Figure 1. Agnès Varda's pruned tree, as featured in the opening sequence of *Agnès de ci de là Varda* (*Agnès Varda: From Here to There*, France, 2011)

“Virtual Varda”: Sustainable Legacies, Digital Communities, and Scholarly Postcards

Colleen Kennedy-Karpat

The meditations on absence and presence that follow a person’s death realign our memories and continue our relationship with that person’s legacy. This process holds as true for public figures as it does for personal acquaintances, although few public figures integrated as strong a sense of intimacy with their public as Agnès Varda did during her long career as a filmmaker and artist. Quite by accident, I found myself writing about this public-private confluence in the unusually personal response to Varda’s death on social media and in published tribute essays; these thoughts went into a conference paper delivered in April 2019 at Istanbul Bilgi University as part of an event dedicated to female agency and subjectivity in film and television.¹ While in my initial proposal I planned to discuss Varda’s film *Visages Villages* (*Faces Places*, France, 2017)—specifically, how her late documentaries frame her relationships and use this framing to reveal her agency—I

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never imagined that I would have to wrestle with such questions in the immediate aftermath of her passing.

Relationships persist even after death, and sharing the experience of mourning can also spark new friendships among the bereaved. Keen to maintain the momentum of the 2019 conference, in the months that followed Feride Çiçekoğlu and her colleagues at Bilgi invited me to help coordinate a symposium dedicated to Agnès Varda's legacy under the aegis of a new initiative aimed at exploring the interconnections between sustainability and gender equality. Thus, "Gender Equality and Sustainability: Agnès Varda's Sustaining Legacy" quickly began to take shape. We set a date in late March, to mark the anniversary of Varda's death; we sent out the call for papers and read the wide, warm responses; we invited and confirmed keynote speakers Sandy Flitterman-Lewis and Homa King; we built the final program and we began seeking a publisher for the volume to come.²

Yet in February 2020, as the date approached and we were dealing with these familiar tasks, an unfamiliar and rather menacing specter cast a pall over our progress. By early March the spread of COVID-19 had already prompted event cancellations and postponements in academic circles, leaving organizations scrambling to address or mitigate the upheaval of the global pandemic. With less than two weeks remaining until the symposium, we had to decide how to move forward. Bolstered by enthusiastic support from Bilgi University's administration, we announced the decision to keep the original date and move the proceedings online; within hours of sharing this news, our correspondence came up with the perspicacious nickname "Virtual Varda." This title renewed our determination to establish a format that could fulfill our mission in the midst of unprecedented disruption.

It helped us tremendously that Agnès Varda makes an apt subject to anchor this shift to digitality. Her late-career foray into digital video combines a sense of departure with a strong impression of continuation, just as a well-rooted trunk might sprout new branches. This natural metaphor is made literal in the opening narration of her 2011 documentary miniseries *Agnès de ci de là Varda* (*Agnès Varda: From Here to There*, France), which begins each

of its five episodes with shots of a tree in the courtyard of Varda's home in Paris (fig. 1). This sequence creates a precise synecdoche for the "here" of the title and thus provides clear contrast to the changing locations out "there" that comprise each episode. In voice-over, Varda explains how, after a very thorough pruning, the tree regained its lush greenery over only three months, a striking regrowth in a fraction of the time it took to gather and edit her travelogue—whose viewers, Varda adds, will experience the series over several days, while on-screen the tree's regrowth takes just two minutes. Juxtaposing a fixed, specific space in the visual track with narration that insists on the subjectiveness and malleability of time strikes an inspiring balance between stability and change, and it also shows how comfortable Varda was in seeking this often tenuous balance.

Such inspiration is sorely needed in the current moment of the global pandemic, as many of the changes happening to, through, and around us in the academy are impairing rather than improving our sense of continuity with existing practice. How will we teach, and how will we continue learning through our own research? Some of the problems will no doubt stay the same; money and time will certainly persist as perennial obstacles to original research, and indeed, the pandemic will likely exacerbate the already unequal distribution of these resources. This is especially true for our teaching, which seems to have vanquished the threat of MOOC-ification only to contort itself, under duress, into approximations of the same forms that so many educators have long and ardently resisted.³ The public reckoning of what has been lost or irrevocably altered in this forced embrace of online instruction has barely begun. Yet even if many traditional classroom practices are well worth defending against the entrenchment of virtual pedagogy, we must also recognize what might be gained as a result of this widespread surge in online capacities. Just as Varda's digital turn invigorated an already vibrant career, digital development can help overcome some impediments to the academic work of teaching and research.

Geographic distance and disconnections affect how we share our research at least as much as how we undertake it. But the strin-

gent and prolonged policies of isolation in response to COVID-19 have inspired new, or perhaps simply newly attractive, ways to close geographic gaps among colleagues. The breathtakingly swift adoption of online platforms that can handle dozens of people connecting simultaneously is not without problems, but this shift in perspective has the potential to go beyond a short-term stopgap to respond to long-percolating conversations about how scholars share their research and which scholars are granted this privilege. Some, for instance, have already begun to question the paradigm of the annual, pandisciplinary megaconference. Sustainability was a common motivator for these discussions before the pandemic, as in a special session at the International Association for Media and Communication Research conference in June 2018 titled “Reimagining Environmental Sustainability for the Academic Conference,” even though it’s tough to overlook the irony of hundreds of scholars traveling to a conference only to question the sustainability of this very activity.⁴ Our Varda symposium, considered honestly, might have been envisioned more sustainably from the start as a virtual one. But crisis allows us to pursue significant change by forcing open many of the cracks that had already been forming in old habits. I should note, though, that this movement rarely needs to push an event’s organizers as far as it does the anonymous brokers who would assess these events’ academic value.

Rethinking “Gender Equality and Sustainability: Agnès Varda’s Sustaining Legacy” as “Virtual Varda” may have been born more of immediate utility than of revolutionary potential, but it is important to recognize that the former does not preclude the latter. Our experience produced compelling evidence that scholarly communities can survive and even thrive despite a severe restriction—if not (yet) wholesale abolition—of face-to-face conferencing. Online connection allows us to introduce and, eventually, integrate even the farthest-flung colleagues into our immediate scholarly circles and routines. We find ourselves sharing our time even if, individually, we occupy different times: morning coffee, after lunch, wrapping up the day. Like Varda’s courtyard tree, our personal space can be fixed while subjective time is multiplied, though on these digital platforms we substitute a more lateral multiplication

for Varda's emphasis on recorded duration. The resulting expansion of perspectives comes together in a kaleidoscope of pixelated videos, all arrayed on a single screen.

Beyond virtual space, moving online also prompted a significant rethinking of time, namely, the question of how best to plan its use within the constraints of the platform. The mental crash and burn dubbed "Zoom fatigue" is real (indeed, we may not have grasped just how real during those early weeks of isolation) and must somehow be accounted for.⁵ What had been planned as a full day of panels on-site, with their attendant refreshments and socializing, we transformed into a Varda-focused, live-streaming content binge: two keynotes of thirty minutes each, plus ten presentations held to the barest double digits on the clock, all sequenced over four hours on a Saturday across time zones. The relentlessness of this succession of papers required team moderation with designated chiefs and backups throughout the program, a measure that proved necessary during our (fortunately brief and few) moments of technical difficulty.

Moving online also turned out to be a serendipitous lens for examining Varda's legacy. Already a master of building unity through diversity, Varda further reinforced this recurring theme in her embrace of digitality. The enhanced mobility and flexibility of digital filmmaking are qualities that vividly underscore Varda's strengths as an artist. Her generosity and genius, particularly as a documentarian, are grounded in the spirit of *partage* (sharing) that she declares in her final film, *Varda by Agnès* (*Varda par Agnès*, France, 2019), to be a driving force of her oeuvre. This core principle of *partage* also inspired us to press ahead with our plans; when limiting physical contact becomes key to our collective survival, the very act of sharing is loaded with a sudden, poignant nostalgia, but also renewed urgency. We committed ourselves to *partage* to better honor Varda herself. This shift also promotes more sustainable connections, as contacts established online might be more comfortably continued online—which is no small consideration for scholars who, like us, are based outside the Anglosphere and Western Europe. We were further buoyed by an enthusiastic response from our speakers, panelists, and university administrators at Bilgi in

launching (and, perhaps, continuing) “Virtual Varda” in lieu of our symposium in Istanbul, finding swift and sure support that validates this community-building impulse and suggests an auspicious future for Varda studies.

Taking an even broader view, the insights produced by considering Varda’s work in this online format visualize a path forward for other scholarship as well. Following Dominique Bluher’s study of postcards in Varda’s work, these virtual forms that academics are now exploring under a state of emergency might have durable appeal as a kind of scholarly postcard: a necessarily constrained yet effective way to develop and maintain social and professional networks by sharing research.⁶ If the megaconference functions largely (if presumptuously) as an annual or biannual record of the state of a given field, and if journals and smaller, multiday conferences produce more detailed dispatches from specific subfields, then our experience with “Virtual Varda” suggests that there is room to consider online conferencing as a collection of scholarly postcards, each presentation offering a standing and infinitely shareable record of research that is publicly available. These scholarly postcards neither negate nor replace established conferencing practices but introduce a complementary format that has the added benefit of boosting public outreach (fig. 2).

Online platforms may have an inherent advantage in their ability to reach new and broader audiences compared to in-person conferencing; however, as with the physical postcard, both platform and audience are primed more for sound bites than for detailed communication. Citing Bjarne Rogan, Bluher noted that most postcards “provide very little information since ‘their main function is to keep up reciprocal social contacts’ and to give ‘a sign of life or a confirmation of friendship.’”⁷ This tracks with our experience in online conferencing, and other forms of technology have similarly adopted this social function of postcards in daily life. Bluher likens postcards to text messages in that, for both, “communication is the first and most important function” (289). But unlike text messages, openness is built into the postcard form: sent without envelopes, they arguably invite readership beyond the addressee and reach out to anyone whose interest might inspire a quick read (297). Similarly,

the increasingly widespread use of online video meets all kinds of audiences—both academic and public—exactly where they are. The same is true for presenters: while no technology offers fully democratic accessibility, for many scholars the barriers to participation for an online event are far more easily surmountable than those in place for an in-person conference.

The live-video postcards that made "Virtual Varda" a success thus present a model of accessible and sustainable practices for building more resilient and inclusive academic communities. The community spirit of this event and in Varda's series *Agnès de ci de là Varda* may not offer a panacea for social isolation, but the shared structural reliance on the postcard serves as a vibrant reminder of the stakes of seeing through this global crisis. Connections matter, and in seeking ways to overcome our isolation through virtual contact, we can take inspiration from Varda's unshakable faith in the human ability to connect. This faith, expressed so clearly in *Agnès de ci de là Varda*, makes an implicit promise that no matter how these connections began, if we pursue them, they will persist even after we open our worlds to one another once again.

Notes

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1. The proceedings volume from this event is Diğdem Sezen, Aslı Tunç, Ebru Thwaites Diken, and Feride Çiçekoğlu, eds., *Female Agencies and Subjectivities in Film and Television* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).
2. A full summary of the proceedings for "Gender Equality and Sustainability: Agnès Varda's Sustaining Legacy," including active links to selected talks, is available at *Gender Equality and Sustainability: Agnès Varda's Sustaining Legacy*, Istanbul Bilgi

- University, 2020, ftvvarda.bilgi.edu.tr. An expanded proceedings volume is forthcoming, titled *The Sustainable Legacy of Agnès Varda: Feminist Practice and Pedagogy in Cinema and Visual Arts*.
3. Massive open online courses (MOOCs) offer instruction in a variety of subjects over the internet, often with few or no restrictions on who can register to participate and with highly variable institutional support for professionals teaching such courses. For an overview of current scholarship, see Ruiqi Deng, Pierre Benckendorff, and Deanne Gannaway, "Progress and New Directions for Teaching and Learning in MOOCs," *Computers and Education* 129 (2019): 48–60.
 4. A description of the special session is available at oregon2018.iamcr.org/sustainable-conference.html (accessed 28 April 2020).
 5. Julia Sklar, "'Zoom Fatigue' Is Taxing the Brain. Here's Why That Happens," *National Geographic*, 24 April 2020, www.nationalgeographic.com/science/2020/04/coronavirus-zoom-fatigue-is-taxing-the-brain-here-is-why-that-happens/.
 6. Dominique Bluher, "Varda's Gift of Postcards," *Área Abierta* 19, no. 3 (2019): 287–306.
 7. Bluher, "Varda's Gift," 294, drawing on Bjarne Rogan, "An Entangled Object: The Picture Postcard as Souvenir and Collectible, Exchange and Ritual Communication," *Cultural Analysis* 4 (2005): 1–27.

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Figure 2. Professor Feride Çiçekoğlu, coorganizer of "Gender Equality and Sustainability: Agnès Varda's Sustaining Legacy," sends a virtual postcard in the form of her introduction to the online event, unofficially renamed "Virtual Varda," on 28 March 2020. Courtesy of Feride Çiçekoğlu