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Feminist Phenomenology and the Film-World of Agnès Varda

Abstract

Through a discussion of Agnès Varda's career from 1954 to 2008 that focuses particularly on *La Pointe Courte* (1954), *L'Opéra-Mouffe* (1958) *The Gleaners and I* (2000), and *The Beaches of Agnes* (2008), this article considers the connections between Varda's film-making and her femaleness. It proposes that two aspects of Varda's cinema – her particularly perceptive portrayal of a set of geographical locations, and her visual and verbal emphasis on female embodiment – make a feminist existential-phenomenological approach to her films particularly fruitful. Drawing both directly on the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and on some recent film- and feminist-theoretical texts that have employed his insights, it explores haptic imagery and feminist strategy in *The Gleaners and I*, the materialization of space characterizing Varda's blurring of fiction and documentary, and the dialectical relationship of people with their environment often observed in her cinema. It concludes that both Varda's female protagonists and the director herself may be said to perform feminist phenomenology in her films, in their actions, movement and relationship to space, and in the carnality of voice and vision with which Varda's own subjectivity is registered within her film-texts.

In the 2000s Agnès Varda confirmed her place as France's longest-standing successful woman filmmaker, while also achieving the remarkable feat of 'reinventing' herself as an installation artist: she launched the decade with the acclaimed essayistic documentary *The Gleaners and I*, showed her much-lauded first exhibition *L'Île et Elle* at Paris's Fondation Cartier for several months in 2006,

following it shortly afterwards with *National Homage to France's 'Justes'* (*Hommage de la nation aux Justes de France*), an installation at the Panthéon paying tribute to those men and women who saved the lives of Jews during the Second World War,<1> and brought it to a close with the autobiographical *The Beaches of Agnes*. Varda's cinema was hailed as in some way 'feminine' from the start – one of the earliest articles devoted to her films by *Cahiers du cinéma* was entitled simply 'The Triumph of Woman' (Beylie 1962) – and over her fifty-five year career she has contributed significantly to feminist film theory as well as to ongoing debates about women's issues. Indeed, it can easily be argued that *Cléo de 5 à 7*, despite being a personal, *auteur* film inextricable from the New Wave in the thick of which it was made, anticipates by fourteen years most of the questions and concepts Laura Mulvey would explore and deploy in 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' in 1975. Varda herself has combined marriage and motherhood with notable acts of feminist commitment such as signing the 1971 manifesto of 343 French women declaring they had had illegal abortions, a key event in the struggle for the legalization of abortion in France that eventually concluded successfully in 1975. Her 1977 film *One Sings the Other Doesn't* charts part of this campaign through the character of Suzanne, a founder member of France's family planning movement, and her 1975 short *Réponses de femmes* is a militant, if also playful, visual statement of women's rights over their own bodies. But the range of subjects and places her films have incorporated far exceeds women's struggles and France, and the political interest of her documentary-style depiction of women's lives has often – as was particularly the case with the 1964 film *Le Bonheur* – been questioned, doubted, and found to be more *feminine* than *feminist*.<2> In this essay I shall review some of the literature comprising these debates, examine statements Varda herself has made about her femininity and her

politics, and suggest that her feminism – if it may be so called – is of a very particular kind, a sort of politicized bodily sensibility that has only lately come into focus in critical writing about film, under the influence of phenomenology. Delphine Bénézet contended recently ‘that Varda’s images would gain from a critical perspective informed by phenomenology as much as by feminist film theory’ (Bénézet 2008), and in my view, it is precisely by bringing together these two strands of writing on film that the specificity of Varda’s world-view can best be approached. I shall start, therefore, with some close analysis of moments in *The Gleaners and I* that illustrate Varda’s sensibility at work, before going on to observe it in her filmography more generally.

Haptic Images and Resistant Bodies

In her book *The Skin of the Film: intercultural cinema, embodiment and the senses* (Marks 2000),^{<3>} Laura Marks draws on a number of sources in order to explore ‘haptic visuality’, which she defines (following but modifying the Austrian art historian Alois Riegl, who coined the term ‘haptic’) as vision in which ‘the eyes themselves function as organs of touch’ (Marks 2000, 162). Whereas optical visuality ‘sees things from enough distance to perceive them as distinct forms in deep space’, haptic looking ‘tends to move over the surface of its object rather than to plunge into illusionistic depth, not to distinguish form so much as to discern texture’ (Marks 2000, 162). The haptic image is thus a sensuous image, often a close-up, while haptic perception ‘privileges the material presence of the image’ (Marks 2000, 163). In developing her notions of haptic visuality and perception, Marks draws to a significant extent on Gilles Deleuze’s philosophy of film, but also on the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, whose phenomenology of perception emphasizes that the

perceiver's relationship with the world is symbiotic and mimetic – that is, that in embodied perception (and for Merleau-Ponty all perception is embodied) there is an enfolding of self and world of which cinema spectatorship can be seen as a special example (Marks 2000, 163). For Marks, 'haptic images are often used in an explicit critique of visual mastery, in the search for the way to bring the image closer to the body and the other senses' (Marks 2000, 151-2). So while she does not accept Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception unquestioningly, its insights about the sensual involvement of our bodies in the world (and in particular, about how the encoding of history in our bodies influences our perception) strongly informs her readings of sense memories in intercultural film.

In Varda's films, haptic visuality perhaps occurs most memorably in the film-portrait of her husband Jacques Demy, made as he was dying of AIDS in 1990. In *Jacquot de Nantes* Varda's camera tracks slowly and in extreme close-up over Demy's skin in a tender and regretful observation of its condition, still tanned but now flawed by the purple patches of Kaposi's sarcoma. (It is of course significant that Varda comes to haptic visuality through filming the body of her husband and only films her own woman's body in the same unfocused extreme close-up ten years later: her discovery of a haptic mode of looking occurs in an eroticized relationship with sexually differentiated alterity. Varda looks at and films the male body with particular tenderness in *Jacquot de Nantes* because it is that of her husband: elsewhere her attitude to male nudity is more casual, as in the opening shots of *Les dites Cariatides* (1984) where a naked man is filmed from behind wandering down a Paris street, or more removed – longer shots of the entire male form such as those that occur in *Documenteur* are much more typical than the close-ups of Demy's body.) Shots that caress the skin, but this time Varda's own,<4> return at two moments in *The*

Gleaners and I: in the first, the camera cuts from a shot of Varda combing the grey roots of her dark chestnut coloured hair to the deeply lined and wrinkled skin of her hands against a car dashboard, as she speaks her rhyming refutation of a famous line about old age from Corneille's *Le Cid*, 'No, no, it's not 'O rage', not 'O despair', not 'O my enemy old age', it might even be 'my friend old age', but even so, there's my hair, and there are my hands, which tell me that the end is near.' This haptic shot is returned to and extended in the second moment, also involving the trope of ageing, where the notion of self-portraiture is explicitly introduced by some high quality postcard-sized reproductions of Rembrandt portraits and self-portraits Varda has brought back from a trip to Tokyo. Here, her camera moves from a detail of a picture of Rembrandt's wife Saskia to her own left hand, tracking down her fingers to the base of her thumb then back up her index finger in a movement that caresses at the same time as it searches. The commentary with which Varda accompanies this shot, 'Saskia, in close-up....and then, and then my hand in close-up....which is to say that that is my project, to film one hand with the other', could hardly echo more closely if she had set out to do so a celebrated passage in Merleau-Ponty's essay 'The Philosopher and His Shadow', in which he describes the meeting of his hands:

When my right hand touches my left hand, I am aware of [*sens*] it as a "physical thing". But at the same moment, if I wish, an extraordinary event occurs: here is my left hand as well starting to feel my right, *es wird Leib, es empfindet* (Husserl, *Ideen II* p.145). The physical thing becomes animate. Or more precisely, it remains what it was (the event does not enrich it), but an exploratory power comes to rest upon or dwell in it. Thus I touch myself touching; my body accomplishes "a sort of reflection". In it, through it, there

is not just the unidirectional relationship of the one who perceives to what he perceives. The relationship is reversed, the touched hand becomes the touching hand, and I am obliged to say that the sense of touch here is diffused into the body - that the body is a “perceiving thing”, a “subject-object” (Husserl, *Ideen II* p.119 *empfindendes Ding*, p.124 “*Das subjective Objekt*”)’ (Merleau-Ponty 1964, 166).

This two-way ‘bodily reflection’ anticipates if it does not already formulate the notion of the reversibility of the flesh Merleau-Ponty would set out in *The Visible and the Invisible*, a book he did not live to complete, but was working on when the essay in which this passage occurs was published, in 1960. The fragments of and notes for *The Visible and the Invisible* set out new notions of ‘flesh’ (*la chair*) and ‘intertwining’ (*l’entrelacs*) – a reversible material relationship between body and world in which they are not separate entities but ‘threads in a single fabric’ (Carman 2008, 80).

Through the deployment of a haptic gaze, Varda’s body – the filming and the filmed body – becomes here the “feeling thing” and “subject-object” Merleau-Ponty describes. As in the shots of Demy in *Jacquot de Nantes*, subjectivity and objectivity blur and become indistinguishable (in *Jacquot de Nantes* this blurring might be termed erotic, in *The Gleaners and I* auto-erotic). The later film, inhabited by the enhanced ‘exploratory power’ of the mini digital camera’s movement, develops Merleau-Ponty’s ‘sort of reflection’ of the flesh into a self-portrait of the ageing woman filmmaker, a self-portrait in haptic rather than optical space. A further detail of the second of these two moments in *The Gleaners and I* is important – that the hand to which Varda’s camera moves from the detail of Rembrandt’s portrait of Saskia is obscuring a reproduction of one of Rembrandt’s self-portraits that is

revealed only when her meditation on the unknown ‘horror’ of her own ageing flesh is over, and she raises the finger. Even then, what we view is Rembrandt’s face rather than his hand: only the next shot, that of a self-portrait by the artist Maurice Utrillo, returns us to an image of an artist’s hand, this time that of a man rather than of a woman. Varda’s haptic moment of filmic self-portraiture ‘as an old lady’ (Rosello 2001) displaces Rembrandt’s mastery of the conventional painted self-portrait – neatly, modestly and without drawing attention to what it is doing in any way, but displaces it nonetheless. A woman’s perception and hands are explicitly privileged at the expense of a man’s in this sequence, so that although the viewer’s senses may shortly afterwards re-engage with conventional masculine self-portraiture by alighting on Maurice Utrillo’s hands, a temporary bracketing-off of the image of the male artist reduces possible sensory engagement to a perceptive perspective gendered female.

A similar kind of suggestively subversive filmic performance can be seen in Varda’s assumption of the identity of ‘gleaner’ in *The Gleaners and I*, where her actions intersect in a striking manner with the gender-specific and historical phenomenological descriptions of lived-body experience made by Iris Marion Young and collected in *On Female Body Experience* (Young 2005). Young began writing about themes of female embodiment in the 1970s, and recalls in the introduction to her book that at that time, ‘existential phenomenology was the primary approach available to American philosophers for such a project’ and that her earliest essay in the field, ‘Throwing Like a Girl’, ‘relies specifically on the theories of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Simone de Beauvoir’ (Young 2005, 7). Young notes the widespread critical reaction from a subsequent generation of French thinkers (Foucault, Derrida, Kristeva, Deleuze, and others) to the ‘naïve humanism’ of existential phenomenology’s conceptions of consciousness and subjectivity, but

observes also how ‘some Anglo-American philosophers and social theorists who for many years aligned themselves with these French postmodern thinkers have in recent years become more interested in the French phenomenologists’, and how Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy seems to be gaining renewed interest (Young 2005, 8). ‘Throwing Like a Girl’, the essay on which I am drawing in relation to *The Gleaners and I*, ‘combines the insights of the theory of the lived body as expressed by Merleau-Ponty and the theory of the situation of women as developed by Beauvoir’ (Young 2005, 31).

By collecting, detailing and meditating upon ‘modalities of feminine body comportment, manner of moving, and relation in space’ as she does in ‘Throwing Like a Girl’, Young has in a way set out a framework for a feminist phenomenological film criticism that can do justice to Varda’s performance in *The Gleaners and I*. Gleaning, Varda notes at one moment in her commentary, is ‘a modest gesture’, but when it comes to identifying herself as the gleaner in the title of her film, it is Jules Breton’s proud and solitary female figure rather than Jean-François Millet’s three more modest ones she imitates. (The two particular paintings that seem to be at the origin of Varda’s investigation into gleaning are Millet’s *Les glaneuses* of 1857 and Breton’s *La glaneuse* of 1877.) Opposite Breton’s painting where it hangs in the museum and art gallery of Arras, and in a mirror image of it, though in the same plane, Varda stands with a large bundle of corn on her right shoulder which she then lets drop and replaces with her digital video camera: this is a humorous moment that is also replete with signification, since Varda’s action expresses a preference for a particular use of space while identifying herself in multiple ways, as the admirer and companion of the nineteenth century peasant women at the origin of her documentary (who were painted by Millet with socially critical intent) as well as a viewing body-

subject *at the same time as* being the viewed body-object they are. The lived body as described by Merleau-Ponty and Young is both immanent and transcendent, immanent in its materiality and situation, yet transcendent in how it is lived by a subject as intention and as action. The ambiguous transcendence of the body when lived by a woman that Young illustrates in feminine body comportment, for example in living space as enclosed or confining or when ‘stand[ing] in *discontinuous unity* with both itself and its surroundings’ (Young 2005, 38) is both acknowledged and resisted by Varda in self-portraiture that works with and through other bodies and representations of bodies, both female and male. This revelation of different modes of body comportment and relationships to space – including on the part of bodies from different social classes – is crucial to *The Gleaners and I*, as are the contradictory modalities of feminine bodily existence Young outlines and claims ‘have their root....in the fact that for feminine existence the body frequently is both subject and object for itself at the same time and in reference to the same act’ (Young 2005, 38).

The striking correlation between Varda’s actions and gestures in *The Gleaners and I* and Young’s Merleau-Pontyan and Beauvoirean framework for explaining feminine body comportment illustrates a feminist phenomenological theory in action. Unlike the moments in *Jacquot de Nantes* and *The Gleaners* where haptic images register the collapse of optical space into haptic space and the sensuous enfolding of Varda’s filmmaker-body into her perceptual world, it is less Merleau-Ponty’s insights about embodied perception than his understanding of the particular, socially situated character of movement and gesture that are relevant here. In *The Skin of the Film*, Marks recognizes that feminist criticism and theory have played an important role in the increasing acceptance of the notion of embodied spectatorship into film criticism, but stops short of theorizing any particular relationship between haptic visuality and

sexual difference, stating that although ‘the use of haptic images may be a feminist strategy, there is nothing essentially feminine about it’ (Marks 2000, 188). Iris Young, by contrast, develops existential phenomenology in an explicitly feminist direction by focusing on female body experience (Merleau-Ponty, famously, never discussed modes of embodied subjectivity qualified by gender, race or age). By so doing, she both returns to and develops the focus on the lived body and women’s embodied experience pioneered by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*.<5>

Varda’s Film-World – A Personal Geography

The Gleaners and I, then, offers plentiful evidence that for Varda, female subjectivity is always ‘lived’, that is, embodied and actively animated, even when it remains a viewed object. Instances of this can be found throughout her films: one of the activities by which we most remember Cléo of *Cléo de 5 à 7* and Mona of *Vagabond* is their dynamic walking through city and countryside respectively, which it seems to me we are invited to view as subjective expression rather than in a ‘sex-pervasive’ manner.<6> The representation of animated, mobile female bodies was, however, particularly comprehensively confirmed recently by Varda’s performance in *The Beaches of Agnes*, openly acknowledged by her to be a performance ‘of the role of a little old lady...plump and talkative, telling the story of her life’ (Romney 2009, 46) where she engages in or narrates numerous very deliberately executed embodied activities. She reports, for example, how at the age of nineteen, for the three-month period between abandoning her training as a curator and beginning evening classes in photography, she carried out the very physical ‘manual’ labour of rowing for Corsican fishermen as they dealt with their nets, masts and sails. This period, not incidentally also the time of her first significant sexual experiences, has just been echoed in shots

of her sailing a small lateen boat across the Mediterranean port of Sète (the location of an early part of the film), then, in a typically wry edit, along the Seine and under the Pont des Arts in Paris. The pleasure Varda takes in practical, embodied activity is signalled here in the very representation of her shuttling back and forth from provincial France – her family had left Belgium for Sète during the Second World War – to Paris, as her film-making career began to take off in the mid-1950s. The most frequent and striking example of symbolic embodiment in *The Beaches of Agnes*, however, is the humorous but entirely knowing device of walking backwards, which Varda does first on the beach at Sète, again on the Pont des Arts, and later in several more of the film's locations. This bodily mime of the process of remembering is Varda's personal contribution to the multiple 'living' installations that feature in her film.<7>

Beaches, timeless spaces according to Varda, are the motif linking the seventy-plus years of memories recounted in *The Beaches of Agnes*, but by mixing autobiographical narration with installation art and filmic and photographic montage, the film also gathers the diverse geography of her life into one document in a way none of her previous films or exhibitions has done. While Sète-La Pointe Courte and the Languedoc are the setting of just *La Pointe Courte* and *Vagabond*, Varda's other preferred locations – Los Angeles-Venice Beach, Paris-the fourteenth *arrondissement*-the Rue Daguerre, and the Brittany island of Noirmoutier, to which she was introduced by Jacques Demy – each figure in a number of her works. Together, these places constitute a 'world' in the sense meant by existential phenomenology, where the term's meaning differs qualitatively from the concept of an objective physical world described by the natural sciences, but varies somewhat from one thinker to another.<8> A specific sense is already given to 'world' by

Merleau-Ponty in his *Phenomenology of Perception*, where perception, rather than being an inner, subjective, mental state as for so much previous philosophy, is described as a mode of being in the world and what links the perspective constituted by each lived body to its 'world', or environment. 'I am conscious of my body *via* the world', says Merleau-Ponty, or, again, 'I am conscious of the world through the medium of my body' (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 94, 95). Most of Merleau-Ponty's aesthetic theory is formulated around painting, which he regards as a thoroughly embodied form of expression, as 'essentially worldly' (Carman 2008, 204). The sense he ascribes to 'world' undergoes further development by the time of his draft and notes for *The Visible and the Invisible*, where body and world come to be seen 'as overlapping sinews in a common "flesh" (*chair*), related...as kind of "chiasm", an "interweaving" or "interlacing" (*entrelacs*) of threads in a single fabric' (Carman 2008, 79-80). For Merleau-Ponty by the end of his life, therefore, 'to understand a work of art is to understand its involvement in the world' (Carman 2008, 204), where that world is defined as the set of material, fleshy relationships between the artist and the objects and places on which his or her perceptions have been exercised, in the reversible dynamic of perception and expression evident in Merleau-Ponty's early work and expanded in his drafts for *The Visible and the Invisible*. Varda's film-world, accordingly, is the set of locations on which her perceptions have frequently been exercised (by inhabiting them) and of which she has repeatedly composed expressions. 'World', for existential phenomenology and for Varda, is materially imbricated with the body that perceives it, which is why the term is so well suited to the locations Varda has contemplated and conveyed with such caring attention in her cinema; they are so entirely fused with her sensibility that it has become impossible to think of her films without thinking of them. If the occurrence of haptic visuality in

Jacquot de Nantes and *The Gleaners and I* makes Varda a ‘lived body’ filmmaker in one way, then, the steady construction over her career of a phenomenological geography or ‘world’, expression of which culminated in *The Beaches of Agnes*, is a different, complementary and possibly even stronger confirmation of this identity. Having set out what I mean by Varda’s ‘film-world’, I shall turn next to selected critical accounts (including some by Varda herself) of its character and texture.

Mirrors in the Sand: Sensibility and Material Space

Early critics of Varda’s work dwell noticeably on sensibility as a characteristic of her 1950s and 1960s films. So Claude Beylie calls her ‘the most wit- and sensibility-endowed person that can be encountered in Parisian cinephile circles’, notes that she has a ‘tenderness’ for everything that relates to sensation, and specifies the type of realist he sees her to be – in a category along with Jean Renoir, Max Ophuls and Jean Grémillon – as ‘a *sensitive* realist’ (Beylie 1962, 20, 26). In gender-essentialist mode, he also identifies ‘feminine intuition’ in the sensibility conveyed by her images, although immediately qualifies the claim by adding that this intuition is ‘offset by a fair and distinctly masculine quantity of something that nonetheless verges on intelligence’, and admits that he does not know or want to know where intuition ends and intelligence begins. Varda seems to pick up on Beylie’s comments in the debate about her style provoked by the release of *Le Bonheur*, where she asks, in response to critics accusing her film of an over-artful, concerted type of intelligence, ‘Why should the notion of intelligence not be considered as equivalent to the vibration of a sensibility?’ (Varda 1965, 15). If anything was over-artful in *Le Bonheur*, it seems, it was Varda’s perception of natural colour (many of the criticisms levelled at the film focused on its serene, sunny colour palette), since it is to defend the role she wanted

colour to have in the film that she resorts, in a different interview, to a fixed opposition between sensation and cerebrality, ‘I often act out of sensation rather than because of reflection, because I have very strong colour-sensations’ (Fieschi and Ollier 1965, 50). But by insisting that the film is pretty because the colours of her chosen locations were pretty, and that colours of the film were indeed an unaltered, un-aestheticised record of what she saw, Varda’s undoing of the opposition between intelligence and sensibility stands, and is reinforced by other commentators such as Annette Raynaud, who sees in Varda’s early cinema the expression of ‘an acute sensibility, something like an awareness-of-life in its raw state’ (Raynaud 1963, 121). This ambiguity between sensation and intelligence resonates strongly with the embodiment of consciousness that is one of the main tenets of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of perception: by rejecting the opposition between a physical body and a non-physical mind Merleau-Ponty theorizes consciousness as incarnate and intentional – that is, intentional in how the body moves, acts and expresses itself in the world. It is significant that in relation to the aesthetic project of *Le Bonheur*, Varda speaks of *acting* out of sensation rather than as a consequence of reflection, since this again brings her film-making activity suggestively close to the intentional expression of the lived body theorized by Merleau-Ponty, as well as confirming the incarnate character of her film-maker’s vision.

Whether through the consideration of sensibility versus intelligence or in other terms, numerous other critics since the 1960s have also remarked on the carnality of Varda’s *cinécriture*. For Marcel Martin and Jacqueline Nacache reviewing her films up to *Jane B. by Agnès V.* and *Kung-Fu Master*, it is because of ‘her pulsating sensibility and its carnal vibration’ that Varda’s cinema is ‘profoundly feminine/female’ (profondément *féminin*), though not ‘*féministe*’, which for Martin

and Nacache requires a militant or otherwise propagandistic message, while René Prédal comments that ‘Varda always imposes a natural physical presence that prevents discourse from dematerializing itself by posing problems of skin and hormones right in the middle of intellectual debates’.^{<9>} The most memorable example of Varda’s organisation of a film around her own body is probably *Daguerréotypes*, the 1975 documentary about the community of ‘her’ part of Paris’s Rue Daguerre, the content of which was decided by the entirely material condition that it take place within eighty metres of her home, where she was looking after her baby son Mathieu Demy. Varda’s use of an electrical cable to measure out the maximum distance her camera could travel points wittily to the centrality of her own maternal body to her film-making, but just as importantly, emphasizes the materiality and materialization of filmic space.^{<10>} The blurring of the boundary between fiction and documentary to be found in so many of Varda’s films is inseparable from – and perhaps largely a consequence of – this insistence on the materiality of space, as is her description of herself as a ‘witness-auteur’ (auteur-témoin, in Varda 1975, 36): in *Vagabond*, when she introduces Mona as she emerges from a swim in the sea, Varda’s use of her own voice weakens the fiction in favour of a strong dose of documentary by placing herself (anonymously here) in the same film-world as her protagonist. In the next and final sections I shall return to the rootedness of Varda’s films in particular locations while developing this question of the incarnate character of her filmic discourse, and address what relationship this very bodily *cinécriture* may be said to have to Varda’s femininity.

A feminine dialectic of people and places?

The majority of Varda's films are powerfully rooted in a particular place, as we have seen, and her film-world is made up of places she has actually inhabited. Her unusually keen vision of her immediate surroundings adds up to more than a 'sense of place': what is expressed is the part played by a material social environment in the construction of personal identity, a belief Varda explained in 1961: 'I believe that people are made of the places they love or have lived in; I believe that location inhabits and propels us' (Michaud and Bellour 1961, 14). Understanding the formative role privileged environments have on people can prove essential to human, intersubjective relationships: in *La Pointe Courte*, it is mainly because She visits the eponymous *quartier* of Sète, He's place of upbringing, for the first time, that She becomes reconciled to the fact that their four year-old marriage has moved into a slower, less passionate stage. *La Pointe Courte* is 'half my life', He tells Her. The connection between protagonists and their environment(s) in Varda's cinema has often been called dialectical,^{<11>} but it seems that no one has ever undertaken to examine exactly what kind of dialectic (in philosophical terms) is at work – and Varda herself uses a variety of other terms as well as 'dialectic' to describe it, such as 'juxtaposition', 'opposition' and 'alternation' (alternance).^{<12>} It is by looking closely at the two films where the cutting between the personal and the social is filmed the most dynamically – *La Pointe Courte* and *L'Opéra-Mouffe* – that this question can best be pursued.

In *La Pointe Courte*, the strict alternation between the scenes of dialogue between He and She and sequences of the fishermen and their families gives way to more fluidity towards the end of the film. After the couple's final dialogue, which takes place in the room he has taken for them to lodge in, as they lie side-by-side on the bed, there are only three further scenes, two of which bring the couple closer to

the village filmically, even although no conversation occurs between them and any of the villagers, and the couple's and *quartier*'s stories remain strictly separate. In the first, the couple, carrying their suitcases, cross the floor of the dance organized to follow the jousting competition, passing through the community's celebrations and sharing in their happy mood despite not participating. A similar kind of diegetic synthesis occurs in the film's penultimate shot, where the fishermen's boats jet across the bay towards the shore as the Paris train pulls out of the town in the background, and the couple's and other passengers' voices are heard on the soundtrack. The couple is not visible in this shot, but is registered as present via diegetic sound.

The kind of dialectic Merleau-Ponty began to develop in his philosophy from the late 1940s onwards is one of synthesis without resolution: unlike a Hegelian or Marxist dialectic, there is no clash or conflict between opposing terms to be resolved, no 'higher' synthesis to be reached. This anti- or a-historical character of Merleau-Ponty's dialectic can doubtless be traced to his increasing disaffection with Marxism as the extent of the repression going on in Soviet labour camps became clear, a disaffection that became widespread among French intellectuals by 1950. It was over this issue that he and Jean-Paul Sartre, whom Merleau-Ponty had helped to radicalize in the years since the Second World War and with whom he had collaborated on *Les Temps modernes*, the leading literary and political journal of its day, would part company in 1952, as Sartre defended Communist practice and the French Parti Communiste in the face of the evident bankruptcy of the Marxist philosophy of history in the USSR. Merleau-Ponty published his account of the failure of Marxism as both theory and revolutionary politics in *Adventures of the Dialectic* in 1955, and it is here that his retention of a non-teleological dialectic is set out: 'What is obsolete, then, is not the dialectic, but the pretension of terminating it in an end of history, in a

permanent revolution' (Merleau-Ponty 1973, 206). 'The dialectic does not, as Sartre claims, provide finality...but the global, primordial cohesion of a field of experience where each element opens onto the others' (Merleau-Ponty 1973, 204). What characterizes the understanding of dialectic Merleau-Ponty had arrived at by 1955 and would develop further in his draft for *The Visible and the Invisible* is openness, incompleteness, complexity and unresolved synthesis: as Laurie Spurling summarizes,

Merleau-Ponty's ... dialectic is, then, 'a contradiction founded in truth', a provisional synthesis of perspectives that are inconsistent or contradictory, and yet also coalesce if put into a certain context which illuminates their interconnections (Spurling 1977, 139-40).

This kind of open synthesis of hitherto unrelated elements seems to be exactly what occurs in Varda's *La Pointe Courte*, where the connectedness of the couple and the village is suggested and emphasized in the film's images without this leading to any new narrative situation. Varda's dialectic of the personal and the social is, like Merleau-Ponty's 'contradiction founded in truth', an open, provisional, yet illuminating synthesis – and Varda in fact uses the word 'truth' to describe the two realities juxtaposed in *La Pointe Courte*, saying 'There is the truth of a couple searching for itself and the social truth of a village organising itself'. She adds – a perfect description of the combination of spectatorial distancing and the materialization of diegetic space achieved in her first feature film – 'I wanted viewers to remain detached while following a film that related these two things plastically' (Michaud and Bellour 1961, 8, 9).

In *L'Opéra-Mouffe*, the relationship between the lives of Varda the unseen, pregnant filmmaker and the people of the Rue Mouffetard is the primary dialectic, but a secondary one equally expressive of the contrast between physical well-being and poverty is set up between the social world of 'la Mouffe' and the couple of lovers filmed naked in their rundown yard and flat. This secondary dialectic reaches a synthesis exactly parallel to *La Pointe Courte*'s in the chapter of the film entitled 'Season's Greetings', mainly made up of shots of dead Christmas trees and children wearing double-headed carnival masks, in the middle of which the lovers are seen embracing amid the street's crowd of market-goers. This fleeting exterior shot of the couple reverts almost immediately to another interior of the woman turning back from the window in response to her lover's embrace, but for one brief instant, 'private' and 'public' meet in the same space. The exact moment of the festival calendar when this occurs is not identified, but it is telling that as in *La Pointe Courte*, it is in repetitive, ritual time that separate elements of the film's social world meet in provisional, dialectical – and as in *La Pointe Courte*, celebratory – synthesis.

Conclusion: performing feminist phenomenology in film

It can be argued, perhaps more easily a whole decade into the twenty-first century than at its start, that feminist film scholarship is more in need of a robust theory of female subjectivity and a non-essentialist and concrete understanding of the body than it is of the sophisticated permutations on the sex/gender distinction that emerged from gender and queer theory of the 1990s. Where Agnès Varda is concerned, both her films and her statements about femininity and feminism privilege female subjectivity and embodiment at the expense of representing femininity as a cultural construct, either in the narratives or the material structure of her film-texts. And they have done

so throughout her career: there is a remarkable consistency between the definitions of womanhood offered in *Réponses de femmes* in 1975 – ‘To be a woman is to be born with female sexual organs’, ‘To be a woman is to live in a woman’s body’, and the first words of her contribution to a much more recent documentary about women filmmakers, ‘To be a woman is to be born in a woman’s body’ (Mandy 2000). A feminist phenomenological enquiry into film must start from and focus on screen women as embodied subjects of their own experience and desire, something it seems Varda has always done in her film-making. But her insistence on subjectivity and the body has often been to some degree misunderstood, as René Prédal’s summary illustrates: ‘Her main interest in feminism follows from matters that affect her directly....women’s creativity, maternity, (in)dependance in love, attachment to the family and the home’ (Prédal 1991, 19). Although it is undoubtedly subjective, Varda’s feminism is just as unquestionably social, stemming as it does from the collective condition of female embodiment. Prédal is much nearer the mark when he says ‘this *carnal feminism* happens to be even more disturbing than the superficially aggressive kind of feminism found in social, political or economic demands, because it relates to the fundamental aspect of relationships between men and women’ (Prédal 1991, 20). For the majority of critics writing in the 1970s and 1980s, the very notion of a ‘feminism of the body’ was biologically essentialist, and rendered problematic Varda’s evidently positive pleasure (undertaken out of a historically feminist context in *L’Opéra-Mouffe* as well as in the 1970s<13>) in representing the gestating or artistic female body. But if the kind of Merleau-Pontyan phenomenological approach that has surfaced in film studies of the 1990s and 2000s is qualified by feminist concerns, it allows Varda’s female bodily perspective on film-making to be appreciated.<14 Varda’s ready acknowledgement of *Le Bonheur* as a ‘woman’s film’

– ‘Obviously: I’m a woman’ (Varda 1965, 14) – is one example of how she has consistently refused (unlike the great majority of French women filmmakers) to live her embodiment as limiting or to feel ghettoized by the ‘woman’s film’ label. In 2000, she emphasized more than in earlier decades that to look *as* a woman is an embodied political act:

the first feminist gesture is to say right, OK, I’m being looked at, but I’m looking too...it is the act of deciding to look, and that the world is defined by how I look and not how I’m looked at (Mandy 2000).

Consistently privileging looking and embodiment, and living her woman’s body as ‘the agent and agency of intentionality’ (Sobchack 1992, 73). Varda’s filmmaking may best be understood, I would contend, as a performance of feminist phenomenology deriving from her woman-subject’s desire, experience and vision, a carnal *cinécriture* she has now developed and refined for more than half a century.

Notes

I would like to thank Jenny Chamarette for making her unpublished doctoral work on Varda available to me while I was preparing this article: although not directly referred to, it was a source of considerable inspiration.

1. Grégory Valens. 2007. Agnès Varda, l’hommage juste. *Positif* 553 (March), p.66.

The exhibition ran from 18 to 28 January 2007.

2. ‘The X-raying of the second sex carried out by Agnès Varda is all the more interesting for its low level of militancy...her look seems to us more feminine/female

than feminist' [La radiographie du deuxième sexe par Agnès Varda est d'autant plus intéressante qu'elle est fort peu militante....son regard nous semble plus féminin que féministe]. (Tigoulet 1991, 61-62).

3. Where French film is concerned, Martine Beugnet has been the closest and most prolific observer of haptic processes in the films of Claire Denis and other contemporary filmmakers. See Beugnet 2007, 2006, 2004.

4. When reflecting on *The Gleaners and I* in *Two Years On (Deux ans après)*, Varda has to be alerted to the similarity between these sequences in her two films, having apparently not noticed it.

5. Although De Beauvoir must be considered the founder of feminist phenomenology as a discrete branch of philosophical enquiry, it is only with the writings of Iris Young and other feminist scholars from the 1980s onwards that this philosophical sub-field has come to be recognized as one. The first book in English on this new branch of political philosophy was Linda Fisher and Lester Embree's co-edited *Feminist Phenomenology* (Fisher and Embree 2000), which was based on a symposium held in 1994. A small number of essays have pursued feminist phenomenological readings of films, such as Del Rio 2004, Newton 2008.

6. The term 'sex-pervasive' is deployed to particular effect by Toril Moi (see Moi 1999). Moi links the birth of the sex/gender distinction (which like Iris Young she is critiquing in favour of feminist phenomenology, though only in Beauvoirean mode and less subtly) to the 'pervasive picture of sex' born with modern, Enlightenment feminism. Female anatomy began to be pictured as pervaded by sex/sexuality at this point in history, Moi claims, as Western culture moved from what Thomas Laqueur calls a 'one-sex model' to a 'two-sex model' of sexual difference (that is, women's reproductive organs began to be viewed as distinct from men's rather than just 'a

different arrangement of the same parts'), and biological sex became 'something that seeps out from the ovaries and the testicles and into every cell in the body until it has saturated the whole person' (10, 11). 'It is in the encounter with the pervasive picture of sex that the need for something like the sex/gender distinction is born', Moi states (12). The idea of sex-pervasiveness seems to me to be particularly pertinent to the female walker or *flâneuse*, which even feminist criticism has had difficulty separating from the streetwalker, or prostitute.

7. On the mix of installations into the film, see Bellour 2009.

8. Edmund Husserl refers to the *Lebenswelt*, while one of the most precise formulations of Martin Heidegger's notion of 'world' can be found in *Being and Time*, and is summarized by David Farrell Krell in his introductory note to 'The Origin of the Work of Art' as 'the structural whole of significant relationships that Dasein experiences – with tools, things of nature, and other human beings'. (Heidegger 1977, 145).

9. 'Is this cinema a *feminist* cinema ? No, because apart from the fact that she refrains from any propagandistic intentions, her films are sufficiently *open* to attract attention and sympathy to the female condition while managing not to impose any militant « messages »' [Ce cinéma...est-il un cinéma *féministe*? Non, car, outre qu'elle se défend de toute intention propagandiste, ses films sont suffisamment *ouverts* pour susciter l'attention et la sympathie sur la condition féminine sans pour autant imposer un « message » militant]. (Martin and Nacache 1988, 57); (Prédal 1991, 20).

10. 'I started with the idea that women are attached to the home. So I attached myself to my home, literally, by imagining a new kind of umbilical cord. I attached an electric cable to the electric meter in my house which, when fully uncoiled, turned out to be 80 metres long. I decided to shoot **Daguerrérotypes** within that distance.' [Je

suis donc partie de cette idée, de ce fait, que les femmes sont attachées à la maison. Et je me suis moi-même attachée à la maison. J'ai imaginé un nouveau cordon ombilical. J'ai fait tirer une ligne électrique du compteur de ma maison, et le fil mesurait 80 mètres. J'ai décidé de tourner **Daguerréotypes** à cette-distance là'], (Varda 1975, 39-40).

11. In her recent article on *Mur murs* and *Documenteur*, Delphine Bénézet refers both to 'the complex interweaving between the personal and the collective typical of Varda's cinema' and its 'complex dialectic between people and places' (Bénézet 2009, 85, 86).

12. 'The couple in LA POINTE COURTE is juxtaposed with – opposed to – a village that is trying to organize itself, to form a trade union' [Le couple de LA POINTE COURTE est mis en juxtaposition avec un village qui essaie de se constituer un syndicat, qui essaie de s'organiser. Il est mis en opposition] (Michaud and Bellour 1961, 8). 'LA POINTE COURTE...is above all a film that depicted both a couple and the chronicle of a village, a private and a collective existence that were two distinct worlds in the film, but offered to the spectator to compare....There was ten minutes of chronicle followed by ten minutes of the couple, an alternation that continued throughout the film' [LA POINTE COURTE...c'était surtout un film qui montrait en même temps un couple et la chronique d'un village et justement cette vie collective et cette vie particulière qui étaient deux mondes sans rapport dans le film, mais le spectateur comparait ces deux mondes...Il y avait dix minutes de chronique, dix minutes de couple et cette alternance se continuait pendant tout le film], (Arnault 1967, 42-44).

13. As Alison Smith notes, '*L'Opéra-Mouffe* is a specifically feminine exploration of the process of subjective or symbolic vision' (Smith 1998, 96).

14. This perspective and the ‘interest in a specifically feminine cinema’ Alison Smith observed in Varda’s life and work in 1998 (Smith 1998, 92) are one and the same – a commitment to the registering of women directors’ embodied vision in their films, by whatever means.

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