7] p. 131.
- 51 Marder [7] p. 131.
- 52 Marder [7] pp. 131–132.
- 53 Marder [7] p. 132.
- 54 Marder [7] p. 134.
- 55 Marder [7] p. 135.
- 56 Marder [7] p. 136.
- 57 Marder [7] p. 136.
- 58 Pease [21] p. x.
- 59 Flitterman-Lewis [19] p. 301.
- 60 Marder [7] p. 144.
- 61 Irigaray [22] pp. 49–50.

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