

Agnès Varda and the Limits of Gleaning

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Gleaning is an activity that serves to delineate the limits of a contemporary culture—at least, one can argue, in Agnès Varda’s view of things. To glean is not only to take what others no longer want and make use of it, but to reflect quite openly on the limitations of a contemporary society of individualism and consumerism. In this paper I would like to show what amounts to the evolution of Varda’s view of scavenging, from a perspective that leaves room for not much more than selfishness and self-destruction to one in which the act, and the art, of gleaning reveals the deeper meaning(s) of the object, community, the environment, and eroticism—all terms that implicate one another through the larger gesture of taking, making use of, abusing that which has been discarded, that which seemingly (and obviously) has no use.

The generosity of the gleaners that we see so clearly in her 2000 film *Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse* (*The Gleaners and I*) is a measure of the extent to which gleaning violates the mores of a “successful” capitalist and consumerist society. Such a violation, whether legal or illegal, indicates by its very marginality—the fact that it is remarkable in the first place—the extent to which a modern consumerist society must exclude this profoundly archaic, but also postmodern tendency in order to constitute itself. It’s no coincidence that the legal question comes up so often in this film: is it legal to glean in fields? Is it legal to salvage discarded objects in city streets? Is it legal to dumpster dive? Is it legal to protest against a store manager that douses discarded food with bleach so that it cannot be reclaimed? By posing and meditating on such questions, Varda’s film indicates the central question of consumer culture: what is the status of the purchased item after it has lost its initial desirability? When it becomes “waste”? Is it still “owned”? What is the status of its “disposal”? The fact that at least French (if not US) law recognizes—and has recognized, since at least the sixteenth century—the right to glean indicates that the limits of property have not always been terribly clear. And the fact that Varda depicts, in her film, various property owners who claim the right to restrict gleaning indicates that, to this day, gleaning is a troubling activity, one that apparently, at least, disturbs in principle the right to own, to dispose of, to control objects even when they are no longer physically possessed.

This desire to possess beyond possession is not, of course, something seen only in today’s consumer culture—the ancient Egyptians, after all, buried their Pharaohs with all the things needed for life after death. But today this tendency has taken on a ghoulish, bizarre aspect: it is one thing to “keep” things if one believes they will be needed later (in eternity), and quite another to want to control them as private property long after their usefulness has (supposedly) ended—out of, it seems, sheer egotism. Jeff Ferrell, scrounger extraordinaire, has noted the resistance of many homeowners to his careful opening, and perusal, of the trash bags they have left on the street.¹ Some of the nastiness, indeed, seems to come from the impossible desire to possess even what has been consigned to the landfill. “Get away from my trash.” It is “mine,” even after I have discarded it, and no one else has the right to find any value in it. I alone am the arbitrator of its value, and I have determined that it has no value. In a strange way I possess it in de-possessing it, I find an ultimate value in its valuelessness. “Waste” is consigned, like our bodies, to the “grave,” and one starts to suspect

that the need to bury waste is a result not only of a certain economics (it's "cheaper" to bury than to re-use or recycle), but of a larger cultural-psychological imperative that has survived the Pharaohs, perhaps has survived the Christian religion itself, to become a larger secular cultural condition: if in doubt, bury it—just as one would like to have one's own body buried.²

This indeed is the paradox: owners that, out of ignorance or willfully, ignore the French law that protects the rights of gleaners (cited in Varda's film) would affirm an infinite, limitless right to possession, even all the way to the point where their possessions have been discarded, where their stuff sits in limbo—in fields, trash dumps, or landfills. The refusal of gleaning is the refusal of the limits to possession, to consumption, not to mention growth: it makes quite clear that without gleaning the idea of possession and consumption is incoherent. What does possession mean when the object possessed has been cast into oblivion? It means everything, and nothing.

Along with this infinite possession goes the affirmation of the infinite self: if the consumed object is always mine, untouchable, all the way to the dump, all the way to endless eons of existence in a covered pile where I have consigned it, then my own self, projected onto matter, stretches to the depths of the earth and the ends of time. The phantasmic absence of gleaning is the projection of the self through its objects into infinity, a boundless realm where the absence of giving, of sharing, delineates the monstrosity of a self that condemns itself to an absolute, but absolutely empty, existence. This is the ultimate logic of consumption and, sad to say, consumerism. One imagines the traditional representations of hell, which are really nothing more than giant burning underground landfills of dead souls, presided over for eternity by demonic "sanitation engineers." Souls that nevertheless continue to maintain their autonomy, their illusory dominion.

I possess, therefore I am (not). Absolute selfishness in the utopia, or dystopia, of consumerism becomes in the end an incoherent movement whereby the self itself is inevitably an object to be possessed, grasped, discarded, since in the world the only relation conceivable is that of possessing and being possessed, consuming and discarding. If, after all, one does not possess sufficiently, if one has not guaranteed one's existence through the fact of infinitely possessing (and why else affirm possession so relentlessly?), then one is liable to end up the possession, the object of someone else. (And the very challenge of possessing infinitely indicates the likelihood of one's becoming a possession.) Moreover, if the possessed self were to revolt—in a world where the only logic is that of possession—the self faces only the void of its own non-existence. In such a world to be exploited is not merely degrading: it is to recognize that one has no ontological status, no discernible being whatever. One becomes a mere de-objectified object, a still-possessed former possession residing in the moral landfill of society.

How does one go about freeing oneself when one is still trapped—as possessor or possessed—in the infernal logic of possession-consumption? An earlier film by Varda, *Sans toit ni loi (Vagabond)* (1985), affirms this relation between extreme alienation and a world where one's status is determined by what one possesses, or by whom one is possessed or depossessed. And it is a woman who finds herself the object of the gaze of virtually every observer, because she does not want to be a mere employee, a sexual object, a possession. Mona, the vagabond, lives on the road for reasons we are never allowed to fathom, besides

the fact that she refused the tyranny of boss, job, perhaps husband or consort. As Susan Hayward has written,

[Mona] defies identification, will not be made other. Her peripatetic and solitary existence is a deliberate choice [...] and functions metonymically for her unfixability and unnameability. [...] The film is a series of gazes, of one-way exchanges from different specular positions. Each contributor fixes their gaze not on Mona but on their perception of Mona as a figure of their desire.³

From this perspective Mona is an empty signifier, sheer revolt against the gaze of the other that would inscribe being. Each observer, met *Citizen Kane*-style in flashback or flash-forward, issues a judgment on her desirability, or, more likely, her lack thereof. They would house her, possess her sexually or materially, or reject her, sometimes with disgust. We as viewers of the film are, moreover, put in a similar role: we too judge her, evaluate her motives, find her sympathetic, or finally agree with one or more of the observers/witnesses.

I would argue here that, while Hayward's analysis is accurate enough, and moreover is largely that of Varda herself, something in addition is going on. If Mona is the object of the gaze of all who would observe, she too consumes as they do. What's notable is less that she too judges, rejects, or approves; more tellingly, she has the same relation to objects—to possessions—that they have. She too is locked in the dystopia of possession, in the impossible world of non-gleaning. Mona is certainly a victim of the profound sexism of the community, but that sexism itself partakes of, and is a function of, the larger infernal logic of consumption and disposal. For if the observers within the film—and by extension, those outside it, i.e. us—look, desire and judge, they also *consume*. Mme. Landier, the well-meaning “platanologue” (specialist in plane-tree disease), is marked by what she consumes: her car, the food she buys Mona, her apartment. If she gives, it is to feel that she has somehow adopted Mona, domesticated her, and saved her.⁴

Objects throughout the film are markers of who possesses them, who disposes of them, who trashes them, who possesses them by trashing them. One need only think of the episode in which Mona crashes at a hippie goatherd's farm. She arrives, and observes that the goatherd and his wife (and children) are defined by what they possess: land, a herd of goats, a cheese-making operation. When things are recycled they are recycled to be retained within the family: Mona is quickly escorted out of the house, the door is shut in her (and our) face. When she admits a fantasy to the farmer—that she would like nothing more than to cultivate her little plot of potatoes—he offers her a bit of land, and lodging in a small trailer on the property. While this might seem like generosity, it's clear enough that the farmer-herder is merely pulling her into his orbit, making her a member of his mini-feudal society. He will inculcate the work ethic, but only in order, inevitably, to increase the productivity of his farm.

Of course he calls Mona's bluff—she never had any intention of raising potatoes—but in the process he reveals precisely that he is what she accuses him of trying to be before she leaves: just another boss. But if the goatherd uses objects to possess—once Mona is in his trailer, she is part of the farm—Mona is no better. She too recycles only in order to possess, if not control. For her too recycling, gleaning, is only a sub-category of possessing and discarding things. The sequence with the goatherd in fact begins with Mona camping, and

emptying out of her rucksack a painting she has stolen from the château in which she had been squatting with David, the “Wandering Jew” whom she has just dumped. It’s a small painting, apparently of a scene in the country through which she is traveling. Somehow a hole has been poked in the middle of it: she sticks her fingers through as if to verify, screams “Merdel,” and tosses it violently onto the fire. One has the impression that she stole the painting only in order to sell it (as she later tries to sell some stolen spoons). More important here, I think, is the fact that her relation to a recycled, scavenged object—a valueless painting—is one of self-centered possession. When the object can no longer provide what it was supposed to, it is tossed with a vengeance onto the fire. If she can’t have it, or sell it, no one else will have it. She will control it to the point of its evanescence in smoke, and, in imagination, beyond.

Mona and the entire society from which she arises—and out of which she falls—seem the living refutation of the theories of Gaston Bachelard. Varda in fact studied at the Sorbonne with Bachelard, and it can be argued that his philosophy of the object influenced her, most notably in her first film, *La Pointe courte*.⁵ But his influence can be seen in *Vagabond* as well, if only in negative outline. For Bachelard certain archetypal elements—earth, air, fire and water—are possessed intuitively, subjectively. Aesthetic reverie, unlike scientific comprehension, involves images that precede concepts; these images are not exhausted by rational knowledge. In the words of Caroline J. Picart, “reverie [in Bachelard] serves an ontological function by transmuting the spontaneous contact with an immediate object into human terms. As such, it is to real life what reason is to the physical world—an escape from solipsism.”⁶ In Bachelard’s view, our link to the world, and to society, is via the archetypal image of the immediate object through which we are allowed to transcend the subject-object relation.

Now in *Vagabond* the Bachelardian archetypal images-elements-objects are quickly defeated by their connection to consumable and disposable things. At the beginning of the film, Mona arises from the sea, but her mythical birth from *la mer*—mother/water—is quickly undermined by a shot of a rack of cheap postcards showing nude women at the beach. Two bikers looking on—one of whom later turns out to be the hoodlum Paolo—fantasize about possessing Mona, whom they don’t have the courage to approach; one of them ironically offers Paolo one of the dirty postcards for two francs, and it’s clear that the card is identifiable with Mona herself. The other elements are well represented in the film as well, but always countered by objects that defeat or overturn them. At the outset of the film we see Mona, dead, in contact with another element, earth, but rather than in any reverie she is inert, a cadaver (the entire film is recounted as a flashback). From the outset we are shown that she is the ultimate object, to be ogled, puzzled over, sexually assaulted, zipped in a bag, disposed of. In the incident with the painting, fire and air come into play: the end of the aesthetic object is not reverie, but simple destruction. The painting, as dirty smoke, drifts from the fire into the leaden air, Mona’s air, there for the taking—if only anyone wanted to take it.

Out of and with these sullied elements, then, Mona arises, an exploiter and rip-off artist against and with all the others. Again, objects tell the story, not of the higher synthesis with elements, but of a lower alienation. In the goatherd episode, she takes not only cheese and food, but the use of the trailer, in which she idly sits reading (and spitting out the window). Objects are nothing more than the indices by which her alienation from others is measured;

she possesses to affirm herself, but ends up making herself less defined, not just a drifter but a principle of drift. In this sense the goatherd, moralistic ass that he is, is perfectly correct when he tells her that she is “not marginal, but just out.” She has lost her identity in the act of wanting to possess anything she can get her hands on, through total, mediation-less possession, thereby refusing to accept any characterization that would come from another. Indeed one can argue that the act of relentless, apathetic possession is inseparable from the profound alienation she undergoes—and which she can understand only as liberation. She possesses, and takes, everything, for all time, for the length of time she chooses, and in the process takes nothing and loses the limits of her being. An empty liberation, then, which is inseparable from a vision of the world as composed of nothing more than a collection of inert objects to be grasped, used up, and tossed away. This is a world of deleterious recycling in which the deadness of the object mandates a toxic disposal as a component of any reappropriation. Mona’s stench is that of waste that can only be grasped but that can never, by its very nature, be shared. Its disposal is rank, definitive decomposition. The ultimate object in the film for this reason might be the spit that Mona launches out of the trailer window, in a moment of inarticulate boredom. If the goatherd—who is also a trained philosopher—imagined Mona in her trailer having a moment of Cartesian reduction and certitude—after all, the stove is there, as is the solitude, just as at the beginning of Descartes’s account—all that results on Mona’s part is a resentful rejection and the ensuing wandering.⁷ Instead of the absolute limits of the *cogito*’s certainty, there is only the gray haze of a smoky, polluting resentment, community devolved into featureless solipsism. To affirm the thing in this world, to attempt to grasp it, to reuse it, is only to replicate the selfishness of an amorphous identity, identity to infinity. Community is nonexistent; where there are groups, they are only defined by a greater mutual desire for the very boundaries that possession tends to eliminate. To desire someone’s house, someone’s world, is not to want to share it, but rather to eliminate the former occupant and thereby reign supreme—and then burn it if one is still unsatisfied.⁸ The endless self-destruction of being “on the road” can only be replaced by the smug certainty of possessing whatever resists simple possession. The idyllic home of Tante Lydie, so coveted by the wife of the old lady’s nephew, and full of avidly guarded knick-knacks, is after all doubled in the film by the abandoned chateau in which Mona and David squat, a hopeless domain of empty corridors, trashed furniture, and long lost and forgotten ancestors. The chateau is the husk, the remainder, the reminder that the absolutely possessed object, from the perspective of eternity, is the putrescence of unclaimed and unclaimable trash: the death of the Bachelardian archetype and the triumph of death-bound solipsism.

Quite late in her career Varda released what is possibly her greatest film: *The Gleaners and I* (2000). This unique film, a kind of road documentary-autobiography, attempts to present an overview of all sorts of “gleaning,” be they physical (salvaging discarded potatoes or art), intellectual/aesthetic (gleaning as “found art”), social-critical (gleaning as living outside the “growth” economy and teaching others, *gratis*), and autobiographical-filmic (Varda’s own film as gleaned autobiography). Gleaning for Varda is above all an activity at the limits of society: literally socially marginal, it traces out (negatively) what is acceptable behavior in its ties to conventionally understood utility, and then proceeds to transgress those limits. Some gleaners glean for fun, some because they have to, but all delineate from a point heterogeneous to accepted norms that which is monstrous *within* those norms: mass consumption and consumerism as inexcusable waste, a constructed world in which everything is “used” to be wasted, “used up,” including even people.

I'd like to suggest that the clearest reading, and critique, of *Vagabond* is to be found in *The Gleaners and I*. The worlds presented are superficially the same: the marginal types, for the most part scroungers by choice or by necessity. But while the world of *Vagabond* is, as we've seen, one of the relentless logic of the possession of things, even at the margins, in *The Gleaners* it's one of *giving*. To salvage something—a potato, a broken clock, a painting—is inseparable from giving it in some way to another, and fostering community. Rather than trying to control the thing to infinity, thereby ultimately losing the very contours of one's own identity, now one happily relinquishes what one has saved, and in the process affirms not one's limited identity (or subjectivity), but the identity of a society whose good fortune is itself the result of countless acts of giving. This is why it is somewhat beside the point to argue that *The Gleaners* hypocritically tends to downplay the hard life of the “excluded” members of society, by, for example, quickly cutting from destitute people living in a trailer to, say, a well-off chef who “gleans” by choice the ingredients for the luxury meals he serves in his restaurant.⁹ One can certainly accuse Varda of political naiveté, but the accusation is off the mark because her point is that gleaning is not just a survival tactic of the dispossessed—which in some cases it most certainly is—but a practice that takes one from mere survival to a larger, inclusive community. To say that gleaning is primarily a practice of the excluded is to say that it is at best a balm that helps remedy exclusion, and in that sense it is identifiable with exclusion (it is one of its tactics). Varda's point is precisely the opposite: that gleaning, and the attendant giving, work to overcome exclusion by affirming a community that goes beyond limits such as mainstream and marginal, “out” and “in.” In Varda's world those limits, maintained by a mainstream economy of production, possession, and disposal, are transgressed by generous acts, local engagement, and sustainable practices.¹⁰

The object is of great importance in *The Gleaners*—but it is an importance whose significance is quite the opposite of what one sees in *Vagabond*. In *The Gleaners* it is always the object that mediates between people and brings them together (rather than separating them and serving as a marker of their own objectification and oblivion). Possession *is* mediation. Many times it is food that does the mediating (and that is the original sense of gleaning): people dumpster dive or collect rejected food in fields, and this food goes not to reaffirm a private farm or enterprise, but to feed others who are needy or in want of a community. Other times it is now “useless” things, which are reused in art, a generous practice if there ever was one (but without archetypes). Society is transformed in a good way by gleaning, and Varda makes the clear point that positive ecological change is inseparable from a deeper practice that engages the body and imaginations of people in communities. Recycling is not merely the treatment of brute matter, congealed stuff reclaimed from dump sites. It is not merely the production of more consumables, more stuff to be discarded. Rather that which is given is inseparable from the giving; gleaned food or things cannot be separated from contributed, free acts that serve to help others find their way into the community, as gleaners. The gleaned object is not (faux) limitless in the sense of the consumable object, which trails off into nothingness and takes its owner with it. It is not to be associated with nebulous, universal elements. In gleaning, what possessors take to be taking is in fact inseparable from giving. The limits of the object are transgressed in the movement gleaning makes possible, from individual to generous participant in institutions that are precisely not institutions. If Mona would affirm a limitless and immediate freedom—a freedom that ends in a quite limited ditch (*fossé*) or the common grave (*fosse commune*), the gleaners' freedom is that of a breaking of limits in the direction of shared (mediated) purpose and aspiration.

The prime example of this in *The Gleaners* is the case of Alain, the sociologist we meet at the conclusion of the film. The first thing we learn is that he is an urban gleaner, haunting the markets that have just closed, and eating very nutritious bits that he picks up from boxes and discard piles. We, through Varda, learn to our surprise that, as he eats, he carries out a very sophisticated meditation on the nutritional content of the vegetables, bread, and fruit he picks up. But from objects we pass to activity, and to character: his gleaning on the margin is one with a giving back. We've seen this before, with others who take food and then distribute it *gratis*. But Alain, a trained biologist (he has a master's degree) goes one further: he gives not only material things, but intellectual ones. He teaches at a free night school: French language among other things. He gives useful lessons that allow those recently arrived in France to become a part of, and contribute to, society. We now realize that the object is not just an object, one to be taken, used, discarded, but rather just one element in a larger nexus of (re)appropriation, exchange, and giving. The physical shades off into the moral and the conceptual. This entails not an archetype, but a practice of giving. The dead weight of the landfill is superseded by the pedagogy of the gift, the gift as pedagogy.

But the ultimate gleaner in the film is no doubt Varda herself; at several points she trains the camera on herself, or rather her hands, the roots of her hair, her camera. She gleanes images of herself, and these are images that reflect the inevitable movement toward death. At 72, Varda affirms herself in her being-toward-death; this is her element, the image through which all objects gleaned both physically and conceptually pass. Varda herself replaces Mona; the heroine of this version of the gleaner's saga resolutely evades both the exploitation and objectification to which Mona succumbs. She does so not so much because she is behind the camera but because her appropriation is already a gift. She gives us her death, in effect, by negating the pure objectivity of her body, transgressing that physical limit, moving it into the realm of social recognition. We recognize her age, her generosity, and in so doing we affirm the community of viewers: we who receive the gift of knowledge of age and pass it on in our own *bricolage*. The community of gleaners generated by the film is one fully grounded in death, not the death of sheer objecthood and oblivion, the blowback of transcendentally owned but ownerless trash, but the opening of the subject in time, in the larger mission of societal subversion and affirmation. For if Mona confronts, takes, and discards, Varda observes, appropriates, passes on (in both senses of the term). Her transgression of possession is accomplished through a process of traveling rather than conflict. The road movie in which a character is seen as being *at odds with* society is supplanted by one in which the gleaner flows through society, undermining only by attentively inspecting, choosing, making use of, appreciating, identifying. This is an affirmative subversion of giving, one that entails a miming, a working within but also against. What is given now is not taken but, in turn, gleaned. And given again. The woman violated and objectified (Mona) becomes the woman narrating, discovering, and passing along, and on (Varda).

The object falls out of "systems that give it meaning and value," as Gay Hawkins puts it, and in so doing it reflects back to us our own finitude.¹¹ The clock without hands shows Varda, and us, the phantasmic time of the end of time, the moment in which moments no longer count: death. Similarly, the object in its finitude recalls the finitude of resources behind it: just as there is no infinite possession beyond the grave (my grave and the grave of the object), so too there is no infinite source. Things reflect back on my limits, the limits of the

community, and the limits of the environment from which they emerge. This is why Varda's *Gleaners* is a film that reflects, in a profound way, on the current and future crisis in the availability of cheap resources. The many avatars of the thing we see in *The Gleaners* are also the many avatars of doing without an infinite resource stream, and the bad double of that stream, the infinite disposal of "waste."

Finally, if Varda's film shows us the deep connection between the object, community, and energy-resource conservation, it also shows us how those terms are linked to eroticism and the fetish. Bodan Litnansky's house, depicted in the film, is made of recycled doll bodies. Burned, broken, naked, hideous, seductive, these fetishes reflect on the "solidity" not only of Litnansky's skills as a mason (as he puts it), but also on his devotion to an erotic drive inseparable from the death drive. If Varda's meditation on death reveals the finitude of the object—its limits as a recyclable thing—via a living thing (her aging hand), Litnansky's goes in the opposite direction: his mutilated things (the dolls) lead us to his own erotic death-drives, his desire for an object that can never respond, never desire in turn—that can only decay. This is what's left after the demise of appropriation and disposal.¹² His wife is there, next to him, affirming that he is an "amateur"—an amateur, a lover, of things, of her, of who knows what. Unlike Varda, we don't see a close-up of his body with its decay, but we see something even more disturbing: his relationship in a doomed erotic community: his wife, his fetishes, with death rapidly approaching. His wife might not feel terribly flattered, living as she does with thousands of discarded dolls, but she receives, and gives back, the gift of love, the gift of death, in her cohabitation with all those discarded, recycled things. The appearance of these two is a strangely utopian moment, holding as it does the promise not of an afterlife, not of eternal possession-dispossession, but of a desire after desire, erotic desire in the embrace of a death that assures, bizarrely, the respect for and recognition of the limitation of available and exploitable resources. (What better way to keep all those plastic dolls out of landfills, and give them a new lease on life?) We've come a long way from Mona's self-destructive, distracted and intermittent sale of her body: now we see the moment of the convergence of fetish and recycled, recyclable fragment: ecological eroticism, or perhaps the erotics of recycling. Either way, without such a conjunction the future is indeed bleak—as bleak as the landscape in which Mona dies.

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Notes

¹ Jeff Ferrell, *Empire of Scrounge: Inside the Urban Underground of Dumpster Diving, Trash Picking and Street Scavenging* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 62, 66.

² William McDonough and Michael Braungart contrast the landfill system in which resources are buried permanently ("cradle to grave") with one in which products are fully recyclable—decomposable into useful or nutritious components that can be fully recovered ("cradle to cradle"). Varda might revise their model, noting that even "dead" objects, those consigned either to the grave, or in McDonough and Braungart's model, back to the cradle, nevertheless can take on a second, gleaned, life, beyond perhaps the sheer utility that seemed

to mark their initial iteration. See William McDonough and Michael Braungart, *Cradle to Cradle: Remaking the Way We Make Things* (New York: North Point Press, 2002).

³ Susan Hayward, “Beyond the Gaze and Into Femme-Filmécriture: Agnès Varda’s *Sans toit ni loi*,” in *French Film: Texts and Contexts*, eds. Susan Hayward and G. Vincendeau (London: Routledge, 1990), 286.

⁴ We are invited to conclude that both Mona and the plane trees are rotting from the inside, victims of contamination in a wasteful society (in the case of the trees, the rot is attributable to a fungus contained in wood packing crates dumped by the Americans during World War II—a not so subtle metaphor). In the end Madame Landier seems unable to help either Mona or the trees.

⁵ See Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, *To Desire Differently: Feminism and French Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 221.

⁶ Carolyn J. Picart, “Metaphysics in Gaston Bachelard’s ‘Rêverie,’” *Human Studies* 20 (1997): 65.

⁷ Descartes’s meditation, alone in his room before the stove, of course led to his famous dictum: “I think, therefore I am.” Mona, on the other hand, could state the opposite: I do not think, therefore I am not.

⁸ This is the fate of the “squat” in which Mona takes refuge, with a group of like-minded vagabonds at the end of the film.

⁹ See, for example, Nathalie Rachlin, “L’Exclusion au cinema: le cas d’Agnès Varda,” *Women in French Studies* (Fall 2006).

¹⁰ McKibben posits an economy (and society) based on local, sustainable low-energy input production, rigorous recycling, and egalitarian enterprise. Such a utopian model—utopian but also visible in many ways throughout the world, today—does not seem that far from the fragments of a world (both here and to come) that Varda films in *The Gleaners*. See Bill McKibben, *Deep Economy: The Wealth of Communities and the Durable Future* (New York: Times Books, 2007).

¹¹ See Gay Hawkins’ *The Ethics of Waste: How We Relate to Rubbish* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006), and especially her chapter “A Dumped Car” (71-92). This chapter, which contains an analysis of Varda’s *The Gleaners*, also provides an excellent overview of theories of the waste-object. Indeed the object becomes waste when it reveals, in a sense, its own reality, by putting into question the easy classifications and valuations of things: “[Waste objects] are what’s left after objectification breaks down, they are what we suddenly notice when an object seems to drop out of all the systems that give it meaning and value” (Hawkins, 80). And, we might add, such objects are, in the end, all objects, because no object ever stays firmly placed in a classificatory grid. It always exits, through half-disposal (nothing can ever really be thrown “away”), reuse, “downcycling,” “upcycling,” fetishization, or some combination thereof. The challenge lies in recognizing the tremendous subversive, and utopian, potential of that exiting, and reveling in it.

¹² Barbara Johnson paraphrases Lacan’s “The Signification of the Phallus”: “Lacan writes, in effect, that desire is what is left of the demand for love when the satisfaction of all possible needs is subtracted from it. Desire, in other words, is both indestructible and unsatisfiable. What could stand for this better than the love of a statue?” Or, we might ask, a salvaged doll? As Bataille would say, negativity here is out of a job—and we see that unemployment in the erotically charged, recycled, and recyclable, object. See Barbara Johnson, *Persons and Things* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 117.