

Avoid Contact with the Eyes and Skin, May Cause Irritation: Agnès Varda's *La Pointe courte* (1954)

Francesca Minnie Hardy

The University of Cambridge

E-mail: fh271@cam.ac.uk

Abstract. When, through highly atypical financial and creative means, French filmmaker Agnès Varda's first feature film *The Pointe Courte* (*La Pointe courte*, 1954) first appeared on cinema screens, a fragment of contemporary commentators thought it hampered by “defects,” “blunders,” and “follies.” Its perceived infirmity compounded further by a “rather irritating intellectual dryness,” implying contact with the film may cause itching. A more material, rather than intellectual engagement with the film, then, may offer a means to overcome such reservations; a piste this article pursues. In doing so, I draw on the thought of contemporary French thinker Jean-Luc Nancy and his proposition that all images are flowers and the mobilised look such thinking engenders which oscillates between an optical gaze and a haptic graze. A look mobilized thanks to the contact it makes with wood's textured, internal ornament and which undoes the material myopia by which the film's existing critical landscape has itself been hampered.

“It must be said here that wood is one of Agnès Varda's key materials, one of the leitmotif images of her films.”¹

Jean-Luc Godard, *Cahiers du cinéma*, 1959

Contemporary and occasional collaborator, Jean-Luc Godard here asserts how wood constitutes Agnès Varda's filmic material *par excellence*; the very first image of Varda's very first feature film *The Pointe Courte* (*La Pointe courte*, 1954) affording us such a ligneous inference through the exposed wood grain that greets a spectator's eyes. [Figs. 1–4.] Varda too has implicated her own oeuvre in this pastoral register, this time on the other side of the camera, playfully conceiving her cinematic audience as fields of spectators. Hemmed in by the space of the

1 Please note that throughout the article all translations are my own. Original French reads: “Il faut dire ici que le bois est un des matériaux-clé d'Agnès Varda, l'une des images leitmotive de ses films.”

auditorium, Varda considers these fields as vital and fleshy ears of corn, blowing in the winds of her projected images; their autonomy supposedly harvested by the combines of light, sound, and movement, as well, of course, as by more material offerings (Varda 1994, 7). Ethically speaking, such talk raises concerns, for any consideration of wood as Varda's "key" cinematic material potentially implies the imposition of a hierarchy of engagement with her filmic images. Yet, as I will argue here, far from grounding her first feature film into a system which privileges certain perceptions over others, Varda's relationship with wood in fact makes the image available to a whole spectrum of perceptual engagements.

The Intertextual Travels of the Flower

Spectatorship for Varda, then, is a case of plant life, whereby viewers are capable of being sensuously modified by the spoils of the image, and a select film history demonstrates a similarly perennial relationship between cinema and botany. The Lumière Brothers' *The Sprinkler Sprinkled* (*L'Arroseur arrosé*, 1895), arguably the very first narrative film, is set within a garden, whilst the very first colour film, recently "rediscovered," includes images of three children waving sunflowers. More playfully, it could be said that Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane* (1941) is driven by such a flowery inclination in its hunt for the mysterious Rosebud, while footage of Loie Fuller's mesmerizing skirt dances is equally evocative of this contingency; the shapes conjured by the ethereal mix of movement, light, and fabric fleetingly adopting floral-like forms. Her luminous textile swirls filling our eyes with tiny arabesques and often begging the question: What are we looking at? Just as the exposed grain of wood of *The Pointe Courte* does when a spectator first lays her eyes upon it. [Figs. 4–6.]

A brief survey of Varda's body of work also reveals such enigmatic florid bursts. Sunflowers feature prominently in the opening sequence of *Happiness* (*Le Bonheur*, 1965), uncannily and unblinkingly looking out at an audience, as the "corny" spectators look on to them. In her two-hour voyage through Paris in *Cleo from 5 to 7* (*Cléo de 5 à 7*, 1962), the sight of a tree hints at its arboreal permanence, as if today, 50 years since its conception a spectator could visit that very spot and take in its now greater majesty. Most intriguing of all, however, at least for myself, are the closing moments of *Opera Mouffe* (*L'opéra-mouffe*, 1958) during which a young, pregnant woman – a potential doppelganger for Varda who was pregnant with her first child at the time of its production – heartily consumes a bunch of flowers. [Figs. 7–9.]

In his essay on the uncanny, Freud noted how the represented double can operate as “the uncanny harbinger of death” (Freud 1989 [1919], 142), yet here the double is invested with fecundity, not simply in its depiction of pregnancy, but also in light of its correspondences with this wider bucolic web. For like the spatiotemporal interconnection that the exchanged look between sunflower and spectator, and the sight of Cleo’s tree, trigger, her consumption of the flower gestures towards an interrelation between the body and the flower. As I watch these petals become pulp I am always reminded of Gilles Deleuze’s adage-like sentiment that: “It is through the body (and no longer through the intermediary of the body) that cinema forms its alliance with the spirit, with thought” (Deleuze 1989, 189); a position that resonates with a major shift in film theory, and what I have identified as Film Studies’ *fleshy* turn.

This *fleshy* turn has seen modes of spectatorship that strive for more bodily readings of film emerge, for instance, through appeals to tactility, the olfactory, or sapidity. In a recent article on the state of film theory in France, Sarah Cooper too highlights the “measure” of importance Deleuze’s two volumes on cinema enjoy beyond “the French context” and among the proponents of this *fleshy* turn (Cooper 2012, 381); noting his particular influence on cultural theorist Laura U. Marks’s own highly influential work on touch and the haptic. Very broadly, Marks’s thesis centres on “haptic looking” and its tendency “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. It is more inclined to move than to focus, more inclined to graze than to gaze” (Marks 2000, 162). In other words, it is a modality of seeing which declines “being pulled into narrative” (Marks 2000, 163) in favour of a more contemplative relationship with the image as a whole. For our purposes here though we are interested in the interstices between the French context and this ever-growing cinema of the senses. Rather fittingly, Cooper refers to what we could call, following my own taxonomy, the French *fleshy* turn, casting Jean-Luc Nancy as a leading figure in the “abiding interest in film” (Cooper 2012, 379) France’s philosophical intelligentsia continues to show. The author of one volume on the cinema of Iranian filmmaker Abbas Kiarostami, of numerous articles on individual films, and an occasional embodied filmic agent, putting his own self at stake by entering the body of film and appearing on-screen, Nancy is likewise part of one of France’s modern-day cinematic power couples thanks to his “intermittent dialogue with the work of Claire Denis” (Cooper 2012, 379). A dialogue in no way restricted to his critical, textual interventions on her work for Denis has responded cinematically to Nancy’s writings through the 2004 feature

film *The Intruder* (*L'Intrus*). Very loosely narrating a heart transplant transacted on the black market, the film consists of “blocks of sensations” (Beugnet 2007, 168), instead of observing a more conventional narrative logic, a structure which works to prise the seat of cinematic perception from vision alone as per the objectives of Film Studies’ *fleshy* turn. This coincidence of concerns, however, is not the whole story of Nancy’s suitability for adoption by the *fleshy* turn, for careful analysis of his most dedicated study of the medium, *The Evidence of Film* (2001) characterises his cinema as an undoubted cinema of the look; the number of mentions of the word *regard* attesting to this very proposition.² Yet it is also undoubtedly a very particular kind of look given that the impetus of Nancy’s most extensive engagement with film is to witness “a mobilized way of looking” (Nancy 2001, 26) emerge, the nature of which cannot be understood by considering his work on film in isolation, for any specificity of his discourses on cinema are caught up with his wider contribution to the canon of aesthetic thinking. Therefore to speak of a Nancean ontology of film we must bear in mind his ontology of the image because one reciprocally informs the other, a contact which itself, as I will show here, not only places his thought into contact with Film Studies’ *fleshy* turn, but likewise into contact with that intertextual (and intermedial) traveller, the flower.

A Little Living Piece of Material Cinema in the Palm of Your Hand

My reading of Nancy’s image ontology situates its foundation in the critical contact he makes with the flower and his claim that “every image superficially flowers, or is a flower” (Nancy 2003, 16).³ There is of course nothing new in electing a particular trope to determine specific phenomena in Film Studies, with the mirror, picture frame, and window, the dominant three (Sobchack 1991, 14), and at first sight Nancy’s flowering image may itself appear metaphorical in its intention. However, it is far more than a mere figure of speech within the Nancean vernacular, for its evocation constructs an organic, material, sensuous image: its blooming silky petals calling to be caressed; its blossoming ostentation risking a greedy picking; its efflorescing scent inviting closeness or chasing away; much like the rich surfaces of the cinematic image flowering into view and so appealing to the *fleshy* turn’s models of spectatorship. However, a survey of the

2 *Regard* is most frequently rendered as look or gaze in English.

3 Original French reads: “toute image est à fleur, ou est une fleur.”

state of this turn reveals that all is not so rosy, and in the wake of the reception of her ideas on touch and the haptic, Laura U. Marks used a guest editorial piece to issue a call to action to all newcomers to her thought. “My purpose in theorizing haptic visuality was not to condemn all vision as bent on mastery, nor indeed to condemn all mastery, but to open up visuality along the continua of the distant and the embodied, and the optical and the haptic. As I have already witnessed the appropriation of my haptic ideas for what seem to me proto-fascist, new-age celebrations of feeling, irrationality, and primordial ooze, I take advantage of this moment to beseech those who are newly encountering haptic thinking to keep alive the dialectic with the optical (Marks 2004, 82)!”

Indeed visuality’s sliding scale has been central to Marks’s project since her debut monograph *The Skin of the Film* (2000) where she issued a somewhat softer warning: “The difference between haptic and optical vision is a matter of degree. In most processes of seeing, both are involved, in a dialectical movement from far to near. And obviously we need both kinds of visuality: it is hard to look closely at a lover’s skin with optical vision; it is hard to drive a car with haptic vision (Marks 2000, 163).”

In resisting illusionistic depth and narrative, then, we should not decline an optical gaze entirely, but instead make room for it alongside a surficial graze. Like the resonance shared with Denis’s work, Nancy directly, though accidentally, responds to Marks’s call to action in his handling of the flower and the sensory appendage this treatment realises. Prefacing his claim that all images are flowers, or at the very least flower, with a more general observation, Nancy comments how: “The flower, it is the very finest part, the surface, that which remains before us and which we only very lightly touch” (Nancy 2003, 16).⁴ It is the availability of the image’s surface first to vision and then, at the very least, to a partial touch, that primes Nancy’s flowering image for such sensory appendage, the tripartite haptic figure at this light touch’s linguistic core further accommodating this embellishment. For it does not simply denote two separate bodies coming into a mutual contact, but rather it connotes multiple modes of touch, for example, “to raze,” “to brush,” “to caress,” whilst also articulating the more definite haptic gesture, “to pluck.” In the first of these tactile instances, then, there resides a preoccupation with a superficial or shallow contact, in the spatial sense of the term, as opposed to implying a sense of the insincere, the cursory, that brushes up against, caresses, indeed grazes the exposed surface of its co-present other,

4 Original French reads: “La *fleur*, c’est la partie la plus fine, la surface, ce qui reste devant et qu’on effleure seulement.”

like we may the petal of a flower, while it simultaneously occasions a hungry gaze which seeks to master this tiny piece of nature by plucking or plundering its micro bouquet. Phenomenologically, however, it plumbs further depths than this surficial frisson and prehensile picking, for it likewise describes a coming forth from latency, which may bloom into a “brilliant display,” or which may work more generally to make manifest formerly “hidden agencies;” an efflorescence that completes this haptic triptych.⁵ Nancy’s flowering image thus oscillates the sensory reception to the image between both vision and touch, between a gaze and a graze, bridging the entire visuality spectrum that Marks wishes to see acknowledged by ontologies of the image, and in turn placing a spectator onto the edges of these sensations too, meaning that our look effectively, and quite literally, mobilizes thanks to this oscillation. If wood, then, is Varda’s filmic material *par excellence*, the flower could almost be thought of as the sensuous image *par excellence*; a little living piece of material cinema in the palm of your hand.

Two Worlds, One Vision

This mobilized way of looking, however, demands some form of leverage which Nancy locates exclusively in the figure of the director, but which I believe can originate in the material surrounds of the image: in the textile surfaces which line interiors and clothe protagonists, in the edifices which deck out landscapes, in the items which litter the spaces and places the film takes in, as well as, in fleshy touches, that is, the hands and faces of the onscreen bodies. These surrounds therefore mobilize our look by the cleaving in two of cinematic perception that Nancy’s flowering image admits and are in turn mobilized by this very same look.

This sense of cleavage brings us nicely to our interest in wood and to *The Pointe Courte* for the film is effectively two films in one; recounting the daily lives of the residents of the eponymous fishing village and their struggle against sanctions imposed by health inspectors, and the visit of two Parisian “outsiders,” contemplating a potential end to their four year marriage. Wood and the structure of the film can, then, be split along the length of their faithful grains, yet by design each faithfully clings to itself along the length of this very grain. In her most recent work, on enfolding and unfolding aesthetics, Marks too has worked with wood, like Nancy, and I hope myself, shaping it into a figurative and a

5 Definitions of efflorescence derive from “effloresce, v.” OED Online. September 2012. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/59763?redirectedFrom=effloresce> (accessed October 10, 2012).

theoretical material to think through, or indeed *not* to think through as the case may be, categorizing it amongst the order of the *machinic phylum*. “The virtual is the truly infinite ground against which the fewest actual entities emerge. It consists of all that cannot presently be thought; it is an asymptote for thought: “the powerlessness at the heart of thought.” Most materiality is virtual too. My notion of the materiality is...closer to Deleuze and Guattari’s characterization of the *machinic phylum* as that material that, like the grain of wood, guides the artisan to invent and to come up with thoughts that she would not have had in the absence of this obdurate, densely enfolded material. Materialistically, we could call the virtual ‘thought’s powerlessness at the heart of wood’” (Marks 2010, 7).

Marks’s words here recall the anonymous plank of wood that welcomes a spectator to the diegetic world of the film, its looped node and striated contours constituting formal rhymes to the enfolding and guiding properties of wood privileged by Marks here. Much more than a visual representation, however, of a singular wooden plane, this first image is made up of a series of simultaneous visual, aural, and kinetic moments that beautifully illustrate the mobilized and bifurcated look Nancy’s flowering image affords.

Quickly establishing the privileged material relationship with wood in which it implicates the filmic body at large, these very moments grant us this ligneous inference not only through the wooden surface which heralds the image track, but equally through the soundtrack that floods a spectator’s ears, composed of a medley of woodwind instruments – which by their very physicality betray this privilege; and the camera which tightly and statically frames the exposed wood grain of the visual track, suggestive of the immovability of a rooted tree. The block of wood thus forms a block of sensations, its internal, textured ornament mobilizing the look to bring “vision as close as possible to the image; by converting vision to touch” (Marks 2000, 159). Yet Varda’s filmmaking approach here does not realise this sensory slippage by declining vision as such, rather this wooden image-box overflows the visual regime in a gesture that does not seek to elevate more marginal sensory data above others, but instead to make space for them. This sense of the wood grain spilling over beyond the ocular and of the subsequent splitting of the pictorial is accomplished by the simple sequence which begins with this intimate establishing shot. Unfolding further with a steady camera pan to the left, which traces the grain until it expires, the sequence then transitions onto an additional series of wooden surfaces, which slowly resolve into the walls of settlement buildings, before we, the camera and the spectator, slowly advance along a path together until we chance upon a suited man beneath what the film’s second

protagonist reveals to the uncultivated spectator is a fig tree. Upon encountering this suited man the camera's mechanical neck cranes a little and then relinquishes its view of him in favour of a more rustically attired figure who quickly reports the suited man's presence in *The Pointe-Courte*. In electing to follow this second man the camera retraces its original steps, coiling around and taking a spectator back with it. A coiling movement that enjoys both an intelligible and a sensible function, ostensibly opening up lines of sight, and thereby permitting us entry into the profilmic world, whilst sensuously modifying vision. In essence, it plumbs down into the materiality of the image for it splits along the grain of both an optical and tactile mode of seeing, without annihilating either, just as Nancy's flowering image prompts the filmic image to border on the edges of touch and vision, in turn placing a spectator onto the edges of these sensations, too.

This phenomenon is better understood if we append two further Nancean reflections on the ontologies of cinema and images to his flowering images. The first relates to his thinking over the impact of editing on the life force of a film, which he perceives not as an exercise in binding meaning and holding it fast, but rather as an exercise in a creative yielding. "The finished film," according to Nancy, "is never the only imaginable," with "each film host to an abundance of others" (Nancy 2011, 82).⁶ This abundance emerging from the fact that in proposing one particular point of view via its "final" edit, the film "distances" its material from a multiplicity of other possible or latent films "each just as much imaginable (as the "actual")" (Nancy 2011, 82).⁷ As such the finished film is merely a placeholder for a multiplicity of others which ectoplasmically halo it as a "floating aura." Thus brimming with alternatives Nancy's wider image ontology further attests to such bounty when considering the cascade of inference with which even black and white text is rich. Rendered as a threadless weaving in his vernacular, Nancy again returns to the flower to illuminate his thinking in relation to the "overspill" such textual enunciation enacts. For example, in the statement "*Je dis une fleur*" the "movement of the needle in the stitch automatically ties *dire* to *fleur*" (Nancy 2003, 128), but thanks to the cascade of inference enfolded within this simple statement our engagement with it does not cease with this most obvious needlework and this first silken fibre seeps new

6 Original French reads: [1] "le film terminé n'est jamais le seul film imaginable," [2] "Chaque film est riche d'autres films."

7 Original French reads: [1] "il reste certainement chaque fois des possibilités que le montage final écarte." [2] "si du moins on ne parle que de l'état "fini" du film, autour duquel et après lequel continue à flotter une aura de possibles qui sont autant d'interprétations imaginables."

meanings auratically floating within its ectoplasmic halo.⁸ *Dire* and *fleur* thus threadlessly weave themselves as: “to say” and “to speak,” “to sing,” “to evoke,” and as “flower,” “scent,” “petal,” “finial,” “wilting,” “flora,” and “flame” to produce an immaterial, yet palpable, tapestry.⁹ In both cases, then, any yielding occurs thanks to the floating aura that ectoplasmically haloes each phenomena and wherein resides the abundance of possible films, constituted from anything from the axed acetate strips lying on the floor of the editing room to the actual splitting of reality according to the infamous many-worlds theory of quantum mechanics, and from whence the formerly impalpable textual filaments may emanate and consequently be threadlessly woven together to form an immaterial tapestry. In a cinematic context, then, this threadless weaving could be annexed to Nancy’s forked films for it permits a remapping of the off-screen space by means of an embroidering of the onscreen space with presences both imagined and sensed; perhaps once seen and now felt.¹⁰ Accordingly then, they should prompt us to conceive of the filmic image as neither absolute nor latently exhausted, as neither final nor finial, for although technically the outermost plane of the film, the actual, visible image is in actuality a densely enfolded plane; its seemingly sheer surface in fact covered in tiny grooves, these micro folds flowering outwards towards our eyes to mobilize vision. The sight of wood during *The Pointe Courte*’s opening moments offering a very literal site to think through this supposition.¹¹

The Pointe Courte’s opening sequence behaves and is embroidered in this way through the camera’s coil. For not only do its movements introduce us to

8 [1] Literally “I say a flower.” Original French reads: [2] “ce mouvement du crochet dans la maille qui enchaîne déjà ‘dire à fleur’.”

9 Original French reads: “‘dire’ à ‘parler’, ‘chanter’, ‘évoquer’ et ‘fleur’ à ‘parfum’, ‘pétale’, ‘fleuron’, ‘flétrir’, ‘flore’ ou ‘flamme.’” The mechanics of the phenomenon could be said to have a direct analogue in a visual context through Roland Barthes’s elucidation of the photographic *studium* and *punctum*. Cf. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. 1981. New York: Hill and Wang.

10 Varda herself embarks on such an exercise in *Ulysse* (1982) wherein she revisits the three chief constitutive elements of a photograph she had taken decades earlier: a boy, now a man; a man, now an old man; and a dead goat; still dead. Creatively and discursively engaging with these three pillars of the original composition “each component of the image...come[s] alive and gain[s] a corporeal dimension in not merely one, but several possible ‘alternative realities’” (Pethő 2010, 84); arguably by means of the floating aura of meanings that ectoplasmically haloes the then of the photograph being threadlessly woven into the now of the film.

11 Nancy’s flowering image, and its corresponding phenomena, could almost be thought of as the obverse of Varda’s *cinécriture*; a term conceived by Varda which addresses the choices she makes when shooting a film. In essence, what she decides to write into the cinema she authors. Nancy’s flowering images et al. could be thought the opposing, yet complementary, processes for they treat, or indeed attempt to coax out, what emanates from this *cinécriture*.

the diegetic world, but they likewise materially mimic knot formation in the trunks and branches of trees as the smooth formation of straight growth lines, cinematically speaking the forward moving lines of the camera's movement, is interrupted by its backtracking. We thus acquire a sort of forked vision, as per Nancy's flowering image, because looking down the alleyway we intellectually understand our impending entry into the diegetic world, but our eyes, having brushed up against the wood grain in "function[ing] like organs of touch" (Marks 2000, 162), as well as through the interplay of visual, aural, and kinetic material, are now sensible to the forms of the wood's internal, textured ornament. Thus infused with its lignin patterns, our eyes threadlessly, yet palpably, weave its patterns back into the image despite the fact that its lignin fibres have been abandoned by the visual (and aural) track and are therefore no longer intellectually visible, but only sensibly in the camera's arabesque coil. Indeed it could be said that the visual image becomes grainier, not by means of a drop in visual quality or sharpness, which may elicit a more material mode of perception through an augmented sense of tactility, but by means of a thickening up of the image through the cascade of inference which carpets it. In essence, the exposed grain of wood of these opening moments supplies us with the material leverage we need in order to mobilise our way of looking so as to prise out the richness with which the image, and the film, is flush. By doing so this material leverage enables the grain of the wood to effloresce upon the body of the film and as such comes to materially and sensuously structure *The Pointe Courte*, permeating its visual, audio, and kinetic material like a refrain which prompts spectatorial oscillations between and upon the distinct moments of its return ensuring that our vision is always in flux; able to tap into the many potential alternate realities that inhere within a film and in no way inhibited by wood's obdurate and densely enfolded material, but rather mobilized by it.¹²

12 Interestingly, Alison Smith, in what remains the only book-length English language study exclusively dedicated to Varda's oeuvre, suggests that the film commences "with a tracking shot down the main street of the village" (Smith 1998, 64), rather than with the exposed and anonymous block of wood explored above; essentially deferring the start of the film until after all of the credits have rolled. In doing so Smith also risks overlooking the sense of this exposed wood grain, and the bounty of the image, which continues throughout *The Pointe Courte*. Similarly, Ginette Vincendeau highlights the role of this tracking shot within the film's opening minutes although she does recognise its timber preface. However, her suggestion that as the camera moves on from this first wooden pane that "a section of a tree trunk" is revealed wraps things up a little too readily. For I would suggest that Vincendeau's trunk is in fact a bench which we later catch a glimpse of through the grain-like coils the film realises in its exposition of the diegetic space; circularly swooping from one corner of *The Pointe-Courte* to another.

Further Wooden Whittlings

A sense of this exposed wood grain, and the bounty of the image, remains throughout *The Pointe Courte* thanks to the many circles and straight lines that fill its material surrounds. Sensible to the visual rhyme they share with its internal patterns through her inaugural encounter with its interior ornament during the opening visual, aural, and kinetic moments of the film, a spectator's eyes once again immaterially, yet palpably, weave these patterns back into the image. These geometrical echoes appear in both stories the film tells, hinting at the potential for proximity between the two narrative strands, and whilst some are quite simply articulated through an overt display of these grainy forms, for instance, a cat curled up asleep in a fishing net; an eel similarly wound up in a bucket; or planks of untreated wood running parallel to a rope washing line, others are yet more discreet. For example, planted amongst the costumes and accessories of the characters small-scale allusions to wood's ligneous design can be found, such as a smoking pipe, or the striped jersey and beret worn by a number of the small fishing town's inhabitants. More sophisticated than these, however, are the moments which demand a greater amount of threadless weaving. [Figs. 10–12.]

Ever present are the simple circles and straight lines that plainly deck out the film's material surrounds, but, like the opening moments of the film, in these moments these shapes transcend these material surrounds and enter the body of the film itself. Deftly demonstrating the intelligent interplay between form and content that film can accomplish, these instances once again consider the image a polymorphous entity ripe with far more than a predominant visual track. One of the most striking uses of this occurs shortly after Elle, the unnamed lead female protagonist of the purely fictional tale the film recounts, has arrived in *The Pointe-Courte* to visit the birthplace of her husband for the first time. As they journey to the shack that will be their residence during their stay, their walk is interrupted by the approach of a slow moving train and standing perpendicular to its passage they, and the spectator, are obliged to endure its cumbersome and metallic presence which comes to dominate the film's visual and aural tracks as it edges past them; a static camera recording the train's steady screech towards the edge of the screen until its cab fills its entire surface area. Transporting a spectator's view to the other side of the tracks, the body of the film refocuses on the trials of the couple quickly cutting to a slightly obliquely angled mid-shot. Whilst holding them here the camera then winds around them before stopping once again to permit them the space to walk off into the unknown distance.

Contemplated alongside each other, and with eyes sensible to the swirled knots and smooth contours of wood's internal ornament, the kinetic content of the image, here expressed by the train's slow forward motion, and the kinetic quality of the filmic body itself, here realised by the camera's semi-circular movement around the protagonists, work in mutual operation and threadlessly weave the woody texture back into the film, causing an efflorescence of wood's lignin fibres on the surface of the filmic body in defiance of the visual track's relinquishing them. [Figs. 13–15.]

The reciprocal play of the straight lines of the train's heavy movements and of the curvilinear motion of the camera can be witnessed at work again, but in a very different form, at a number of points during the film. Likewise concerned with shot choice, and consequently operating at the level of the filmic body, the fleshy touches that inflect the film's imagery, here the faces of the protagonists captured in close-up, act as the circles central to the immaterial tapestry threadlessly woven, whilst the series of vista shots seen throughout the film, essentially functioning as pseudo-establishing shots in their very literal capability of opening up *The Pointe-Courte's* locale, constitute the linear complement to the protagonists' round, fleshy faces. Two remarkable instances coincide with the early part of *Elle's* visit too, the vista shots effectively acquainting both spectator and protagonist with *The Pointe-Courte*. The first follows a brief enquiry into whether or not her face has changed in the five days since the couple parted and after some reassurance from *Il* and a lingering close-up of *Elle's* round face, he presents *The Pointe-Courte* to her, and the audience, by way of a steady pan to the left which opens up the narrow vista. A second example first opens on to one of these vistas, the sight of which is quickly interrupted by a cut away to another close-up of *Elle's* face; the pace of this change shunting the wood grain back onto the surface of the filmic body [Figs. 16–18].

A more lyrical example takes place later in the trip as the couple wander along the shoreline. Initially filmed in long shot, as the couple near the water's edge, a cut quickly installs the camera behind an abandoned, broken basket lying on the sand; its woven, circular form providing a diegetic although highly stylised frame to the couple's movements. As they pass in front of this wicker frame, its shape obviously reminiscent of the knot in the anonymous grain of wood, the camera dives through its cylindrical body so that we do not lose sight of the couple although we are denied a view of their bodies and must simply make do with their feet. Charting their walk at this ground level, a linear travelling shot remains focussed on their feet until a star-like shape, which we infer to be

the base of the broken basket appears in the foreground of the image; its spiked circular form stalling the camera's sideways movement and again recalling the knot of the film's timber preface. In completing this motion, this beach debris also completes the final stitch in the threadless weaving which sews the now absent lignin fibres of the opening wooden plane back into the onscreen space of the beach. The warp and weft of its immaterial tapestry gathering filaments as soon as the image acquires its wicker frame; these filaments bolstered by the travelling shot's mimicry of wood's striations; the sight of the basket's formerly missing base likewise forming the base of the purely sensible tree trunk that our mobilised look could be said to carve out through the sequence's visual and kinetic material. [Figs. 19–21.]

I should perhaps pause here for a moment because it could be said that this discussion privileges the couple's narrative too much at too great an expense of the villagers' tale. But this is somewhat of a wilful neglect, motivated not by disrespect, but by a desire to dispel, or at the very least to challenge the material dichotomy promoted by the prevailing canon of criticism surrounding the film. Whereas these two halves are supposedly narratively, thematically, and stylistically distinct, the film as a whole has been well and widely documented as "delight[ing] in contrasts [...] and parallels" (Vincendeau 2008). Yet this pleasure it delights in draws up materially opposing territories, such as light and shadow (Varda), iron and wood (Truffaut, Flitterman-Lewis), black and white (Deleuze) which co-exist, but do not necessarily confer. These material schisms are largely gendered and the most significant for our purposes here is undeniably "the opposition of wood and steel" (Flitterman-Lewis 1996, 221). Visually articulated by the artefacts fashioned from these materials and scattered about the diegetic landscape, and aurally by means of these materials being worked by or as tools, Il is aligned with wood and Elle is associated with steel. However, through the continued efflorescence of the exposed wood grain throughout the film, I would like to suggest that this material divide is purely ostentatious, or at the very least, operates on a purely superficial level, in the insincere sense of the word, because in acquiring a look that plumbs down into the materiality and multiplicity of the image, mobilized by incorporating the ornamented insides of the wood grain it has brushed up against into our *regard*, our vision successfully splits along the grain of both an optical and tactile mode of seeing. A spectator therefore enjoys the practical advantages of each modality of seeing, as sketched out by Marks's call to action, whilst simultaneously benefitting from the creative freedom such relay grants in its enabling expired exposures to re-enter the onscreen image

and thereby acknowledging the abundance with which every film is rich, as per Nancy's forked film's theory and threadless weaving. As such, the exposed wood grain encountered in the first few moments of the film grants the spectatorial look the material leverage required to mobilize and it does so to such a degree that this look transcends any long-thought material myopia, essentially opening up the entire filmic body to the ligneous inference with which it pulsates. Like the block of wood, then, *The Pointe Courte's* blocks of sensations are porous.¹³

As the couple's narrative unfolds the film illustrates such porosity via the ligneous crossover witnessed as the seemingly rekindled pair chat inside the wooden hull of a ship, with the formerly iron Elle wandering gaily within it. Admittedly, however, this wooden shell possesses an iron lining for it is dotted with nuts, bolts, and support rods; the film's material surrounds again delighting in contrasts, but pleasantly implying an osmotic parity. [Figs. 22–24.] Bearing these words in mind, it could almost be argued that wood, Varda's key cinematic material, functions as far more than a leitmotif, and a material one at that, but as a lining to the whole film, a lining which thickens, strengthens, and acquires new dimensions as the film plays on through the reciprocity between a hungry gaze that plunges into illusionistic depth and a surficial graze that is more concerned with texture than narrative teleology. The final moments of the film attest to this proposition.

The couple prepare to leave The Pointe-Courte for Paris, together. The village celebrates, together. As the celebration gets into full swing woodwind music fills the air and our ears evoking a sense of the wood grain which here occasions a diegetic and an extra-diegetic oscillation: the villagers jostle on the dance floor, whilst a spectator jostles with the very opening moments of the film when this music was heard for the first time. Through this aural material the film itself becomes a knot in the grain of cinema encased within itself, effectively enacting a final coil which materially returns us to the opening moments of the film. Yet *The Pointe Courte* does not leave us with any sense of being wrapped up for we do not know if the couple will remain together upon their return to Paris, nor whether any of the kittens will be saved from drowning following a child's request in its closing moments. Our final impression of the film thus splits according to Nancy's forked films theory, like the playground game of plucking petals from a flower: a kitten drowns, a kitten lives, she loves him, she loves him not.

13 Following the terms set out by Ágnes Pethő in her intervention on intermediality as metalepsis in Varda's *cinécriture*, this transcendence could perhaps be annexed to the threefold taxonomy she identifies as operative across Varda's oeuvre as a sensory metalepsis that effects a "jump between diegetic and non-diegetic worlds" (Pethő 2010).

References

- Barthes, Roland. 1981. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. New York: Hill and Wang.
- Beugnet, Martine. 2007. *Cinema and Sensation: French film and the art of transgression*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Cooper, Sarah. 2012. Film Theory in France. *French Studies* vol. 66 no. 3 (July): 376–382.
- Curot, Frank. 1991. L'écriture de *La Pointe Courte* [The Writing of *The Pointe courte*]. In Agnès Varda, ed. Michel Estève, 85–99. Paris: Lettres Modernes-Minard.
- Deleuze, Gilles. 1989. *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. H. Tomlinson and B. Habberjam. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Flitterman-Lewis, Sandy. 1996. *To Desire Differently: Feminism and French culture*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Freud, Sigmund. 2003 [1919]. *The Uncanny*, trans. by David McLintock. London: Penguin.
- Marks, Laura U. 2010. *Enfoldment and Infinity: An Islamic genealogy of new media art*. Cambridge and London: The MIT Press.
- . 2004. Haptic Visuality: Touching with the eyes. *Framework: The Finnish art review* Issue 2 (November): 80–82.
- . 2000. *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural cinema, embodiment, and the senses*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Nancy, Jean-Luc. 2011. En tournage avec R.A.-Z. *Trafic* Issue 78 (June): 79–86.
- . 2003. *Au fond des images* [The Ground of the Image]. Paris: Galilée.
- . 2001. *The Evidence of Film*. Brussels: Yves Gevaert.
- Pethő, Ágnes. 2010. Intermediality as Metalepsis in the “Cinécriture” of Agnès Varda. *Acta Universitatis Sapientiae. Film and Media Studies* Vol. 3: 69–94.
- Prédal, René. 2009. Genèse d'une œuvre: Agnès Varda et *La Pointe Courte* [Genesis of an œuvre: Agnès Varda and *The Pointe Courte*]. In Agnès Varda: *le cinéma et au-delà* [Agnès Varda: the Cinema and Beyond], eds. Antony Fiant, Roxane Hamery, and Eric Thouvenel, 101–112. Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes.
- Smith, Alison. 1998. *Agnès Varda*. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press.
- Sobchack, Vivian. 1992. *The Address of the Eye: A phenomenology of film experience*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Truffaut, François. 1975. *Les films de ma vie* [*The Films in my Life*]. Paris: Flammarion.

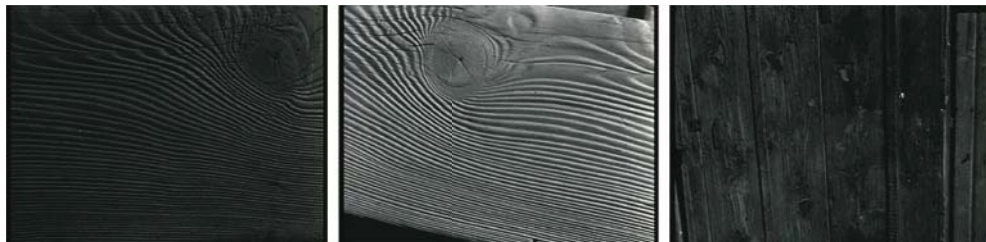
Varda, Agnès. *Varda Par Agnès*. 1994. Paris: Cahiers du Cinéma/Ciné-Tamaris.

Vincendeau, Ginette. 2008. *La Pointe Courte*: How Agnès Varda “invented” the New Wave. <http://www.criterion.com/current/posts/497-la-pointe-courte-how-agnes-var-da-invented-the-new-wave>. Last accessed at 24. 09. 2012.

OED Online. 2012. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/59763?redirectedFrom=effloresce>. Last accessed at 08. 10. 2012.

List of Figures

Figures 1–3. The anonymous and exposed wood grain of *The Pointe Courte*’s opening moments that initially greets a spectator’s eyes.



Figures 4–6. Loie Fuller’s mesmerising skirt dances. Her luminous textile swirls filling our eyes with tiny arabesques.



Figures 7–9. A brief survey of the enigmatic florid bursts across Varda’s oeuvre.



Figures 10–12. A sense of the exposed wood grain remains throughout *The Pointe Courte* thanks to the many circles and straight lines that fill its material surrounds.



Figures 13–15. Contemplated alongside each other, and with eyes sensible to the swirled knots and smooth contours of wood's internal ornament, the kinetic content of the image and quality of the filmic body work in mutual operation to threadlessly weave the woody texture back into the film, causing an efflorescence of wood's lignin fibres on the surface of the filmic body in defiance of the visual track's relinquishing them.



Figures 16–18. The juxtaposition of narrow vistas and close-ups of faces shunts the wood grain back onto the surface of the filmic body.



Figures 19–21. Our mobilised look could be said to carve out a purely sensible tree trunk through the sequence’s visual and kinetic material.



Figures 22–24. Ostentatiously and superficially aligned with either wood or iron, as the couple’s narrative unfolds, the film illustrates its porosity via the ligneous crossover witnessed as the seemingly rekindled pair chat inside the wooden hull of a ship, with the formerly iron Elle wandering gaily within it. Admittedly, however, this wooden shell possesses an iron lining for it is dotted with nuts, bolts, and support rods; the film’s material surrounds again delighting in contrasts, but pleasantly implying an osmotic parity.

