

Dresses and Children: The Myth of Domestic Happiness in Varda's *Le Bonheur*

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In *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes expands the notion of myth to include modern-day confusions of the historical with the natural. In the preface to the 1957 edition of *Mythologies*, he describes “a feeling of impatience at the sight of the ‘naturalness’ with which newspapers, art and common sense constantly dress up a reality which, even though it is the one we live in, is undoubtedly determined by history” (11). Agnès Varda’s 1965 film *Le Bonheur* too explores what can be called a modern myth: the domestic happiness myth. The film details the daily life of a young French couple, François and Thérèse, and their two young children. Thérèse appears as the ideal of young motherhood and femininity: she makes dresses from home so that she can raise her children while François goes to work. When François begins an affair with the postal worker Émilie and tells Thérèse of his infidelity, she is found dead only hours later, her cause of death never specified. Soon, however, Émilie moves in with François and his children, taking on Thérèse’s repetitive, domestic chores, and all-too-easily replacing her.

In the chapter of *Mythologies* “Novels and Children,” Barthes analyses the implicit lessons of the women’s magazines of his time. Here, he demonstrates how such magazines suggest that women’s roles should be restricted to those of child bearer and homemaker. In her article, “Unhappily Ever After: Visual Irony and Feminist Strategy in Agnès Varda’s *Le Bonheur*,” Rebecca J. DeRoo also investigates these restrictive roles through comparisons of images from *Le Bonheur* with those found in contemporaneous women’s magazines. She concludes that, in *Le Bonheur*, Varda is offering a feminist critique of these roles. By portraying domestic happiness as contingent upon the constant toil of the wife, Varda demonstrates that such happiness is mere illusion, existing only insofar as one is able to turn a blind eye to the woman’s constant exertion. The domestic happiness myth as illustrated in *Le Bonheur* therefore merits a Barthesian reading that takes into account the historical, non-natural elements from which it is constructed.

The visual appeal of *Le Bonheur* derives largely from its pastoral setting and abundance of natural imagery in brilliant color. The film opens with an idyllic and memorable scene: Mozart’s Adagio and Fugue in C minor accompanies vivid shots of sunflowers. Accompanied

by their two children, François and Thérèse enter the film as reddish blurs in an out-of-focus field; this colorful gesture emphasizes the uniformity of the family, setting the stage for the ultimate rupture. The presence of the “natural” is apparent in the film through the family’s frequent visits to the countryside; however, one must also note that, in *Le Bonheur*, the natural is plainly visible in the artificial as well. Thérèse’s dresses are often patterned with floral designs, and this clothing blatantly emphasizes her assigned role: be fertile and produce. The use of floral symbolism in *Le Bonheur* is nearly exhaustive at times; in addition to the profusion of natural imagery due to the pastoral setting, floral motifs are found in internal and domestic spaces as well.

The film’s natural metaphors, however, are not only present in the visual realm. One of the film’s most poignant moments occurs when François remarks to Émilie that his wife is like a plant, while she is like a freed animal: “Thérèse est comme une plante vivace, toi, tu es comme un animal en liberté, et moi, j’aime la nature” (*Bonheur*). The comparison is striking, as it underlines Émilie’s freedom in comparison to Thérèse’s constancy and dependability. Near the end of the film, when François reveals his infidelity to Thérèse, he uses the image of a field of apple trees to describe his happiness which has been amplified by the arrival of Émilie:

Toi et moi et les petits, on est comme un champ planté de pommiers, un champ carré bien net. Et puis j’aperçois un pommier qui a poussé en dehors du champ, en dehors du carré, et qui fleurit en même temps que nous. Ce sont des fleurs en plus, des pommes en plus. Ça s’ajoute. Tu comprends ? (*Bonheur*)

Émilie is a source of expansion for François. She is analogized to a tree that has for its function the production of flowers and fruits. It is not difficult to see that by flowers and apples, François means children.

Varda also examines in *Le Bonheur* different types of workspaces, demonstrating that the work that takes place inside the domestic sphere is notably more limiting than the work that takes place outside of it. Conspicuously, François meets Émilie for the first time while she is working at a post office. More autonomous than Thérèse, Émilie, like François, is able to maintain a social circle outside of the family. Thérèse is self-employed, a characteristic that almost seems to put into doubt her otherwise thorough acceptance of the traditional women’s roles of her era. However, her employment does not allow her truly to escape from her

domestic duties. As remarks DeRoo, “The character of Thérèse in *Le Bonheur* differs from the model middle-class housewife portrayed in [women’s] magazines: she is working-class and works from home as a dressmaker. Nonetheless, in many respects, she resembles the ideal homemaker: her life revolves around caring for her family” (200). Thus, while Thérèse’s work entails a sort of production independent from childbearing, it does not allow her a respite from the domestic sphere and thus provides her with no opportunity for the development of an autonomous self. François’s carpentry job, on the other hand, allows him to socialize and develop his own identity outside of the household. Rebecca DeRoo affirms that “[b]y juxtaposing François and Thérèse’s work, Varda underscores the difference between the types of labor and work situations: François’s carpentry is public, he has colleagues and he has structure: leisure with lunchtime and time off at night” (205).

Thérèse’s work, however, is endless. Varda illustrates the perpetual nature of her work in one scene where the shot is split by a wall in the couple’s home. The viewer sees on the left side François, who is shaving, and on the right side, Thérèse, who is occupied with the children’s dinner. Unlike François, who is able to set aside time for his own personal care, Thérèse must incessantly perform the domestic duties accorded to her: “This simultaneous depiction of their activities contrasts their different domestic roles and emphasizes that the home is not a domestic retreat for women, but a site of labour and a continuous ‘second shift’ after the workday has finished” (DeRoo 205). These scenes “illustrate what Friedan and other feminists at the time called ‘life behind the scenes’ or the ‘invisible labor’ of housework” (DeRoo 205).

According to DeRoo, Varda’s use of close-up shots of Thérèse’s hands also emphasizes the repetitive and dull nature of her work. For more than a minute, the viewer sees only a pair of hands making a bed, preparing dough, cutting fabric, pulling fabric through a sewing machine, watering a plant, ironing children’s clothing, arranging flowers in a vase, and putting children to bed. DeRoo interprets these images as synecdochic: “Here, Varda draws attention to the strangeness of using a pair of disembodied hands to represent a whole woman” (203). This visual device emphasizes the notion that “the importance of a woman in a family is tied to her role, rather than her individuality” (DeRoo 203). In short, Thérèse’s hands have come to signify not only her entire person but her role as a homemaker as well.

It is not surprising, then, that Thérèse has difficulty understanding and justifying her place in the world when she discovers that she is not the only one able to fulfill her role as her husband's companion. When François reveals his infidelity, Thérèse asks him, "Il y a quelqu'un d'autre qui t'aime comme moi?" to which he responds, "pas comme toi" (*Bonheur*). However, the sole purpose of François's response seems to be to lessen the blow, for it is indeed obvious to Thérèse that, if she has not yet been replaced, she is certainly replaceable. Thérèse assumes that François has looked elsewhere for affection, stating her worry that she has not been alone with him enough and thus expressing a fear that she has somehow failed in her duty. Although Thérèse verbally consents to the new development in her husband's life, her expressions and gestures betray her, and the viewer can readily sense her disappointment. François offers to leave Émilie, but Thérèse refuses this offer, knowing that should her husband's affair continue or end, he has already irrevocably damaged their relationship and her sense of self.

On the same afternoon, François and the children awaken from their outdoor naps to find that Thérèse has disappeared somewhere in the countryside. They wander through the area, asking several of the other guests if they have seen her: one woman responds that she has seen a young woman in a blue dress carrying flowers. Eventually, François comes across a group of people crowding over a body beside a lake, and he realizes that the body is that of his wife. Shots of François repeatedly lifting and embracing his wife's body are intercut with brief shots of Thérèse struggling in the water and attempting to grasp a branch. These latter shots remove the possibility of any certainty regarding the cause of death: the viewer does not know if Thérèse drowned herself intentionally, accidentally fell in the water, or attempted to drown herself and at the last minute tried to grasp an overhanging branch. However, this scene seems to be modeled after classical portrayals of Ophelia in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, drowned amongst the flora.¹ Regardless of its ambiguity, it is not, therefore, unwarranted to interpret Thérèse's death as a suicide in reaction to her perception that she was unable to respond fully to the role accorded to her.

Thérèse's conception of self is so linked to her ability to fulfill her duty that she cannot imagine a life where she believes that she has failed at it. She views herself as an anonymous

¹ See Eugène Delacroix's *La mort d'Ophélie* (1853) and Alexandre Cabanel's *Ophélie* (1883).

placeholder as opposed to an individual. Her status as placeholder is confirmed by François's interactions with Émilie. When he visits her after his wife's death and she greets him at her door, she pronounces his name while François merely says, "toi." Her name left unpronounced, Émilie comes to replace Thérèse; in greeting Émilie as "you," while she calls him by his name, he neglects to acknowledge her uniqueness. Rebecca DeRoo remarks that the visual strategy of *Le Bonheur* also demonstrates how the individuality of housewives is undermined: the same "focus on housewives' hands is repeated in the last five minutes of the film. When Émilie, François's mistress, takes Thérèse's place in the home, she is similarly represented by a sequence of shots of anonymous hands fulfilling domestic chores that strikingly resemble those of the first wife" (201).

Le Bonheur concludes with a shot of the new family taking a walk in the familiar countryside, whose brilliant green flora has turned brown in anticipation of winter. This sequence mirrors the earlier shot, where the entire family appeared as barely distinguishable splotches of color. Significantly, in this second version, Émilie and François wear yellow sweaters, underlining their union. The children, on the other hand, wear red. Though Émilie has come to replace Thérèse, the family is no longer a single unit. With this use of color, Varda subtly calls attention to the discord that François's affair has caused.

Barthes writes, "If we are to believe the weekly *Elle*, which some time ago mustered seventy women novelists on one photograph, the woman of letters is a remarkable zoological species: she brings forth, pell-mell, novels and children" (50). In this article, *Elle* magazine introduces several of these female novelists with the number of novels they have written alongside the number of children they have produced. Barthes ironically continues, "Women are on the earth to give children to men; let them write as much as they like, let them decorate their condition, but above all, let them not depart from it" (50). He acknowledges the subversive nature of women as artists, as well as the way in which media such as *Elle* magazine present the creation of art as a departure from their "naturally" determined role as child bearers. In short, *Elle* confuses a role of only women as being the only role of women.

Although publications such as *Elle* attempt to appeal to their female readership by presenting them with women who flourish both inside and outside of the domestic sphere, these magazines exist nonetheless in a world governed by masculine authorities. Barthes

describes this concession to masculine authority as one that concerns the primarily masculine conception of the creator (or else, the Creator):

Let women acquire self-confidence: they can very well have access, like men, to the superior status of creation. But let men be quickly reassured: women will not be taken from them for all that, they will remain no less available for motherhood by nature. *Elle* nimbly plays a Molièresque scene, says yes on one side and no on the other, and busies herself in displeasing no one; like Don Juan between his two peasant girls, *Elle* says to women: you are worth just as much as men; and to men: your women will never be anything but women (51).

According to Barthes, *Elle's* advice to women is therefore, “compensate for your books by your children” (50).

Although Thérèse’s occupation as a dressmaker is perhaps less subversive than that of a female novelist, both professions entail a production, particularly a production of art, and they also permit these women to work without leaving behind the family and the household. As DeRoo points out, “The work [that] takes place in the domestic sphere...is isolating and, often, not socially recognized or valued” (205). As a dressmaker, Thérèse is able momentarily to step outside of her role as homemaker, though in doing so, she fails ever to challenge the dual nature of her incessant work. Thérèse’s perspective seems to correspond to that which Barthes references in his essay: “A Jesuitic morality: adapt the moral rule of your condition, but never compromise about the dogma on which it rests” (52).

Both Varda and Barthes engage in a critique of women’s roles, presenting the happily perfectionist housewife as nothing more than a myth perpetuated by women’s magazines. Varda herself has admitted in an interview with DeRoo, “I wanted to critique the idea of happiness in *Elle* magazine.”² The female novelists of “Novels and Children” and Thérèse in *Le Bonheur* step outside of their roles as child bearers and homemakers to produce literature and clothing, respectively; however, due to the nature of this work that does not permit them to leave the domestic sphere, it is viewed as inferior to male-oriented occupations that do, such as that of François. Confused with their ability to bear children, these women are

² From a 2006 unpublished interview with Rebecca J. DeRoo.

regarded as mothers first and artists second. And unlike the images of housewives propagated in women's magazines, one sees in *Le Bonheur* that the myth that working women are able to free themselves fully from their condition creates a second myth: that domestic happiness is easy and natural, whereas it actually only becomes possible upon the toil of the wife, who, due to her constant exertion, may not be experiencing it at all. With her abundant use of natural imagery in *Le Bonheur*, Varda therefore is not only providing filmgoers with an aesthetically pleasing experience; this imagery also calls to mind the "naturalness" to which Barthes refers, juxtaposing it with historically-derived women's roles.

Works Cited

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