Intermediality as Metalepsis in the "Cinécriture" of Agnès Varda

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Abstract. In this article I propose to examine the different ways in which Varda's films accomplish a kind of metaleptic leap between levels of "fiction" and "reality," of hypermediacy and immediacy, and to present this as an alternative to the techniques involving metalepsis used by the most famous representative of the generation of French New Wave filmmakers, Jean-Luc Godard. I have found that, most of the times, for Varda cinema is defined as an "artifice" between two layers of the "real:" the reality of herself, the personal world of the author-narrator and the reality captured by *cinéma vérité* style cinematography. Intermediality in these films serves as a "figuration" that on the one hand performs these metaleptic leaps from immediacy to stylized representation/hypermediacy, and on the other hand "figurates" the impossibility of such a leap. Among the films referred to in the analysis are *L'opéra-mouffe* (an effective collage of photographic *flânerie* and concept-art), *Ulysse* (a narrative-dramatic ekphrasis of a photograph), *7p., cuis., s. de b., ... à saisir* (inspired by an exhibition entitled *The Living and The Artificial*), *Histoire d'une vieille dame* (a sort of cinematic *objet-trouvé* recovered from the shooting of *Sans toit ni loi*), *Daguerréotypes* (a controversial documentary), *Happiness* (a fiction film that shocked its contemporary audience with its unusual approach to adultery), *The Beaches of Agnes* (an autobiographical essay film), etc.

1. New Wave Cinema and Metalepsis

Agnès Varda, who was first referred to as "the grandmother of the New Wave" when she was merely 30 years old, turned 81 in 2009, and has finally lived up to her reputation of being the "grandmother" of the famous French New Wave, perhaps not so much in the sense of being the ancestor of the "New Wave" as it was once suggested, but in the sense of becoming one of the most creative and uncompromising surviving members of the legendary generation of filmmakers. Her recent film, *The Beaches of Agnes* (*Les Plages d'Agnes*, 2008), is not only a

playful and ironic re-evaluation of her life, but also, inevitably, a remembrance of the New Wave. The success of this film renewed the critical interest in her own artistic work, and in a way also launched a challenge for a wider re-evaluation of what New Wave filmmakers were all about, what their real legacy consists of. In setting myself the task of such a re-evaluation, I have found that Varda's films are thought-provoking not only because she herself became almost obsessed with conceiving filmmaking as a kind of ritual act of remembrance, but also from another, more theoretical viewpoint: that of re-evaluating our concepts about *intermediality*, *hypermediacy* and their correlations with *immediacy*, or what we perceive as *reality*.

Post-structuralist literary and cultural theories often emphasize the *constructed* and *mediated* nature of all our experiences and the short circuiting of "texts" into "texts." New Wave films, mostly those of Godard have frequently been quoted as examples for such a hypermediated experience in which the viewer is forced to navigate through an almost inscrutable maze of images and texts. The famous *cinéphilia* of the French New Wave directors resulted in their films being packed with quotations and references to all kinds of films, while at the same time – being extremely well read authors as well – their films also abound in literary quotations. Characters move in rooms with reproductions of famous paintings, listen to classical music or jazz, drop hints at different contemporary cultural or political events, and so on. In one word, these films present an intricate web of references and a multiple layering of significations, being perfect examples of a world constructed of "signs" and "texts." But at the same time, we must also acknowledge that the New Wave's other trademark techniques – the preference for natural lighting, for shooting with hand-held camera on authentic locations (streets, pubs, public places) providing the viewer a sense of "naturalness" in contrast with the Hollywood tradition of glamorous lighting effects and artificial studio sets – acted exactly the opposite way, counterbalancing the effect of these multilayered "textual" environments. New Wave cinema's famous *cinéma vérité* technique itself combined the spontaneity of filming things "as they are found" with a self-reflexive element of recognizing the medium's (the camera's, the crew's) intrusion into the "natural" world, of the coexistence of the medium's artifice with the "reality" it captured (and created).

In fact, what we see in French New Wave cinema seems to confirm some of the ideas that surfaced in more recent studies on the nature of mediation in general and which insist on the real, (inter)active presence of media in our contemporary lives and on the experience that links "reality" to media. In this respect, I think

that the films of both Godard and Varda offer ample material for such a reassessment of our general ideas on hypermediacy, and more importantly, for a closer research into those *figurations of intermediality*[1] that combine hypermediacy with effects of immediacy. And from this perspective I have found that the seesaw experience, alternating the illusions of the "real" (the seemingly unmediated) and the "represented" (i.e. framed, constructed media "texts") that has been a trademark of both Jean-Luc Godard's and Varda's New Wave films can remind us of the technique called *metalepsis.*[2]

Metalepsis, as we know, can be considered either a rhetorical figure or a narrative device. As a rhetorical figure it refers to various kinds of complex figures or tropes that are figurative to the second or third degree: meaning that they involve a figure that either refers us to yet another figure or requires a further imaginative leap to establish its reference (this "leap" can also be to a literary reference, resulting in a sophisticated form of allusion).[3] In more recent interpretations, those of John Hollander and Harold Bloom, for example, metalepsis appears as a figure of literary influence or legacy. In Paul De Man's theory of figuration it is one of the key models, a sort of figure of figuration itself.[4] When Gérard Genette[5] extended the use of the rhetorical term metalepsis and transformed it into a narratological concept (that is: transposed the notion "from figure to fiction"), he started form the idea that fiction itself is an extension of the logic of the trope (the figure of speech) that always relies on our capacity to imagine something "as if it were real." In his view, the main feature of metalepsis is that it performs a paradoxical loop between the ontological levels of the "real" and the "fictional," and as Genette emphasized, this feature is often highlighted in metafictional works by the introduction of a fantastic element (for example: the screen actor stepping out of the projected film in Woody Allen's film, *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, 1985). As a narrative device, therefore, following Genette's arguments, it is most commonly understood as a means of "breaking the frame" that separates distinct 'levels' of a narrative, usually between an embedded tale and primary story, or as a way in which an author transgresses into the narrative.

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[1] For we have to bear in mind that according to Joachim Paech (2002), intermediality, as such, always manifests itself as a kind of "*figuration*," a figuration that inscribes or re-inscribes medial difference.

[2] I have already discussed some of the aspects regarding such figurations in a previous article entitled *(Re)Mediating the Real. Paradoxes of an Intermedial Cinema of Immediacy* (2009).

[3] For a comprehensive definition of the term metalepsis (*μετάληψις, transsumptio*) see Baldick (2001, 152/3).

[4] See a current evaluation of these theories by Brian Cummings (2007).

[5] Cf. Gérard Genette: *Métalepse: De la figure à la fiction* (2004).

Genette's narrative reinterpretation of the classical trope has inspired extensive researches into identifying a great variety of other forms of metaleptic leaps in literature, in film (cf. Campora 2009), in diverse forms of popular culture,[6] and even in video games (cf. Harpold 2007).[7] Although research articles analyzing specific metaleptic instances that we see in films are not as numerous as the ones referring to literature, we can say that in the last decade the term "metalepsis" has been widely used by film criticism, albeit mainly with a somewhat simplified meaning referring to a structure of "world within a world" and any kind of jump between diegetic and non-diegetic worlds.

What I would like to examine in this article is the way in which the intermedialization of the cinematic discourse can also act as a metaleptic force within a film *both* as a *figure* and as a *narrative device*. What is more, I have found that this angle seems extremely fruitful in approaching the "cinematic writing" ("*cinécriture*")[8] of the films of Agnès Varda. So, in what follows, I will examine some of the techniques that can be interpreted as *metaleptic occurrences involving intermediality* used by Varda and compare them to the perhaps the better known model of Jean-Luc Godard.

2. Intermediality as Metalepsis: Leaps between Immediacy and Hypermediacy

2.1. A collage of the "real/immediate" and of the "(hyper)mediated"

In Godard's films very often we have street images or domestic scenes in which "life" is shown against a backdrop of a visible text (a collage of texts) or a fixed image: life appears as framed by artifice, characters moving in a context populated by different media images and texts. In this we can see a thematization not only

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[6] See in this respect the conference on the topic of "Metalepsis in Popular Culture" at Neuchâtel held between 25. 06. 2009–27. 06. 2009, which provided a platform for discussions about metalepsis observed in cartoons, TV shows or popular comedy films.

[7] See a theoretical assessment of the possibilities of using metalepsis as a transgeneric and trans-medial concept also by Werner Wolf (2005).

[8] "Cinécriture" is a complex word coined by Varda herself. It is in fact a kind of intermedial notion combining the idea of cinematic authorship (comparable to that of literary authorship) with the use of specific cinematic techniques rendering a distinct cinematic style. As Varda herself and her interpreters have stressed many times, it relies on the basic ideas that: "A well-written film is also well filmed, the actors are well chosen, and so are the locations. The cutting, the movement, the points of view, the rhythm of filming, and editing have been felt and considered in a way a writer chooses the depth of meaning of sentences, the type of words, number of adverbs, paragraphs, asides, chapters which advance the story or break the flow, etc." (Cf. Smith 1998, 14, and also Hurd 2007, 131.)

of the since well exploited topic that consumerism and media shape our daily activities, but also a presentation of how the metalepsis of "artifice" and "life" is in fact becoming part of the real, the everyday experience in our lives. Early Godard films, like *Breathless* (*À bout de souffle*, 1960), *A Married Woman* (*Une femme mariée*, 1964), *Band of Outsiders* (*Bande à part*, 1962), etc. are full of such images. Just consider the well-known scene from the 1962 film *My Life to Live* (*Vivre sa vie*) [Figs. 1–2.] where we see Nana, the young prostitute, standing in the street in front of a collage of posters. The frame consisting of the posters in the background with the fragmented sentences and jumbled up words emphasizes artifice, a world constructed by visible signs that need deciphering.[9] As a result, Nana is also collaged into the posters, her figure projected onto this background is partly reduced to a mere visible sign (an image of a prostitute), however, the composition also highlights the "ontological" collage between the real life figure and the inanimate composition of signs in the background. In the filmic sequence the shot is followed by the countershot of the image of the passing cars in the street (that Nana is looking at), the incessant and spontaneous stream of traffic captured in *cinéma vérité* style cinematography. Godard stages a fine "dialogue" through Nana between the cluster of disjointed, artificial signs on the one side (the abstract collage of the posters), and the continuous flow of images of "life" contrasting with this on the other side. Something similar is achieved in the composition that we see in *A Married Woman* [Figs. 3–4] in which Macha Méril appears in front of a giant poster. In this case the "real life" figure is again framed by an artificial representation. The uncanny effect on the viewer is the result of the differences in the scale of the images of the two women (the huge poster towering over the "real" figure), as well as the perceived ontological difference between them ("life" and "representation"). In both cases Godard not only contrasts the "real" with the "mediated" but also plays with their paradoxes: the "real" Nana can be perceived as a mere representation of a prostitute, and Charlotte, the married woman is shown in earlier frames just like the poster girl advertising women's underwear, while the posters, the collages of street life are shown as not only highly realistic, but integral parts of "life" itself.

The same collage-effect is used by Varda in many of her films, but with different emphasis. Whereas with Godard such a metalepsis can be perceived as basic figure within the sequence of images (initiating a metafictional level of

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[9] It has also often been interpreted as a puzzle: analyses of the scene often derive meaning from the significations that can be attributed to the possible intertextual references hidden in these fragments (i.e. the reference to the Paul Newman film with the French title *L'arnaqueur*, etc.)

interpretation about reality and representation), Varda uses it in an astonishing variety of ways. Already in Varda's first feature film we have a narrative extension of this technique: the use of parallel story lines of "fiction" and "reality" rendered in the double intermedial transgression into literature and still photography. *The Pointe Courte* (*La Pointe Courte*), made in 1954, consists of the intertwining of two distinct story lines and stylistic worlds: a realistic, *cinéma vérité* portrayal of the fishermen (real life people captured in their own authentic environment who consciously act out their own lives in front of the camera) plus the fictional story of a couple on the verge of breaking up, presented in a stylized manner, the whole script being written under the influence of Faulkner's double narrative structure of the *Wild Palms*. The stylization of the fictional story line lies actually in both the audio and the visual rendering of the story. The actors were instructed to deliver the finely elaborated dialogues without any psychological realism, and the artificiality of this "recital" of lines by the actors was also underscored by the rift between sound and image: the dialogues can be heard just like a voice over narration, with a total lack of sound perspective. The visual compositions in which the couple appears are again constructed without following the conventional dramatic purposes. This stylized manner of presentation, however, achieves a level of "directness" in rendering a feeling of alienation and unease that dominates the couple's relationship. The images rendering the "real" story line are also paradoxically, highly artistic: the fishermen's life appears in carefully constructed imagery in which almost every frame could be taken in itself as a powerful photographic representation of the world of the village of Pointe Courte. Thus the "realistic" images open up the medium of moving images towards the art of still photography, while the "fictional" story (through the Faulknerian undertones and the literary sounding dialogues) breaks the cinematic frame towards literature. The double leap into intermediality expresses both the distance of Varda herself from the world portrayed (the view of an outsider who has a basic training in photography) and her empathy (or nostalgia for "immediacy") with a world she tries to reach through the means she is most familiar with: literature and the finest art of photography, the detachment we feel in the stylizations is balanced by the passion of the filmmaker for her art and her subject that is "palpable" throughout the film.

Her short film entitled *Opera Mouffe* (*L'opéra-mouffe*, 1958) combines the levels of the "real" and of the "mediated" in an even more radical way. The film is an effective collage of genuine photographic *flânerie*, *cinéma vérité* on the one hand, and *concept-art* on the other. Varda, who was pregnant at the time of making

the film,[10] alternates street images taken of the Rue Mouffetard in the course of several months in a *cinéma vérité* manner with clearly "fictitious" visual compositions, carefully staged imagery expressing her own feelings towards love and pregnancy. The flow of images captured in the course of several walks taken in the neighbourhood of Rue Mouffetard is centred around the motif of the gaze: the gaze of the camera that records the images of the street and singles out the faces and other details in its own "mechanical ballet" and the gaze of the passers by who acknowledge the presence of the camera by staring into the lens and thus making eye contact with us, the spectators of the spectacle of the street. [Figs. 9–10.] The images of the people populating the Rue Mouffetard are, however, not randomly presented, they are edited in specific pace and musical rhythm (hence the reference to the musical structure in the title: "l'opéra"), and also around some repetitive visual motifs (movements and gestures of the passers-by) that confer the whole sequence an air of buffoonery of grotesque charm parading an impressive variety of faces (hence the allusion to "opéra bouffe"[11]), and that ultimately stage what we could see as a modernist cinematic "comedie humaine," a study of human condition from the subjective perspective of a woman filmmaker (with emphasis on both terms).

The "artistic" compositions on the other hand, were considered unusually bold at the time with associations that shocked contemporary viewers (the belly of the pregnant woman compared in subsequent shots to a pumpkin that was sliced open, the nude bodies and the "love scene"). [Figs. 11–12.] The complex feelings of Varda towards the idea of pregnancy and towards her own body, towards a sensation of the body in general and the complex relationship binding sensual, bodily experiences with the spiritual are rendered in an imagery constructed of dreamlike sequences, painterly compositions and conceptual installations of visual art transferred to film. [Figs. 13–16.]

This "personal touch" or "idiosyncratic subjectivity" seen here will become one of the defining features of Varda's art: this is only one of the first examples in which Varda starts from her own deepest personal experiences but reworks them in a unique, stylized manner that nevertheless retains both the qualities of subjectivity along with a sense of conceptual detachment resulting from the techniques of abstraction.

As a true-blood *flâneuse*, Varda repeatedly records her walks in Paris, incorporating extensive walking sequences not only into her well-known fictional

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[10] The film is also known with the English title: *Diary of a Pregnant Woman*.

[11] "Opéra bouffe" can be described as a short amusing piece of opera, a genre of late 19th century French operetta known for its elements of comedy, satire, and farce.

feature film, *Cleo from 5 to 7* (*Cléo de 5 à 7*, 1962), but into several other films that she made along the years. Rue Daguerre, the street that she has lived in ever since the 1950s has become a recurring "muse" for her artistic mix of *flânerie* and abstraction. In one of her major works, made in the seventies, explicitly intended to chronicle her experiences linked to this street, Varda also betrays an increased interest in an already dated form of photography, the *daguerreotype*. In fact, we can say that here, in this controversially received documentary entitled *Daguerreotypes* (1976), the *daguerreotype* emerges as a key model for the kind of *personalized*, *fetishistic* and *artistic* cinema that she practices.

The documentary records the lives of the inhabitants of the Rue Daguerre, as Varda strolls along the street with her camera, accompanies her daughter visiting the shops, engages in everyday conversation with the shop-owners, and observes minute details about the locations, the activities, the faces, the hairdos, the peculiarities of her own neighbourhood. This "first person approach" and realistic representation is, however, once more combined with meticulously elaborated artifice. Varda alternates the spontaneous, *cinéma vérité* style cinematography with a visibly staged performance (scenes envisaged as if conjured up by a magician), and compositional structures reminding us of the framing techniques of still photography made within a studio, and in the early years of the photographic techniques when the taking of each picture still constituted a sophisticated social event. We see people posing for the camera in motionless postures in front of their shops or counters, with the emblems of their profession as if posing for a *daguerreotype*. [Figs. 17–20.] At the same time these real life (moving) images – that often acquire a quality of stillness as a result of the poses for the camera – get to be mixed with actual still images that also "populate" the world of these people (the advertisements, labels and all the other kinds of pictures that are "consumed" and used for decoration and self-identification by these people and that Varda visibly enjoys to photograph together with her subjects). [Figs. 21–22.] The shots in which people are portrayed in the same frame with these commercial representations are playful and funny, and the vision offered of Rue Daguerre becomes in this way generously all inclusive: people are pictured in symbiosis with the images of their times, the faces and postures are compared, life seems to imitate "art," the awareness of the "image" quality of these visual representations appears as integral part of the complexity of sensuous experiences that emerge from Varda's cinema, along with the references to various scents (that we almost feel in the small perfumery shop), or the haptic qualities of the image resulting from a sense of texture and touch (most evident in the images of the beauty shop).

In principle, the technique of combining still photography and moving pictures resembles that of Godard's, nevertheless the use is different. Varda's whole "cinécriture" in this work seems to be conceived in the spirit of the *daguerreotype*: the film is meant to document the spirit of a place captured as intact as possible but also framed. As we know, the daguerreotype was an unusually lifelike representation with its hologram-like features, but at the same time it was also a highly constructed image that required a lot of patience from the part of both the photographer and the model. Moreover, it was a unique image and not a mechanical reproduction. Its long exposure time made it an imprint not merely of reality but also of an elevated moment in time, something that resulted in an object to be treasured. Unlike a snapshot that captures a fleeting moment, a daguerreotype had to be planned and composed, like a painter composes a picture on the canvas. Varda, who even declares herself at one point "la daguerreotypesse," has found that this kind of paradoxical "painting of reality" represents the indexicality of cinematography in a pure form with a fascinating fusion of the "real" and the "artificial."

In her short film, *Seven Rooms, Kitchen and Bath* (*7p., cuis., s. de b., ... à saisir*, 1984) the collage effect of the artificial, the documentary and the personal is even more extreme. This time Varda is inspired by an exhibition entitled *The Living and the Artificial* created by Louis Bec[12] in 1984. She uses the location and the bizarre collection of puppets, sculptures and paintings on display as her setting and as her props for filming a series of free associative images and dreamlike dramatic scenes of a family life loosely based on her own personal memories related to her parental home. [Figs. 23–28.] The "living" can thus be interpreted as both the fiction brought to life by her film (she feels free to imagine all kinds of "slices of life" associated to the lifeless but extremely lifelike puppets of the exhibition) and her personal "reality" behind the surrealistic imagery. And despite the fact that she appropriates props from another artist's exhibition and wraps the whole film into a fictitious frame of an apartment being put on sale and shown to the visitors (the spectators of the film) by an invisible narrator, the film becomes one of Varda's most spontaneous works, as she herself declared in many interviews, a product of uninhibited subjective imagination.

The film highlights in this way how the metalepsis between "reality" and "fiction," hypermediacy and immediacy has always had a double fold in Varda's cinema. It seems that, for Varda, cinema is defined as an "artifice" between two layers

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[12] Louis Bec, born in Algeria and living in France, a lifelong friend of the philosopher Vilém Flusser, is an artist, a curator and a scientist working in the fields of biology and artificial life. Not surprisingly, Varda who is herself interested in techniques of mixing the real with the artificial, finds his ideas of merging the biological with the technological captivating.

of the "real:" the reality of herself, the individual world of the first person author and the reality captured – most of the times – by *cinéma vérité* style cinematography. The credit sequence of *Daguerreotypes*, which can also be interpreted as an effective cinematic paraphrase of *Las Meninas*, is an emblematic image in this respect that sums up the essence of this type of metalepsis in her films [Fig. 29].[13] The image presents the screen as a semi-transparent veil (or glass pane) – a "film" that is in fact both a transparent and a reflective surface – placed between the filmmakers' team and the reality that is the object of their movie, and also, implicitly, between the filmmakers and spectators who share their voyeuristic positions as if in a mirror. Varda captures in this way not only the two "real" sides of cinema in a single image (a self portrait of herself and the other filmmakers who gaze into the camera and at the world that the camera records, the world that is reflected in the transparent "film" image) but also the artificial nature of the "veil" that displays the movie itself, both through the analogy of the sheet of paper on which the credits are inscribed and where a visual word play can also be made, and also through the artifice of the whole composition itself that condenses elements from Varda's own backyard (i.e. the pot of geranium) and the cans of the film stock piled up in front of the crew. Thus ultimately all of the above amounts to a sophisticated installation that combines "the living with the artificial," and mixes the "immediate," highly personal, subjective gaze with "hypermediated," constructed forms of representations in a self-reflexive image that folds onto one another multiple layers of reality and fiction.[14]

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[13] *Las Meninas,* a 1656 painting by Diego Velázquez is considered a complex and enigmatic composition that raises questions about the nature of representation itself. The interpretations focus on the self-reflexive aspects of the painting in which the painter paints his own act of painting and also on the different points of focalization that the picture offers to the viewer. The object of the represented painter's gaze (the subject of his painting) is invisible; however, we can catch a glimpse of it in the mirror placed behind the painter on the wall. In Foucault's analysis (1970), what lies outside the painting gives meaning to what we see inside the frame. The king and queen reflected in the mirror and standing outside the space of the painting constitute in fact the centre of the depicted scene. They "create this spectacle-as-observation" by providing the "centre around which the entire representation is ordered" (Foucault 1970, 14). Joel Snyder and Ted Cohen (1980) have challenged Foucault's interpretation by analyzing the spatial structure of the painting, and arriving at the conclusion that the image seen in the mirror is not a direct reflection of the real figures of the royal couple (the models of the painting), but a reflection of the painting lying on the canvas in front of the painter. In such an interpretation the painting is no longer a representation of classical representation as Foucault claimed, but is more like a "hall of mirrors" in which the role of the painter emerges as a controlling authority (instead of the authority of the king), and representations mirror each other within the representation. Varda's shot has several parallels with Velázquez's painting: the self-reflecting image of Varda and her crew in the process of making the film (thus becoming models themselves), the "outside" of picture reflected in the "inside," the plane of the "canvas" lying in between Varda's crew and the "outside" world. However, the fact that the "canvas" in this case occupies the whole frame, and is actually like a windowpane (that is both see-through and mirror-like), makes it an adequate representation of the paradox of filmic representation itself: both of its transparent and of its non-transparent nature (that makes it analogous to a painting or to a sheet of paper).

[14] This conscious combination of documentary style and artifice is acknowledged by the word play in the title of her lesser known fiction film, *Documenteur* made by Varda in 1981. The pun mixes the

2.2. Intermediality as a Metaleptic Leap into the Domain of the "Figural"

Henk Oosterling (2003) claims, under the strong direct influence of Lyotard's idea of the *figural* and of the *sublime*, that intermedial occurrences belong to the domain of the "figural" and also, that they can in fact "figurate" something infigurable, "incommensurable." In fact, we can observe ourselves that Lyotard's argument around the notion of the figural has certain key notions that make it easily connectable to the discourse on intermediality. First of all there is the idea that the figural challenges the order of discourse but is not simply opposed to the discursive. It can be seen – to quote the interpretation offered by Readings (1991, xxiv) – as an action that "opens up" discursive works to "a radical heterogeneity or singularity," a singularity that is "excess of any meanings we may assign to it" (Readings 1991, 4), or as other interpreters have put it: the figural "injects opacity into the discursive realm," working against "the self-sufficiency of discursive meaning, introducing an unassimilable heterogeneity into putatively homogenous discourse" (Jay 2006, 142). Lyotard formulates his ideas "in defence of the eye" and in defence of the non-discursive and sensual domains of human communication, yet finds that it is manifest on both sides of the word and image (figure) dichotomy, where it acts like a chiasmus,[15] so ultimately discourse and figure are mutually implicated. The figural in this way resonates well with the basic assumptions of intermediality claiming that all communication is multimedial and challenging the idea of monomedial texts. Moreover, the key notions of "opening up,"[16] "transgression" or "disruption" that describe the action of the figural over discourse are also applicable to the way intermediality is supposed to "work" within a text: intermedial occurrences can be perceived as metaleptic figures that are meant to perform exactly such "disruptions" of the logic of discourse and "transgressions" into the domain of the figural. Studying the films of Jean-Luc Godard and Agnès Varda, I have found that the "figural" can function in more than one fashion within a cinema relying on techniques of

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paradoxical meanings of the French words "documentaire" (meaning: "documentary") and "menteur" (meaning: "liar"). In this film, made by Varda while temporarily staying in the US with her husband, Jacques Demy, she explores within a fictional story the experiences of a French woman in Los Angeles (an autobiographical character) who lives with her son (played in the movie by her own real life son, Mathieu).

[15] See Rodowick's ideas (2001) elaborating on the nature of the chiasmus involved in the figural, or see Lyotard's own famous example of the figural acting as a "force that erodes the distinction between letter and line."

[16] Cf. Joki van de Poel's hypothesis about intermedial processes in a 2005 thesis written at the University of Utrecht with the title: *Opening up Worlds: Intermediality Reinterpreted,* and posted online (*http://www.ethesis.net/worlds/worlds.htm*, last date of access: 25 April, 2010.)

intermediality. In what follows, I will discuss three ways in which intermediality achieves such a metaleptic leap into the "figural."

a) Discourse disrupted by the figural

This is the case in which we have a metaleptic sequence of images in which the "real" cinematic image is associated for instance with a painting, conveying in this way a less then clear ("opaque") meaning, a feeling of being propelled onto a more surreal level where it is impossible to formulate an exact, discursive meaning. This is mainly how the famous inserts of paintings work in Godard's movies. The unusually fragmented narrative of *Pierrot Gone Mad* (*Pierrot le fou*, 1965) is full of such unexpected inserts of paintings, for example, that pop up without any dramatic or contextual motivation. [Figs. 30–33.] If we contrast these examples for instance with Varda's famous simile from *L'opéra mouffe* of a pregnant woman's belly resembling a pumpkin [see Figs. 11–12.] we see that Varda's is a shocking pair of images, but a rather straight-forward metaphor, while Godard's associations of paintings are clearly visual metalepses. In other cases, however, Varda uses similarly metaleptic images that operate with the same effect of "opacity" within the cinematic discourse (like the ones with the conceptual "installations" – see Figs. 13–16).

In Varda's latest autobiographical essay film, *The Beaches of Agnes*, for instance, we find not only one, but three variations of this metaleptic structure. The first type resembles the most the example taken from Godard's *Pierrot Gone Mad*, and can be seen in the scene in which Varda recalls her love for her husband, Jacques Demy. The scene begins as a free association starting from some old film cards about French film directors (among them Varda and Demy) found at the flea market and continues with series of shots paraphrasing Magritte's famous painting of the lovers with their faces covered with a white cloth. [Figs. 34–35.] However, this sequence is more than a simple association of ideas that result in a metaleptic leap from representation to memory, and from memory to life (the cardboard heads of Varda and Demy contrasted with the naked body of the lovers, implicitly: schematic representation opposed to flesh), it is also an intermedial play with the moving image and the moving bodies that she shows first in a travelling shot seen in naturalistic colour, then in a painterly artificial coloration, and finally freezing the frame into a still, black and white composition. The outcome – in contrast to Magritte's panting – is a sequence full of movement in all senses of the word (movement of the camera, of the bodies, the changes in the quality of the image), and that manages to convey something that cannot be easily expressed in words

or even in just one image, may that be as complex as Magritte's enigmatic painting.

Then there are the images of the elaborate installations that Varda repeatedly includes in the film [Figs. 36–37] and that she repeatedly includes herself in, both as an artist and as a model.[17] These "constructions" that she makes and that she films in the making are meant to serve the same purpose: by way of these images of sophisticated structures being put together by Varda on the beach – using mirrors, found objects and colourful veils and frames – discursive remembering lapses into the domain of the figural, or – in a self-reflexive way – the workings of memory itself are figurated.

Finally, in the images in which Varda tries to capture the complexity of emotions she feels for her children and grandchildren, she again resorts to intermedial imagery. The "infigurable" quality of the subject is also stressed by the fact that Varda is not satisfied with only one version; she offers us two alternative renderings of the same "idea." In each case instead of a traditional family portrait she constructs an artificial collage of cinema, photography and painting, clearly indicating the "singularity" of this figuration. In the first version she stages a photo shoot of her children and grandchildren using a large tree as a background (as if to suggest the image of the "family tree"), but also places different paintings between the branches disrupting the natural scenery with refined artifice, and continues these images with a scene of moving images placed as if on the tree top. [Figs. 38–39.] The people in the image step lightly as if on a cloud, dancing away in a setting that combines the visual elements of trees, grass and painted background. In the second version the image of the family appears as a vision projected within the frame of an abstract painting on the wall of Varda's study. Here the dancing figures have the sea as the background and the dancing waves. The whole scene performs a chiasmus: first we have the realistic film image with the abstract painting on the wall, and then the abstract painting becomes filled with "realistic" movement inside the multiple frames remaining of the original texture emphasizing a heterotopic spatiality. [Figs. 40–41.]

In both cases Varda starts with a conventional film scene that she then "disrupts" by way of intermedial techniques and that in this way becomes less "readable" and more open towards the synesthetic qualities of the image (the "traditional" family portrait gets disseminated into an amalgam of movements, colours, sounds, textures). The images acquire at the same time, a more eerie atmosphere and a spiritual charge, in the end the figures of Varda herself and her

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[17] This is not the first example of Varda's newfound interest in installations; since *The Gleaners and I* she has repeatedly used this form of expression (which prompted critics to speak even of a new career for her).

children, grandchildren appear just like in a dream (as if supporting Lyotard's argument that the figural works on the logic of the dream and of the subconscious).

b) Discourse masked by the figural

In some scenes in Godard's films we find characters totally immersed into a stylized world, in such cases what should be perceived as "reality" appears as fiction, as artifice, as a construction of images and texts. Godard's *Made in USA* (1966), *The Chinese Girl* (*La chinoise*,[18] 1967), *Joy of Learning* (*Le gai savoir*, 1969) are perhaps well-known examples. Varda's best known film in this respect is the highly controversial *Happiness* (*La bonheur*, 1965). Here the story of a happy family being disrupted by the love affair of the husband is presented with unusual, even uncanny "naturalness." A "naturalness" that paradoxically oozes out of complete artifice, out of a stylized form that envelops the story: the images are gorgeously coloured in a way so as to resemble beautiful impressionist paintings, and instead of using fade to black or white, Varda marks the transition between the scenes by fading to blue, red or autumnal gold. [Figs. 42–43.] The story unfolds but we gain no psychological insight into the motivation of the characters, there is no explanation for things that "just happen." And while Godard usually emphasizes with similar techniques of stylization a conceptual framework, the primacy of a meta-narrative level (a defiant gesture of pulling a "screen" over conventional narrative), and the emphasis on an ideological discourse (see for example the bold colour scheme used in *The Chinese Girl*), here the lack of "lifelike" melodrama *and* the lack of a philosophical meta-level gives rise to a uniquely uneasy feeling.[19] In this case the "figural" continually frustrates the viewer as an impenetrable shield. The idyllic imagery, the enthralling music (Mozart) obscures for us the "real issues" that we continually suspect that lurk in the background and that Varda apparently refuses to address head on: the shocking story of betrayal, adultery, lust, self-centredness, etc. Instead of all these, what we get is the "surface" of the world, the impenetrable images of happiness.[20]

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[18] Full original title: *La chinoise, ou plutôt à la chinoise. Un film en train de se faire.*

[19] The fact that the characters in the film are embodied by a real life family (Jean-Claude Drouot's wife and two children) adds an unusual personal dimension to the fictional characters. This background knowledge about the husband, wife and the children seen in the film could have increased the melodramatic aspect had Varda chosen this approach for her story, but instead it merely contributes to the disconcerting effect of the stylized representation.

[20] The same stratagem is repeated to a lesser degree in *Vagabond* (*Sans toit ni loi*, 1985) that makes use of a narrative rewriting of the flash-back technique of *Citizen Kane*'s (1941) multiple narrators. The film begins with an enigmatic image that looks like a painting and introduces us to the story of a young homeless girl, but instead of getting to know her, the subject becomes even lesser understood as the narrative progresses: the character of Mona, the "vagabond," gains no psychological depth, while others keep weaving their own texts and memory images around her figure.

However, even this technique has a unique feedback to reality: complete artistic control in the design of the images appears as an astounding contrast to no control whatsoever over life's occurrences as they are presented in the film.

In another puzzling example, a short film entitled *The Story of an Old Lady* (*Histoire d'une vieille dame*, 1985) Varda presents a documentary style sketch of an old lady, Marthe Jarnias, who played a small role in *Seven Rooms, Kitchen and Bath* and in *Vagabond* (*Sans toit ni loi*, 1985). Varda in fact re-uses, re-frames as an individual work of art an old piece of celluloid that lay forgotten for some time, and the idea is that she presents not just the film stock, but also the real life person captured on film as a *found object* (an *objet trouvé*) whose idiosyncratic laughter is preserved by the 16 mm film that was partially decomposed by mould. [Figs. 44–45.] In this short film the images are hardly visible because of the spots and scratches on the surface of the film, but somehow it does not become frustrating to the viewer, as there is no story behind the shroud of grainy film that we could follow; nevertheless, we feel that there is a life, there is a personality in its complexity and singularity. Here the decaying film stock is used as the almost corporeal figuration of the aging lady. This example can furthermore lead us to another type of metalepsis in Varda's work.

c) Leaps from figural into the "corporeal"

Perhaps one of the most debated type of intermedial images is the "*tableau vivant*:" a site where painting and cinema can interact and also a site where "the figural" gives way to the "corporeal."[21] Jean-Luc Godard's well-known *Passion* (1982) revealed multiple facets of this technique, and it certainly seems to be of Varda's favourite devices as well. What is characteristic for her is that beside "classic" *tableaux vivants*, that she extensively used for instance in her film *Jane B. by Agnès V.* (*Jane B. par Agnès V.*, 1988, see Figs. 46–47) she tends to *animate* almost everything, taking visible pleasure in staging live situations, accentuating the bodily sensation of the products of her artistic imagination over and over again. If the "figural" serves as a possibility of stepping beyond the discursive realm, the leap from the "figural" into "corporeal" manages to perform another loop, this time, into the empirical domains of "life," infusing it with the aura of uniqueness, of figural "singularity."

This is how she renews a classical trope of *ekphrasis* in her documentary-essay, *Ulysse* (1982), for example. Interpreting a photograph she took years ago on the

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[21] As Brigitte Peucker claims in her book (*The Material Image. Art and the Real in Film,* 2007) the *tableau vivant* can be seen "an extremely charged instance of intermediality" exactly because it animates an abstract image and brings forth a more direct sensual and emotional response from the viewer.

beach [Fig. 48] she takes each element of the photo (the naked man staring at the sea, the boy sitting on the ground, the dead goat lying in the foreground) and expands on them by way of a series of associations. In the course of these digressions she also creates a series of real life, interpersonal situations through which the world of the picture becomes "tangible:" she interviews the protagonists of the painting (the young man and the boy), the one time models for an enigmatic photographic composition, and she fleshes out the abstract, allegorical image with real life stories. She places the photo in the hand of children who are invited to comment upon it, and to recreate the image with "fresh," "innocent" eyes in drawings of their own, devoid of preconceptions. Other representations are shown in comparison to the picture, and so on. It is as if each component of the image would come alive and gain a corporeal dimension in not merely one, but several possible "alternate" realities. The play with the same photograph is continued in *The Beaches of Agnes* in a scene in which she herself recreates the scene composition of the image with the naked young man, only this time she includes herself – as she earlier informs us – "playing the part of a little old lady" running towards the man with a towel so as to cover him up in a protective gesture that pokes fun at contemporary prudery. [Fig. 49.]

Throughout the *Beaches of Agnes* memories are not only represented by photographs and film clips or installations, they are also playfully (and personally) *re-enacted*, animated,[22] each significant stage of her life is introduced with the present day Varda dressed up in clothes or using props that recreate the segment of life she is speaking about. The strange new way of making a kind of playful "first person installation" using her own body "collaged" into part real life setting and part painted scenery [Figs. 50–51.] achieves a figuration that mixes imagination, memory, reality and corporeality viewed with both emotion and ironic reflexivity.

As a conclusion we can say that for Varda cinema is *an artefact* in its highest degree: *craftsmanship*, *handiwork* and *ritual* involving bodily presence and interpersonal relations. Intermediality in these films serves as a "figuration" that on the one hand performs these metaleptic leaps from immediacy to hypermediacy, from discursive to figural, from transparent to opaque, from real to fantastic, and back; and on the other hand "figurates" the impossibility of such leaps, the "infigurable," singular quality of life itself. Yet, we see that Varda continues to transform this impossibility into a challenge time after time with an enviable joy and creativity. The final installation she presents in *The Beaches of Agnes* is emblematic

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[22] This penchant for re-enactments, personifications can also be seen in Varda's surprising gesture of dressing up as a potato to promote her film, *The Gleaners and I* (*Les glaneurs et la glaneuse,* 2000) at the Venice Biennale.

in this respect, she takes the celluloid film stock of her film, *The Creatures* (*Les Créatures*, 1966) that was generally considered as a failure, and literally transforms it into something "constructive," she builds a house out of it, a house of cinema in which she feels she has her real place. [Figs. 52–53.] She creates an ultimate picture of metalepsis: the author designing and manufacturing herself an artificial world that she inhabits with her real life emotions, memories and fantasies.

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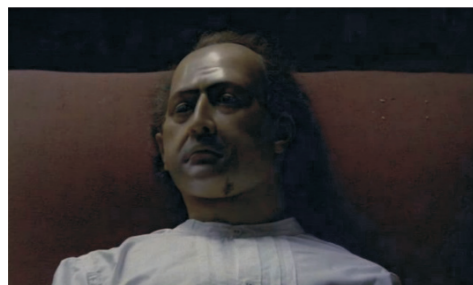
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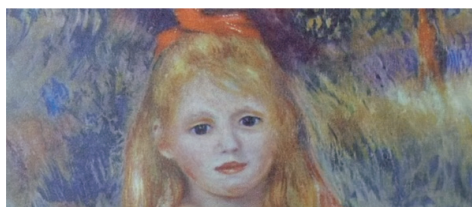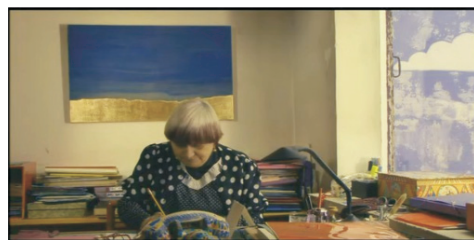
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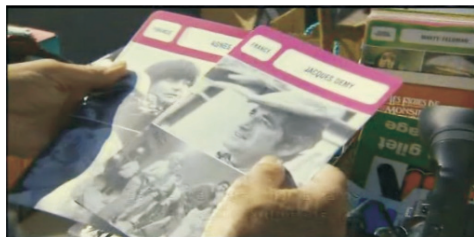

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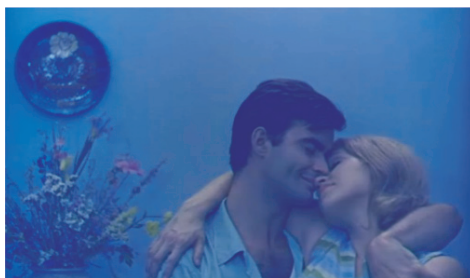
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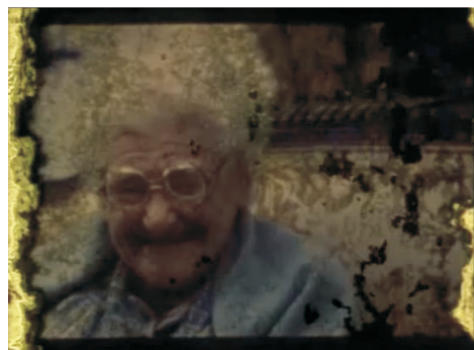
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