

Figure 1. "Heavenly cities float": San Francisco in the establishing shot of *Uncle Yanco* (US/France, 1967)

Floating Roots: Agnès Varda's *Uncle Yanco*

Homay King

Agnès Varda's 1967 short portrait film *Uncle Yanco* (US/France) begins with an image of San Francisco at dawn. From a distance, the city appears to hover over the water. Yanco Varda speaks in voice-over: "Heavenly cities float. They have no top or bottom. They call San Francisco the Holy City. It's the city of love." This image was taken in October, a time of year that, due to the San Francisco Bay's unique microclimate, tends to be clear and warm. In the summer months an opaque morning fog funnels through the Golden Gate, blanketing the city's hills and spilling into its valleys, obscuring the skyline, evaporating only during a narrow window of afternoon sun. On the day depicted in this image, though, the morning view was translucent, and the city is shrouded in pink. In voice-over, Agnès Varda invokes "rosy-fingered dawn," a Homeric epithet that links this image to the *Odyssey* and the Varda family's Greek roots, signaling that this film will be in some way connected to ancient myth.

In this article I attempt to trace some of Agnès Varda's "floating roots," as she calls them, primarily through Jean "Yanco" Varda, the uncle of this film (who was in fact her second cousin).

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I argue that Yanco served as a muse to his niece and that they shared a similar philosophy: the idea that the imagination is the place where matter and spirit are reconciled. This work builds on an argument I made in my book *Virtual Memory* about Varda's *The Gleaners and I* (*Les glaneurs et la glaneuse*, France, 2000), in which I read that film as a supreme example of materialist feminism, stressing her use of earthly and tactile materials and interpreting her as an artist committed to what Siegfried Kracauer called "the redemption of physical reality," despite the fact that the film is shot entirely with a digital camera.¹ Here I focus not only on matter but also on the immaterial and its significance in Agnès Varda's oeuvre. For the sake of clarity, I refer to her primarily as *Varda* and to her uncle primarily as *Yanco*, a longtime nickname that he instructs his niece to call him by in her film.

Like Gaston Bachelard, Varda's mentor at the Sorbonne, Yanco found inspiration in the elemental matter of the world and the forms it wondrously assumes. But both also insisted on the primacy of the intangible, frequently stressing words like *transcendence*, *myth*, *heavenly*, and *sacred*. This insistence can be puzzling, since their mystical tendencies cannot be fully explained in religious terms. Bachelard's writings frequently invoke the idea of spirit, but not any particular theological system. And although Jean Varda claimed that he could not help but be *croyant* (believing), given his Greek Orthodox upbringing, his notion of the divine was extremely syncretic, even heretical.² In addition, neither the artist nor the philosopher can rightfully be described as proponents of Platonic, idealist, or Cartesian principles. They are both worldly sensualists, disdaining the disciplinary connotations of mind-over-matter subjectivity, elevating the enjoyment of aesthetic pleasure to a kind of Epicurean ethical practice. Furthermore, while both attribute redemptive powers to creativity and the imagination, neither of them understands these faculties as related to individual authority or the products of human will and agency. At the same time, they are definitely not structuralists: while they put little stock in notions of individual agency or self-sovereignty, they do not dismiss culture as merely the by-product of abstract, impersonal systems like language and kinship structures that imprint themselves

in an ideologically determinative way on subjects. Finally, the deep human psyche is also not the true wellspring of imagination for either one, as in a psychoanalytic account. While Bachelard wrote of the power of dreams and reverie, his version of these does not square fully with the Freudian concepts of fantasy or sublimation, nor did he describe them as by-products of the unconscious or repression. Jean Varda, for his part, openly disdained psychoanalysis: as he quips in *Uncle Yanco*, “For me, the only way not to succumb to life’s supreme indignity, which is being psychoanalyzed, is to go sailing once a week with no motor.”

How, then, are we to understand this worldview, which I argue is visible in the work of Agnès Varda, too? What kind of creative imagination has its source not in the divine, in the human mind, in abstract structures like language, in the unconscious, or, finally, as one might expect, in a phenomenological or vitalist account, but solely in the physical and vital properties of matter? I hope to begin to answer this question in a provisional way in this article, through analysis of Varda’s film, an account of Jean Varda’s life and artistic oeuvre, and commentary on Bachelard’s writings on the image. It is a question that I hope will illuminate not only the work of these three figures but also the California mindset as it took hold of the San Francisco Bay Area in the mid-twentieth century, in its least hypocritical form. This way of understanding the creative imagination is related to the utopian, visionary prong of what Fred Turner called “the Californian Ideology”—a blend of “libertarian politics, countercultural aesthetics, and techno-utopian visions.”³ I would call it a form of Romantic phenomenology.

The Meeting of Two Vardas

Uncle Yanco’s opening shot of the floating city at dawn is followed by a quick montage of images introducing San Francisco as it was in 1967: the Golden Gate Bridge seen by car, psychedelic artwork and posters from the legendary Fillmore music venue, photographs documenting protests of the Vietnam War, and similar images. The next shots return to Yanco, who appears in his natural habitat: the *SS Vallejo*, a patchwork quilt of a houseboat built

from the shell of a retired passenger ferry. Yanco acquired this boat in 1949 with his friend Gordon Onslow Ford, a British surrealist who fronted \$500 for the purchase. Together they refurbished it for use as a home, artist studio, and social gathering site. They docked in Sausalito, California, a small bayside community just north of San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge, where dozens of floating homes sit tucked in a corner of the bay sheltered by Mount Tamalpais. During the 1950s and 1960s, through Yanco's death in 1971, the *Vallejo* hosted various luminaries of the California counterculture movement. Alan Watts (1915–73), a founder of the California Institute of Integral Studies and author of over twenty books on Eastern mysticism, largely responsible for popularizing Zen Buddhism in the Western world, visited the ship and soon became Varda's roommate there.⁴ Watts convened the famous Houseboat Summit of February 1967 on the ship, which gathered Timothy Leary, Allen Ginsburg, Gary Snyder, and others.⁵ Artists, poets, and scholars who visited or had studio space on the *Vallejo* included Maya Angelou, the Chilean painter Roberto Matta, Ruth Asawa (whom Yanco had taught at Black Mountain College), the Austrian painter and theorist Wolfgang Paalen, Luchita Hurtado, and Grace McCann Morley, then director of San Francisco's Museum of Modern Art.⁶ Sabro Hasegawa, who introduced Eastern calligraphy to the Bay Area and Western abstract art to Japan, produced work on the ship.⁷ Yanco Varda collaborated with these and other Bay Area artists and filmmakers, appearing in a role in James Broughton's *The Bed* (US, 1968). The *Vallejo* is still intact and currently hosts an invitation-only artists' residency.

Uncle Yanco provides a short tour of this community and its unusual architecture through a series of mobile images, filmed as if we were gliding around its piers on a skimmer. The 35mm film stock reveals a fairyland of saturated colors and quirky shapes: boats of red, blue, and brown, some half-sunken, some geodesic, one floating alone like a tiny island, others docked in cozy groups bridged by narrow wooden walkways, many of which are lined with pots of cultivated herbs and succulents. "Sausalito," Yanco explains in voice-over, "is what they call 'aquatic suburbia' . . . the aquatic



Figure 2. The SS Vallejo, with *The Owl* in the background, in Varda's *Uncle Yanco* (US/France, 1967)



Figure 3. "Aquatic suburbia": Sausalito docks in *Uncle Yanco* (US/France, 1967)

suburbs represent a certain intelligence. It's people who aren't rebels with guns, but rebels against the system, against the American obsession with making money." A notable icon appears in this sequence: a pagoda-like structure with pointed eaves for wings and large round windows, resembling a sort of half-bird, half-sea creature. Nicknamed *The Owl*, the boat was constructed by architect Chris Roberts, who built a second floating residence called *The Madonna* that towered over the marina until it was destroyed by a fire in 1975.

Soon the film introduces a set of mythological references that will be activated throughout its brief duration—many of which Varda would continue to work with in later work. Yanco proclaims: "It's important to always be by the sea. The sea is the element of love. The Greeks say so. Aphrodite emerged from the water." A tracking shot reveals more floating homes, accompanied by the sound of Greek lyra music. Varda picks up the voice-over where Yanco has left off: "This Greek who says so lives on the water in this floating house right out of a cartoon, in this ark worthy of Noah, off this island worthy of a Greek . . . a painter, my ancestor, my floating root." On this houseboat with its collection of fantastic creatures, including his pet cat Melanesia, Uncle Yanco seems Noah-like: a savior figure in times of war and destruction. Yanco was known for telling tall tales about himself: he claimed that his mother was a seal and that he was from the island of Cythera, the mythical birthplace of Aphrodite and home to her archaic temple.⁸ Like Mona in *Vagabond* (*Sans toit ni loi*, France, 1985), it seems as though Yanco came from the sea, a semiaquatic being emerging like Venus from a shell. One legend about San Francisco imagines it as the resurrection of the lost city of Atlantis.⁹ Yanco clearly lives in a world steeped in myth and ancient imagery, and the film opens in such a way that we feel we are stepping into this world. Varda refers to Yanco as a member of her "imaginary family," suggesting that, to her, kinship to him involves more than a chance fact of birth. As Yanco quips, "The family is what we mustn't be." In a later interview, Varda referred to Yanco as "this father of my dreams."¹⁰ Theirs is a chosen, fantasy kinship in addition to being a biological one.



Figure 4. Yanco (left) and Tom Luddy (right), in *Uncle Yanco* (US/France, 1967)

The next segment of the film, labeled “How Uncle Yanco Met His Niece Agnès,” consists of a montage of reenacted takes of the two Vardas meeting each other. Agnès approaches the *SS Vallejo* via its wooden walkway and pretends to be meeting Yanco for the first time, introduced by her friend Tom Luddy. Their encounter is shown a total of seven times, with the dialogue repeated in French, English, and Greek, sometimes as a complete action, sometimes in fragments. A clapperboard snaps between takes, showing the date as 29 October 1967, a Sunday and their second day of filming. The inclusion of the date and the repetitions produce an alienation effect, clearly marking their meeting as a fictional reenactment. As Rebecca J. DeRoo notes, Varda often practiced feminism through Brechtian methods.¹¹ Similar repetitions and breaks with illusionism are to be found in *Le bonheur* (*Happiness*, France, 1965), where color takes on a Sirkian unreality, as well as *Lions Love (. . . and Lies)* (US, 1969) and *One Sings, the Other Doesn't* (*L'une chante, l'autre pas*, France/Belgium, 1977). Varda had served as the official photographer of the Théâtre National Populaire under the direc-

tion of Brechtian Jean Vilar and imported alienation effects into her filmmaking.¹²

Agnès appears in a bright violet top and trousers, and Yanco in a pink jersey tinted with the inexpensive Rit dyes that he was known for. These colors, against the backdrop of the *Vallejo's* cheery pink and yellow windowpanes, lend a painterly effect to the scene. Color was already a prominent element in Agnès Varda's practice, evidenced in the stunning, anti-illusionist palette of *Le Bonheur*. Sandy Flitterman-Lewis writes that in that film "Varda implicitly evokes impressionist painting theory in her use of analytic color shading (violet as the shadow of orange, for example)" and notes that, throughout her career, Varda's use of color continued to be influenced by "her painter-hippie Greek relative."¹³ Varda's use of color here verges on extradiegetic: in *Le bonheur* she inventively fades to monochromes of blue or red rather than to black or white, and in *Uncle Yanco*, too, there is a sense that color assumes a life of its own, independent of the objects that serve as its canvas, producing what Gilles Deleuze calls an absorbent "color-image."¹⁴

At the conclusion of the repetition montage, children hold yellow and red cellophane hearts up to frame the pair, anticipating Varda's use of the heart motif in later work, notably the heart-shaped potatoes in *The Gleaners and I*. The images of their embrace also look backward, to Jacopo Pontormo's *Visitation* (1528–30), the Mannerist painting that inspired Bill Viola's *The Greeting* (US, 1995). Pontormo's image depicts a meeting between the Virgin Mary and her elderly relative Elizabeth, who is also miraculously pregnant with a son who will become John the Baptist. It captures the moment in the story when they approach each other, embrace, and are filled with the Holy Spirit. While Varda's film gestures only obliquely at this iconography, she would surely have known of it from her art historical training, and even if it is not a direct quotation, affinities between the two images are worth observing: the matching bright hues of pink, orange, and blue, the two attendants flanking the pair, and the joyful meeting of two relatives, one young and one old, who are kindred spirits. The positioning of Yanco in Elizabeth's place has feminist implications, as though he were both an uncle and a maternal figure. While conventionally



Figure 5. Embrace with cellophane heart in *Uncle Yanco* (US/France, 1967)

masculine and even sexist in some of his behaviors, Yanco appears in his niece's film as a chimerical, fluidly gendered figure, aligned with Aphrodite and feminine creative potential, a point I return to later in this article.

Through all these devices—the repetitions, the colors, the iconographic references—the meeting of two Vardas is placed under the sign of the imaginary many times over. We are presented with an uncle and niece, who are in reality second cousins (Yanco explains that he is actually the cousin of Agnès's father Eugène), who repeatedly pretend to meet for the first time onboard a polychromatic floating home, when in fact, as Varda states in her final film, *Varda by Agnès* (*Varda par Agnès*, France, 2019), they had been introduced by Luddy the previous Wednesday. The scene is of course no less touching for its lack of facticity. Varda imbues it with a fairy-tale quality and makes clear the visit is not motivated by family obligation or filial duty. Their kinship is not defined by a single arboreal line of descent; rather, it goes by multiple names and reaches into the future as well as the past.



Figure 6. Jacopo Pontormo, *Visitation* (ca. 1528–30). Oil on panel, 80 × 61 in. The Church of San Michele e San Francesco, Carmignano, Italy

The Artist as Sublime Ragpicker

Agnès Varda had come to the Bay Area to present *The Creatures* (*Les créatures*, France/Sweden, 1966) at the San Francisco Film Festival. Tom Luddy, who arranged her meeting with Yanco, was a programmer at the Pacific Film Archive, and soon-to-be cofounder of the Telluride Film Festival.¹⁵ Varda and Jacques Demy had temporarily moved to Los Angeles that year, as Demy had a contract with Columbia Pictures, during which time he made the 1969 film *Model Shop*.¹⁶ Due to this residency, Varda and Demy missed May 1968 in France but were in California for the Summer of Love, the Bobby Kennedy assassination, and the beginnings of the Black Panthers movement, which Varda documented in her 1968 short film of that title.

Yanco, for his part, had been living in California since the 1940s. Born in 1893 in Smyrna, of Greek and French heritage, he and his family moved to Athens in 1905.¹⁷ He left Greece for Paris in 1913 to study at the École des Beaux Arts; there he kept a studio in a Montmartre building owned by Georges Braque. He crossed paths with Picasso, who insultingly called him “a classical painter, not a modern painter” (22). According to his biographer Elizabeth Leavy Stroman, Yanco dropped out shortly after this encounter, perhaps as a result of it, and gave up painting for years. He turned his attention instead to dance: after seeing a production of Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring* around 1916, he began to study ballet, joining Margaret Morris’s dance club (22). During the 1920s he moved between the art worlds of Paris, Cassis in the south of France, and London, where he was a member of the short-lived Omega Workshops design movement. In this decade, Yanco also had his first solo show and married Dorothy Varda, with whom he had a daughter named Dominica. It was the first of five committed romantic relationships he had throughout his life, many of them contentious due to Yanco’s self-proclaimed nature as “a cat who walks by himself” (108). In his final years he would surround himself with a retinue of young women he called his “graces”: dancers and young hippies who lived with him on the *Vallejo*, four or five at a time (54). As an artist in her own right, Agnès Varda seems to have escaped being slotted by Yanco into this problematically gendered category.

Yanco's nymphets may rightly strike the contemporary viewer as antifeminist, given their youth, their devotion to him, and the fact that they appear utterly replaceable and interchangeable with one another. Still, it is important to remember the context of 1967 San Francisco: *Uncle Yanco* was filmed immediately after the Summer of Love, at the height of the free love movement and its radical sexual politics, but before Stonewall and the women's liberation movement.

By the early 1930s, Yanco had begun to experiment with a mosaic technique using mirrors, which involved scratching their backs, painting over the scratches, and embedding the pieces on boards covered with gesso such that the paint would show through the scored areas. Inventive use of materials characterized his entire career. He continued to produce mosaic-like assemblages made from glass, textiles, paper, metal, and other found fragments, usually embedded on wood. As he states in *Uncle Yanco*, "I don't like people calling them 'collages.' I use all sorts of durable materials: plastics, fabrics, like a mosaicist. Stone, glass." Later, he would return to painting for practical reasons, stating that it made the work "easier to carry around." But even then, his supports and canvases were often scavenged from discarded materials. Anaïs Nin, who befriended him in the early 1940s, dubbed him "a sublime ragpicker who turns everything into an object of beauty."¹⁸ Yanco, like his niece, was a gleaner, turning salvaging into an art form.

Yanco's first journey to the United States took place in 1939, during which he visited New York, Chicago, and finally San Francisco, for a showing of his work at the Courvoisier Galleries. He fell in love with Northern California, and by 1942 he had moved to the coastal town of Monterey after a stint in nearby Big Sur. He and his third partner, Virginia Barclay, a textile designer, purchased a home that would come to be known as the Red Barn. The interior was gaudily decorated with odds and ends: pieces of polished driftwood, bits of broken marble, and a child-sized mannequin named Phoebe, who had straw hair, red and blue legs, and a dress dotted with tin foil.¹⁹ He taught at various colleges, including Black Mountain, the San Francisco Art Institute (then known as the California School of Fine Arts), and the California College of the Arts

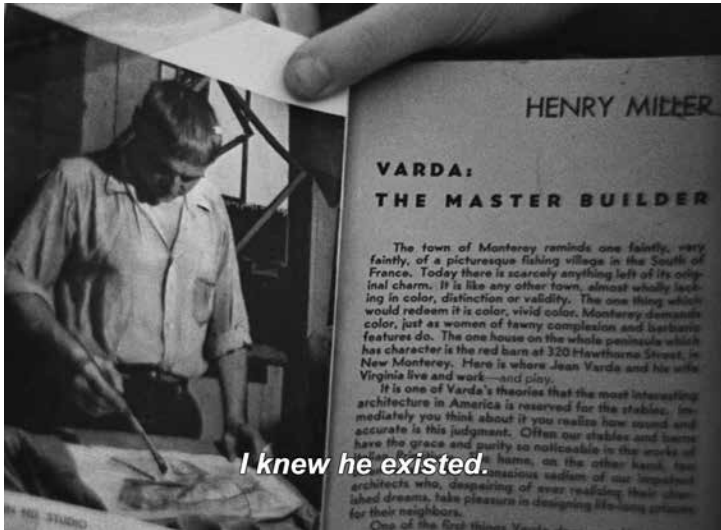


Figure 7. Agnès Varda holds a copy of Henry Miller's *Varda: The Master Builder* in *Uncle Yanco* (US/France, 1967)

in Oakland, while also working occasionally as a cook on a Yugoslavian sardine boat.²⁰

One notable local commission in Monterey was for a restaurant called Angelo's, built out of salvaged lumber and recycled wood, which, in typical fashion, Varda painted in garish hues of blue, pink, and black. Its opening was celebrated with a costume party attended by local author John Steinbeck, at which several guests came dressed as characters from Varda's mosaics.²¹ The building has a flattened, facade-like look, making it seem almost like one of Varda's mosaics come to life. The restaurant's name is painted in a Greek-looking font, a reference to the other seaside country that Varda associated in his mind with the Northern California landscape and climate.

Friends and party guests at the Red Barn during this period in the 1940s included Henry Miller, who had moved to Big Sur at Yanco's suggestion, and Anaïs Nin, the writer's friend and former lover. Like many, Miller found a muse in Yanco. His short volume titled *Varda: The Master Builder* was the text that provided Agnès

with knowledge of Yanco prior to their meeting. Miller described the Red Barn as “a house made entirely of refuse: bottles, tin boxes, rockers, lead pipe, rope, dismantled hulls and masts of wrecked ships.”²² Miller drew a portrait of the artist as a Neptunian magician whose chief power is to create beauty from foraged debris: “He takes delight in plundering the refuse heaps and from the plunder creating veritable mansions of light and joy. One of the first things I was instructed in, on coming to stay with him, was never to throw away tin cans or empty bottles—nor rags, nor paper, nor string, nor buttons, nor corks, nor even dollar bills.”²³

Anaïs Nin used one of Yanco’s untitled collages as the cover image for her 1961 book *Seduction of the Minotaur*. In her diaries she wrote eloquently of his work *Women Reconstructing the World*, which he had gifted to her, in a passage that merits quoting at length:

One morning . . . appeared . . . a big square package, one yard around. I opened it and it was a collage by Jean Varda. He calls it “Women Reconstructing the World.” Against a background of sand the color of champagne, with its tiny grains of sparkling glass, five women in airy cutouts. The middle one is the strongest, with her abstract labyrinth of black-and-red stripes; on her left walks an Ophelia in a trailing white dress of clouds and lace, dancing not walking. And on her right a sturdy woman in white and blue, carrying a piece of music on her head. . . . In the back are four small houses, all façades, pierced with smiling, askew windows; one can easily walk in and out of them . . . They are made of intangibles, lights and space, labyrinths, and molecules which may change as you look at them. Elusive and free of gravity. They bring freedom by transcendence.²⁴

Indeed, these footless women appear “free of gravity”; they seem to float toward us from the distant city, despite the fact that they are made of mixed materials of varying thicknesses. The “piece of music” that the figure on the left carries on her head is a collaged, cut-out slice of an actual musical score. The middle figure wears a pale apron that drapes and folds slightly, behaving like a moving piece of fabric. They approach on white welcome mats, as if inviting us to join them. They cross a desert of indeterminate scale, bringing all the shapes, colors, and bits of material they have sal-



Figure 8. Jean Varda, *Women Reconstructing the World* (1944).
 Courtesy of the Anaïs Nin Foundation

vaged and will use to reconstruct the world. They do not appear burdened by this task; rather, in Nin's words, they are airy and transcendent.

Where other artists at this time were exploring the material, factual qualities of paint and the objecthood of paintings, Yanco emphasized the ethereal, insubstantial qualities of matter. Perhaps this is why Picasso could not recognize his work as "modern": he reversed the quintessential modernist gesture of reflexivity, insisting instead on matter's capacity to be etherized into scenes of the imagination. This insistence must have struck Picasso as naive, or even semi-illiterate. For this final point, compare Jean Varda's use of the musical score fragment in *Women Reconstructing the World* with Picasso's use of newspaper in the 1913 collage *Bowl of Fruit, Violin, and Wineglass*. Writing about this painting, Rosalind Krauss famously argued that Picasso uses the collage medium in a proto-postmodern way, "setting up discourse in place of presence": words, letters, and violin *f*-holes are not so much figural elements as signifiers deployed as such.²⁵ Rather than referring to "predicates" like



Figure 9. Pablo Picasso, *Bowl of Fruit, Violin, and Wineglass* (1913). Charcoal, black chalk, watercolor, oil paint, coarse black wash, and collage of printed and colored papers on board, 25¹¹/₁₆ × 19³/₄ in. © 2021 Estate of Pablo Picasso / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

actual newspapers or violins, they invoke “the very system of form” itself; in this way, Krauss argued, the subject of Picasso’s collage becomes not the objects in the still life but “the various resources for the visual illusion of spatial presence.”²⁶ Form itself, representational systems as such, are what this image is about and what it interrogates.

Women Reconstructing the World, though, does the opposite. The clipped piece of musical score is not a sign as sign, nor is it even “itself,” presented literally as a found object. It is meant to invoke music as a whole, all the music in the world, not as an abstract generalization (as in Music with a capital *M*), but as actual music that

this woman is carrying to the new world that is being prepared, as if she were Noah, stocking an ark not with generalized concepts or signifiers of things but with real things. It is not meant to derealize the image and interrogate its illusionism; rather, Jean Varda wanted to create hyperreal images, dreamscapes, that would operate like archaic myths. He stubbornly and anachronistically insisted on the thingliness of representations, effectively declaring, “This *is* music; this *is* a pipe.” His art involves a two-stage transmutation: salvaged scraps of matter are dematerialized into an image, and then that image assumes a reality of its own. In this way, its magic is not unlike that of film, although it has roots in a much earlier epoch.

Heavenly Cities

During his time in London, Jean Varda spent time in the British Library reading room, where he recalled immersing himself in texts by Byzantine mystics. One of these, Joannes Bardas, supplied him with one of his favorite quotations: “To the eye that is pure, the world is transparent. If there is still opacity, this is not a defect in matter, but an infirmity in the eye of the onlooker.”²⁷ However, there is no known documentation of the existence of any Joannes Bardas or any volumes by him housed in the library; he seems to have been invented by Yanco as a kind of alter ego. A clue to this is offered by the similarity of their names. Another Byzantine mystic he quoted, Emanuel Mavroulas, is also likely fictional; there is no record of his existence, and the name is suspiciously similar to the



Figure 10. Two Vardas in profile in *Uncle Yanco* (US/France, 1967)



Figure 11. Yanco as “rich American uncle” in *Uncle Yanco* (US/France, 1967)

word “marvelous.”²⁸ It is fitting that Yanco would use make-believe scholars to illustrate his philosophy about the pliability and transparency of worldly matter. He understood plasticity in the Eisensteinian sense of potential and malleability, that is, in terms of its capacity for transformation rather than its obdurateness.²⁹

Agnès Varda films portions of her conversation with her uncle in sharp profiles edited in shot-counter shot, her uncle against a golden yellow wall, and herself, still clothed in purple, against a burgundy background, one silver earring dangling beneath her bobbed hair. These images have an icon-like quality, with their flat outlines and jewel tones: she composes their portraits with a nod to the Byzantine forms that influenced her uncle. As if to emphasize the suitability of these forms, Varda inserts a second, contrasting portrait of Yanco in a wholly different guise, that of the rich American uncle. He poses seated in an ill-fitting checked suit jacket, a too-wide red tie, and white cowboy hat, his hand resting on a stuffy-looking book called *The Bible of the World*. His expression is wary, even slightly terrified: the role, pose, clothing, and genre of portrait are a bad fit for him. “I’m not really American,”



Figure 12. The dinner party scene in *Uncle Yanco* (US/France, 1967)

Yanco says, “I was naturalized at fifty. And I’m not rich.” Here, the film signals again that this dream uncle will not be the caricature we might expect from clichés, even if his persona is archetypal in a different way.

Varda quickly restores her uncle to his preferred habitat: a casual celebratory dinner party on the *Vallejo*. The film’s images of the composition—Henry Miller noted that Yanco always referred to parties as “compositions”—reveal an inventory of objects.³⁰ At the center are steamed mussels in a giant bowl made of reclaimed wood. Works on paper fill the back wall. Flowers, both real and silk, decorate the dinner table and ornament the ship’s mismatched wooden columns. A documentary photo by Bob Greensfelder reveals Yanco’s second daughter, Vagadu, among the group, leaning against one of these supports in the back; in the upper left corner is an electric lamp that was likely used to provide illumination for the film shoot; its cord is visible in the film. Present here are the many colorfully clad guests in Yanco’s social milieu.

The next segment of the film takes the form of a sort of studio visit. Yanco describes his methods and principles while standing

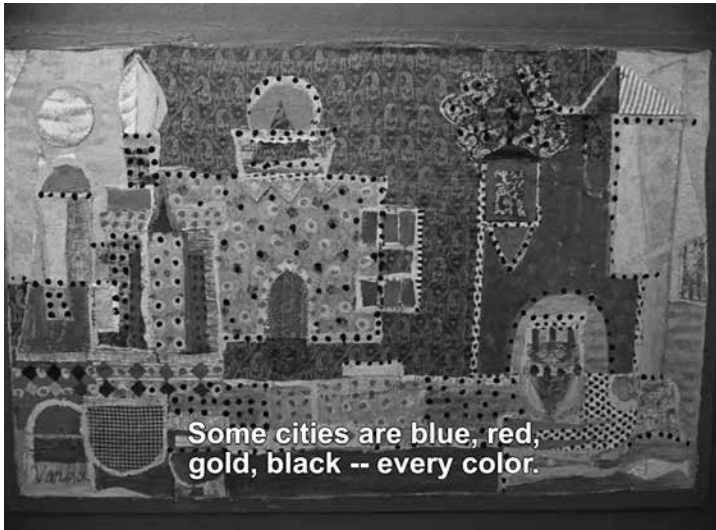


Figure 13. “Some cities”: one of Jean Varda’s Heavenly Cities mosaics in *Uncle Yanco* (US/France, 1967)

before a work in progress on an easel. Reiterating his commitment to the transcendent, he states that “the goal of painting is to have light penetrate matter and dematerialize it.” Again, his metaphors establish a link between his own art forms and his niece’s, the cinema. The film continues to a sequence of shots of Yanco speaking in front of his work as if giving an artist’s lecture, intercut with more examples of his images, sometimes filmed statically, sometimes panning or zooming in to close-ups of details.

One group of images to which Agnès devotes particular attention is his Heavenly Cities series. “I did a series of heavenly cities,” Yanco intones. “The walls were emeralds and precious stones and so forth. . . . I did 30 of them. They’re all hanging in houses now. Some cities are blue, red, gold, black—every color.” Extradiegetic celestial music plays. Yanco continues his narration: “Gold—more childhood memories, of course. Mosaics, the gold backgrounds. Gold is the color of revelation.” But the splendor Yanco describes does not fully match up to what we see on-screen, at least not at first glance. While the images do reveal some of the Byzantine and Islamic architectural forms that Yanco invokes, they are expressed loosely, through simplified approximations of shape.

The emeralds, precious stones, and gold he describes are suggested by the bright colors and decorative details but are far from expensive looking. No gems or even gem substitutes are inlaid here: the city is built from scraps of glued-together paper, fabric, and paint. Their patchwork look recalls quilting. They might easily be dismissed as kitsch outsider art; indeed, to this day, Stroman's is the sole monograph on Jean Varda's artistic oeuvre, and he is remembered equally if not more as a countercultural persona, teacher, and social hub as for his art.

However, this is precisely where it makes sense to return to Yanco's counterintuitive declaration that the purpose of art is to "dematerialize matter." It has nothing to do with denying the worldly objecthood of the found materials with which he builds his images; rather, it is about the marvelous capacity for a magnificent city to arise from what is in reality only bits of trash. This is poiesis in its highest form. To make a luxurious emerald city out of luxurious emeralds is no great feat. What Yanco does is more magical, akin to transubstantiation or alchemy. This explains why he called his works "mosaics" rather than collages, even when using only paper, textiles, or paint: like Byzantine mosaics, his images are meant to function as miraculous objects, exceeding the sum of their parts and conjuring up the presence of another world. "Painting rivals the splendor of a bird, the opulence of the sea or any landscape, but it surpasses them," says Yanco to his niece. Again, this is not because the bird or the sea is any less wondrous but, rather, because they already exist as such and do not require any transformation.

However roughshod one finds Jean Varda's artistic work, one cannot deny that it illustrates this power of the imagination, a faculty that allows visions of things to appear that do not in fact yet exist. It is not a negation of reality, like a lie or falsehood. Nor does it entail the destruction of the existing physical world. But it does require that the matter of this world be transformed, a capacity that Yanco attributed at times to light and at times to color, facilitated but not solely enacted by the artist. "Art is the last refuge of magic," he once wrote, "and the artist the modern alchemist, transmuting the refuse and scraps of civilization."³¹ He was a pre-Reformation subject living in iconoclastic times.

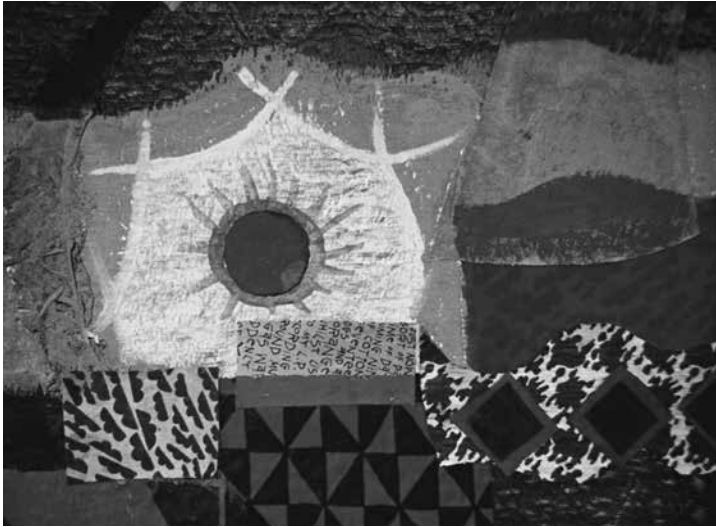


Figure 14. A close-up of a mosaic by Jean Varda in *Uncle Yanco* (US/France, 1967)

Shells Navigating the Water

Several of Yanco's Heavenly Cities are floating cities, like San Francisco. One of them that appears in *Uncle Yanco* contains a detail that Varda zooms in on: a structure with eaves and a large round window resembling *The Owl*, a floating home shown earlier in the film. Another of these aquatic cityscapes bears a slight resemblance to San Francisco. In the foreground, pink and red blocks are nested on a shimmering waterfront, while in the background, a row of taller structures in foggier colors juts skyward. One of these has twin spires reminiscent of the landmark Saints Peter and Paul Church in the city. A small boat appears ready to dock at a pier in the lower right corner, perhaps having just entered the bay via the gateway behind it, which, although it looks nothing like the Golden Gate Bridge, can be imagined as its analogue due to its position in the picture.

In *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard, Varda's mentor at the Sorbonne, compares cities themselves to the ocean. Specifically, he writes that the sound of city bustle and traffic mimics the rhythmic crash of ocean tides, producing a soothing effect. He writes:

“My bed is a small boat lost at sea; that sudden whistling is the wind in the sails. On every side the air is filled with the sound of furious klaxoning. . . . But there now, your skiff is holding its own, you are safe in your stone boat.”³² This relationship between city thrum and ocean rumble is more than a metaphor, in Bachelard’s view; it is what he calls a true image: “Everything corroborates my view that the image of the city’s ocean roar is in the very ‘nature of things’ . . . that it is a true image.”³³ By *true image*, he seems to indicate something like what Varda called a “key image,” which operates as a touchstone, in a stronger way than a mere metaphor.³⁴ Something ascends to the status of a true image of something else when the two are experientially and perceptually nearly indistinguishable, due to qualities that inhere in their very matter and spatial organization. Bachelard elaborates on this idea in an anecdote about Gustave Courbet, who wanted to paint a view of Paris as seen from the top floor of the Sainte-Pélagie prison where he was confined, and to paint it “the way I do my marines: with an immensely deep sky, and all its movement, all its houses and domes, imitating the tumultuous waves of the ocean.”³⁵



Figure 15. Sailing party aboard the *Cythera* in *Uncle Yanco* (US/France, 1967)

The Poetics of Space contains a long chapter on the image of the seashell used poetically. Bachelard suggests that the shell-house is also a “primal” or true image in this sense (140). Shells, he writes, are “rough and rocky on the outside” but “highly polished” and “enamel-like” on the inside (149, 126). They are the very evocation of what he calls “the tranquility of inhabiting” (151). He describes the myth of Aphrodite’s emergence from her shell as the opposite of the Medusa myth: whereas Medusa petrifies her victims with fear, turning flesh into stone, shellfish exude stone-like dwellings from their soft bodies (128). The birth of a creature from an eggshell or a sapling from a seed, too, inverts the Medusa curse: vitality breaks forth from an inanimate, sculptural hard casing.

The penultimate section of *Uncle Yanco* depicts a sailing party onboard Yanco’s boat the *Cythera*, named, of course, for the island of Aphrodite and his self-appointed birthplace. Many of the same vividly clothed guests from the dinner party board the vessel for a merry outing. They bring their dogs aboard and smoke joints. A Pan-like hippie in green crowned with a headband plays a bamboo woodwind instrument. Varda films the boat from several angles, high above, level with the party, and from another vessel as the boat sails, revealing its painted exterior and sail. Extradiegetic Greek lute music accompanies the scene. Later, in *Varda by Agnès*, she reenacted this sailing venture in a similarly painted boat.

Bachelard’s chapter on shells contains a final example of this form’s dwelling-like qualities, the image of the seashell as a sailboat. He describes a sixteenth-century engraving by Pieter van der Heyden after Hieronymus Bosch, alternately titled *Shell Navigating the Water*, *The Oyster Shell*, and *The Sailing Scale*. Like the boating party in *Uncle Yanco*, the sailors feast, play music, and kiss, and there is even a dog on board. The image is likely a copy of *The Concert in the Egg* (1561), once attributed to Bosch and now assigned to a follower. These sixteenth-century images belong to the “ship of fools” genre; their purpose is to warn of the dangers of overindulgence in drink, song, and merriment. As Bachelard put it, “The dream of inhabiting all the hollow objects in the world is accompanied by ludicrous scenes peculiar to Bosch’s imagination. . . . The travelers are feast-



Figure 16. Pieter van der Heyden, *The Oyster Shell* (1562).
Engraving, 7.6 × 11.2 in.

ing and carousing, with the result that the dream of tranquility we should like to pursue when we ‘withdraw into our shells’ . . . is lost because of the insistence on frenzied joy that marks the genius of this painter.”³⁶

Varda, though, is able to reconcile the ecstatic and the tranquil. Her uncle’s ship of fools is the very image of a floating root, an understanding of what it means to cultivate a sense of dwelling even in conditions of impermanence and instability. Years later, in 2012, she would build one of her cinema-shacks, a greenhouse-like installation made from recycled celluloid strips, out of the final print of *Lions Love (. . . and Lies)* for an exhibition of her work at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, titled *Agnès Varda in Californialand*; *Uncle Yanco* was screened at that exhibition. In an interview, she says, “I’ve been working all my life, and I feel this is my private shack. This is where I live. I live into cinema.”³⁷ In the same interview, she suggests that her movement between various media forms was also a kind of migratory travel: “It’s very exciting for me to go from one life into another, and from one medium into another.” Like a house-

boat, the cine-shack is semiweightless; it is made of light and airy materials that transmute into a vision of solid, inhabitable space. Both the French and English titles of her film *Vagabond* likewise convey a sense of being at home in itinerancy. One also thinks of the island of Noirmoutier that, like the mudflats of Sausalito where the *Vallejo* is docked, is connected to the land at low tide but floats separate from it when the tide rolls in. We might also recall the tomb of Varda's cat Zgougou adorned in seashells, and her *Cabane du chat* at the Fondation Cartier in Paris. And then, there is the concluding image of her final film *Varda by Agnès*, in which sea, sand, and sky blur together as one.

Varda describes what she learned from Bachelard in these words: he “had this dream of the *material* in people: a psychoanalysis of the material world related to people, wood, rivers, the sea, fire, wind, air. . . . He taught us to study writers not only by the stories they told but by the material things they mentioned.”³⁸ Varda seems to have applied this principle to her uncle, who personified the element of water. “There is a distilling apparatus in every one of us,” Yanco once quipped, one that “reduces all material, even the one of stark realism, into a parable or more often into a fable. In the beginning there was the Fable and in the end the Fable will be. . . . Nothing endures unless it has first been transposed into a myth.”³⁹ Bachelard, a self-described phenomenologist of the imagination, shared this sense that matter requires myth to remove it from the stream of impermanence. And both of these men now find their transposition into myth, their endurance, in the work of a woman who studied them well, capturing them in images made of light.

Notes

My thanks to Patricia White for editorial wisdom, to Emily Leifer for assistance with images, and to the organizers of the “Virtual Varda” conference hosted by Bilgi University in March 2020, where I delivered a version of this article as a talk.

1. Homy King, *Virtual Memory: Time-Based Art and the Dream of Digitality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 71–88;

- Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1960).
2. Jean Varda studied with a nun and claimed at one point to have converted to Catholicism, but there is no evidence that she participated in organized religion later in life. See Elizabeth Leavy Stroman, *The Art and Life of Jean Varda* (Sausalito, CA: Purple Cottage, 2015), a comprehensive monograph that I rely on for much of Jean Varda's biography.
 3. Fred Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 208. Turner cited Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron, who described *Wired* magazine as a purveyor of the Californian ideology, which Turner traced to the Whole Earth Network.
 4. Watts also hosted a radio program on principles of Eastern thought called *Way beyond the West* on KPFA from 1959 to 1973.
 5. Alan Watts, Gary Snyder, Tim Leary, and Allen Ginsberg, "Changes (The Houseboat Summit)," *San Francisco Oracle* 1, no. 7 (1967).
 6. Stroman, *Art and Life of Jean Varda*, 6, 10, 92, 96, and 138.
 7. David Keaton and Linda Keaton, "Ship of Dreams: Artists, Poets, and Visionaries of the S.S. *Vallejo*," in *Artists, Poets, and Visionaries of the S.S. Vallejo: 1949–1969*, ed. Fariba Bogzaran (Inverness, CA: Lucid Art Foundation, 2018), 5–6.
 8. Stroman, *Art and Life of Jean Varda*, 15.
 9. See, for example, Frona Eunice Wait, *Yermah the Dorado* (San Francisco: William Doxey, 1897), a science fiction novel that casts San Francisco as a resurrected Atlantis.
 10. Jean Narboni, Serge Toubiana, and Dominique Villain, "L'Une Chante, L'Autre Pas: Interview with Agnès Varda," in *Agnès Varda: Interviews*, ed. T. Jefferson Kline (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2014), 86.
 11. Rebecca J. DeRoo, *Agnès Varda between Film, Photography, and Art* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018), 75.
 12. Gordon Gow, "The Underground River (1970)," in Kline, *Agnès Varda: Interviews*, 42.

13. Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, *To Desire Differently: Feminism and the French Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 233.
14. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 118.
15. A graduate of the University of California, Berkeley, Luddy was also instrumental in bringing film studies to the university, hosting 16mm screenings in the basement of Alice Waters's home. Seymour Chatman, interview with the author, Berkeley, CA, 2001.
16. Alison Smith, *Agnès Varda* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), 8.
17. Jean Varda chronology from Stroman, *Art and Life of Jean Varda*, 6–11.
18. Anaïs Nin, *The Diary of Anaïs Nin*, vol. 5, 1947–1945, ed. Gunther Stuhlmann (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971), 107.
19. Elayne Wareing Fitzpatrick, *Traveling Backward: Curious Journeys and Quixotic Quests beyond the Youth of Old Age* (Bloomington, IN: Xlibris, 2009), 157.
20. Fitzpatrick, *Traveling Backward*, 158.
21. Catherine Coburn, "Monterey's Regional Cuisine Is Defined by Geographical Blessings and Cultural Influences," *Monterey County Weekly*, 16 July 1998, www.montereycountyweekly.com/news/local_news/monterey-s-regional-cuisine-is-defined-by-geographical-blessings-and/article_7c59b050-365c-53da-8f4e-4523ee51c9b6.html.
22. Henry Miller, *Varda: The Master Builder* (Berkeley, CA: Circle Editions, 1947), 6–7.
23. Miller, *Varda*, 4.
24. Anaïs Nin, *The Diary of Anaïs Nin*, vol. 3, 1939–1944, ed. Gunther Stuhlmann (Orlando: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1969), 312–13.
25. Rosalind Krauss, "In the Name of Picasso," *October*, no. 16 (1981): 20.

26. Krauss, "In the Name of Picasso," 19.
27. Quoted in Stroman, *Art and Life of Jean Varda*, 36.
28. Stroman, *Art and Life of Jean Varda*, 36.
29. Sergei Eisenstein defines *plasmaticness* as "like the primal protoplasm, not yet possessing a 'stable' form, but capable of assuming any form." Eisenstein, *Eisenstein on Disney*, trans. Alan Upchurch (New York: Methuen, 1988), 21.
30. Miller, *Varda*, 13.
31. Quoted in Stroman, "Jean 'Yanko' Varda: The Modern Alchemist," in Bogzaran, *Artists, Poets, and Visionaries of the S.S. Vallejo*, 31.
32. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (New York: Penguin Books, 1958), 49.
33. Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*, 49.
34. See Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, "The Gleaner and the Just," in *Situating the Feminist Gaze and Spectatorship in Postwar Cinema*, ed. Marcelline Block (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars, 2008), 222.
35. Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*, 49.
36. Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*, 142.
37. "Agnès Varda Discusses Her Work in the Exhibition" (video), in *Agnès Varda in Californialand*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, www.lacma.org/art/exhibition/agnes-var-da-californialand (accessed 2 February 2020).
38. Quoted in Gow, "Underground River," 42.
39. Quoted in Stroman, *Art and Life of Jean Varda*, 4, 31.

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Figure 17. Varda Landing, Sausalito, California.
Photo by the author