



“Show the Clichés:” the Appearance of Happiness in Agnès Varda’s *Le Bonheur*

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Abstract. *Le Bonheur*, perhaps Agnès Varda’s most beautiful film, is also her most perplexing. The film’s insistently idyllic surface qualities, overtly beautiful imagery, and psychologically impenetrable, improbably content characters mystify and confuse. Of late, feminist scholars have clarified the situation, noting Varda’s incorporation of advertising and pop cultural visual rhetoric to implicate the social forces framing the picture and those insistently “happy” people: more like advertising ciphers than dramatic characters. Varda herself referenced Impressionist painting as a source of the film’s aesthetics. The purposes of this vivid, chromatic intertextual and intermedial source, in relation to the rhetoric of commercial and popular culture, demand attention. Varda studied art history and connected the milieu of *Le Bonheur*, the Parisian exurbs, their petit-bourgeois and working-class populace, and bucolic leisure, artisanal and industrial settings, to the modernity of 19th-century Impressionism. *Le Bonheur* uses an Impressionist picturesque dialectically, in relation to a pop contemporaneity, to observe and critique an ideological genealogy of capitalism and its oppression of women.

Keywords: Agnès Varda, *Le Bonheur*, Impressionism, advertising and pop cultural visual images in film, feminism.

In 1819, Constance Mayer, one of a number of women who had made careers as painters following the French Revolution, showed a major painting at the annual Salon. *Le Rêve du Bonheur* shows a young couple and their infant being rowed down the river of life by Love and Fortune. [Fig. 1.] As Helen Weston has noted, “Mayer’s work expresses a continuing belief in the Stendhalian moment of perfect illusion and the beauty of the pursuit of happiness [...]. It is a dream-world, illusory and intangible” (1980, 19). Whose dream is this? In the picture, the mother and baby cradled in arms are asleep while the father against whom they slumber looks down at them adoringly and the wind blows his hair and cape. In the moonlit darkness, there is just a hint of storminess around the idyll that is hard not to regard as an omen.

Constance Mayer (1775–1821), who had previously undertaken extensive and influential instruction with Jean-Baptiste Greuze, a master of domestic and sentimental subjects, became a student of the painter Pierre-Paul Prud'hon (1758–1823) in 1802, when she was already a mature, accomplished artist. When Prud'hon's wife was institutionalized the following year, Mayer became a frequent caretaker of his five children, while continuing to work in his studio, where the two began a long-term artistic collaboration. They also became domestic partners. According to Weston, “the partnership between them was so close, the give and take in the relationship so mutual, the contributions to the pictures so interwoven, that the traditional distinction between teacher/pupil, master/subordinate, producer/assistant cannot seriously be upheld” (1980, 17). The resulting collaboration led to a genuinely mutual oeuvre, one which posterity has tended to attribute mainly to Prud'hon. However, evidence suggests that for *Le Rêve du Bonheur* and other works, the theme was conceived by Mayer, often inspired by Greuze; that Prud'hon, who was a consummate draughtsman (and, of course, had much greater access to live models than Mayer), prepared drawings and sketches; and that Mayer, the better painter, completed the final canvas from Prud'hon's studies (Weston 1980). Elizabeth Guffey notes that when Mayer entered Prud'hon's studio in 1802, she was already an established artist and had exhibited more paintings in the Salon than her new “master” (1996, 396), having exhibited in every Salon since 1796 (Weston 1980, 15). There is evidence to suggest that Mayer may have suffered from depression; however, her suicide is said to have been precipitated by Prud'hon's rejection of the prospect of marrying again after the death of his wife. She slit her throat with his razor. She was 46 (Weston 1980, 19).

I begin with this sad excursus because I have long wondered if Constance Mayer and her *Dream of Happiness* might not have crossed Agnès Varda's mind when she undertook *Le Bonheur* (*Happiness*, 1965), her third feature film, her first in colour, probably her most misunderstood, certainly her most disputed. As Amy Taubin notes, “Is it a pastoral? A social satire? A slap-down of de Gaulle-style family values? A lyrical evocation of open marriage? [...] Are the implications of the film's title ironic or sincere?” (Taubin 2008). Varda had studied art history at the École du Louvre, so it is not unlikely that she would have known Mayer's chef d'oeuvre and her sad story. Moreover, I shall argue in this paper, art historical intertexts, which appear frequently in Varda's oeuvre often provide interpretive keys. In *Le Bonheur*, a narrative that might sound like a melodrama is shown like a fairy tale, a picture book, or an advertisement: François (Jean-Claude Drouot), a blissfully happy young man, father of two adorable young children (Olivier and Sandrine Drouot, the actor's own

children), and husband to an adoring wife, Thérèse (Claire Drouot, the actor’s wife) meets and happily falls into a love affair with a beautifully accommodating working girl, Émilie (Marie-France Boyer); finds himself so moved by the surplus of happiness that he confides in his wife, makes love to her as the children sleep after their picnic lunch, dozes off, and awakes to find her missing. She has gone off and drowned. He appears heartbroken, at least briefly, although not the least bit guilty. The word suicide is never uttered. After Thérèse’s funeral and a summer holiday with his family and the children, he returns home and soon his happy equilibrium is reestablished, with Émilie, who now inhabits the domestic place once occupied by Thérèse: the conjugal bed, the maternal duties, the bucolic Sunday picnics in the country.

It is the film’s visual pleasures that have given rise to critical doubts: its insistently idyllic surface qualities; pretty people and places, dazzling displays of colour – accompanied by the music of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (*Adagio and Fugue in C*) – and psychologically impenetrable, improbably sweet, content characters. In her book, *Pretty: Film and the Decorative Image* (2011), Rosalind Galt has interrogated the longstanding bias in film culture against such pleasures, astutely analysing its patriarchal and sexist origins; and she further observes the paradoxical double bind that led this bias to be embraced by much feminist film theory. In her article, *Subversive Imitation: Agnès Varda’s Le Bonheur*, although she doesn’t refer to Galt’s book, Heidi Holst-Knudsen notes that such biases are part of the enduring contradictions of the film’s reception, pointing out that: “many read *Le Bonheur* literally, qualifying it as a ‘mindless rhapsody’ (A.S. 118), a ‘celebration of all sensory pleasure’ (Kozloff 35), or worse, as an insidious confirmation of women’s lack of agency and blind submission to male domination. Elizabeth Sussex of *Sight and Sound* believed Varda took ‘a fool like François seriously’ and reduced her experimental style to a desire to make pretty pictures, condemning her ‘meaningless’ use of ‘style for style’s sake.’ [...] Claire Johnston, in her much anthologized 1973 essay ‘Women’s Cinema as Counter Cinema,’ reads *Le Bonheur* as a portrayal of female fantasy celebrating bourgeois myths of women: ‘There is no doubt that Varda’s work is reactionary: ... her films mark a retrograde step in women’s cinema’” (Holst-Knudsen 2018, 504–505). It was over twenty years after *Le Bonheur*’s release that some feminists, Barbara Quart (1988), Susan Hayward (2000), and Sandy Flitterman-Lewis (1990) among them, began to see, not *past* the prettiness, but *into* it and how integral it was to the film’s ironic implications, which were hidden in plain sight.

Of late, scholars, including Holst-Knudsen, have clarified the situation further, analysing Varda’s incorporation of advertising and pop cultural visual rhetoric to

implicate the social forces framing the picture and those insistently “happy” people: who seem more like advertising ciphers than dramatic characters. In *Unhappily ever after: visual irony and feminist strategy in Agnès Varda’s Le Bonheur* (an article later adapted as a chapter of her recent monograph), Rebecca DeRoo focuses on two parallel sequences in the film – one towards the beginning, of Thérèse’s hands in close-up performing a series of domestic tasks; the other towards the end, of Émilie’s hands [Figs. 2–3] – connecting these to advertisements from French women’s magazines that “idealized the daily drudgery of the housewife.” DeRoo observes that this structured repetition plainly suggests the domestic housewife’s replaceability and a conscious critique of French ideals of femininity, persuasively arguing that *Le Bonheur* “engages with two influential [feminist] texts: Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* (1949) and Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* (1963)” (DeRoo 2018, 51). Kierran Horner in *The art of advertising happiness: Agnès Varda’s Le Bonheur and Pop Art* (2018) also focuses on imagery that derives from popular magazines, advertising, and pop culture – connecting Varda’s strategies to both pop artists, including Peter Blake and Evelyne Axell, and to friend and fellow filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard, in his contemporary films, *Une femme mariée* (1964) and *Pierrot le fou* (1965). “Through the détournement of advertising images to critique an idealised and untenable notion of happiness, *Le Bonheur* is a Pop Art film” – he maintains (Horner 2018, 152).

Holst-Knudsen notes that certain stylistic features of the film heighten its aura of artifice. “The extraordinary coloration and composition of the shots in the film also call attention to themselves and demand interpretation. In several frames, the focus is so blurred as to yield visual abstractions as opposed to photographic images,” she continues. “A chromatic alliteration visually unifies the characters populating the sequence, their color-coordinated clothing blending perfectly with the tonalities of the surrounding floral landscape, exposing the “natural” scene as staged composition. Varda’s excessively composed shots and her pointedly unnatural manipulation of color force the spectator to adopt a distanced critical stance with respect to this Edenic representation” (Holst-Knudsen 2018, 510). Although it could be argued, based on the confused reception of the film, that spectators have often in fact *refused* to adopt a critical stance, the effect to which Holst-Knudsen refers is similar to what Brigitte Peucker has called “pictureness,” a modernist anti-perspectivalism she observes in, among others, the films of Michelangelo Antonioni, who, she says, “draws on painting, the flat art, in order to fashion an alternative conception of film space as inherently dissonant” (2019, 29–36). Varda engages such perhaps similarly motivated “pictureness” variously: using shallow and racked focus, self-conscious

framing, richly chromatic dissolves, and other pictorial devices, as well as certain rhythmic editing patterns. This modernist strategy should alert us to look critically at Varda’s pretty pictures [Figs. 4–6].

Amidst the film’s prettiness one notes an insistent equation of woman and nature, particularly in the figuration of Thérèse, whose “dresses are often patterned with floral designs, and this clothing blatantly emphasizes her assigned role: be fertile and produce” (Quaranta 2017). It should be added that these floral designs are almost always echoed by flora in the *mise-en-scène* [Figs. 7–8] and that the equation of woman and nature is also echoed in the script as dialogue, both when François assures Émilie that for him she and Thérèse are different sorts of love objects – his wife is like a plant, while she is a wild animal... he loves nature! – and when he assures Thérèse that to him the family is like an orchard and Émilie a tree beyond it he had to explore. She is supposed to be mollified by this! The equation of woman and nature is initially much more visually evident in the film’s treatment of Thérèse, who is strongly associated with the garden and domesticity, than of Émilie, who, in her job at the post office is surrounded by printed matter (the film includes close-ups of stamps, cards, and advertisements), and, in the world (a café scene) and at home, is semiotically associated with advertising and pop culture [Fig. 9]. The visage of pop singer Sylvie Vartan, whom Émilie rather resembles – or fashions herself after – along with head shots of other celebrities (including Sacha Distel, Marilyn Monroe, Brigitte Bardot, and Jean-Paul Belmondo) are seen as part of her apartment décor, and echo pictures and pin-ups seen in the carpentry shop where François works [Fig. 10]. This dual construction of womanhood – traditional and modern – in *Le Bonheur* has been noted (Schmid 2019, 100). But Varda, by associating pop imagery with the more modern, “liberated” Émilie, may, in fact, be drawing a parallel between her and Thérèse, as much as a contrast. The single Émilie, with her public-facing, bureaucratic service position at the post office, occupies a role that did not exist for women until the 20th century, but by the film’s end she will abandon it to the more traditional, domestic role of wife and mother after she supersedes the dead Thérèse. She too often dons floral prints. Her freedom is temporary. Thérèse had been a wife, mother, and a self-employed seamstress, a petit-bourgeois possibility since at least the 19th century. In the very few moments where she is neither working nor making love to her husband, Thérèse looks at women’s magazines; and the one commission she undertakes in the narrative is a wedding dress she is asked to copy from one seen in *Elle*. These small moments point to the common influence of the mass media and the feminine ideals it reinforces, which DeRoo saw reflected in Varda’s parallel construction of working hands sequences.

Conventional marriage, still the societal ideal, is implicated as the tradition that belies women's liberation. Indeed, one could argue that the film paints a history in continuity of the paradoxes of gender and class in French modern culture, drawing on imagery and paradigms from Impressionist painting to pop culture.

Thérèse, the domestic animal (or plant), a more old-fashioned character, is less free than Émilie, more restricted in her worldly activities, but more supported by family and community, especially by other women. Her leisure activities are entirely connected with her husband and extended family, shown in bucolic and convivial scenes vividly reminiscent of Impressionist painting. Varda openly acknowledged Impressionism as an inspiration for *Le Bonheur*, which begins with a *déjeuner sur l'herbe*, one of Impressionism's enduring subjects, and she draws heavily upon the iconography and the look of Impressionist painting: the picnics in the country [Fig. 11 and [hyperlink 1](#)], the luncheons *en plein air* [Fig. 12 and [hyperlink 2](#)], the weekend dances at outdoor cafés [Fig. 13 and [hyperlink 3](#)], as well as the more intimate and feminine themes of the two eminent woman impressionists, Mary Cassatt [Fig. 14 and [hyperlink 4](#)] and Berthe Morisot [Fig. 15 and [hyperlink 5](#)]: notably mothers with children, constrained leisure, and handwork. Varda's intertextual engagement with Impressionism and its legacy is acknowledged in *Le Bonheur* in an early scene set at the home of François's uncle (owner of the family carpentry business), where on a television set is seen playing Jean Renoir's 1959 film *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, one of his two cinematic homages – along with *A Day in the Country*, 1936 – to the Impressionist idylls of his father, the painter Pierre-Auguste Renoir [Fig. 16]. Varda also stylistically echoes Impressionism, using cinema to achieve some of its most innovative effects – a forfeiting of spatial depth in favour of an ephemeral and plenitudinous play of diffuse colour and light [Fig. 17 and [hyperlink 6](#)].

Although these lovely Impressionist homages might seem politically toothless, indeed, to contribute to the widespread impression (so-to-speak) of *Le Bonheur's* banality, it is my contention that they constitute part of a critique of French society. Varda said in a 1971 interview, “when you have in mind to show the clichés of society—and that is what *Le Bonheur* is all about—you have to show the clichés” (Varda 2014, 55). However artistically radical Impressionism may have been in the 1870s, by 100 years later in was something else altogether and very much cliché. And although to an international audience, the milieu of *Le Bonheur* may appear to be small-town, provincial France, it is, in fact, as would be clear to a French audience, set in very much the same sorts of places as were many Impressionist paintings: the Parisian exurbs, with their petit-bourgeois and working-class populations, their admixture of bucolic leisure, as well as artisanal, and industrial settings. Art

historians, including, among others, Robert Herbert, T. J. Clark, and Tom Crow, have well established the manner in which this landscape, from the 1860s was “recognized to be a special territory in which some aspects of modernity might be detected,” as Clark puts it, “at least by those who could stomach the company of the petite bourgeoisie.” Noting that the word “suburban” is misleading, Clark points out that in the exurbs an alternative to city life was staged, “a way of living and working which in time would come to dominate the late capitalist world, providing as it did the appropriate forms of sociability for the new age [...] industry and recreation were casually established next to each other, in a landscape which assumed only as much form as the juxtaposition of production and distraction (factories and regattas) allowed” (Clark 1984, 147). Just as the Impressionists generally left the industrial part of this landscape out of their pictures, or relegated it to the distance, Varda marginalizes it, too, leaving small glimpses of industry on the horizon, or fleeting shots of large urban apartment blocks – just enough to signal the political economy lurking around the edges of the narrative.

According to Tom Crow, the classic Impressionism that emerged in the 1870s, particularly the *plein air* scenes of Claude Monet and Pierre-Auguste Renoir, portrayed lives “lived entirely within the confines of real-estate development and entrepreneurial capitalism; these are images of provided pleasures. But they are images that alter, by the very exclusivity of their concentration on ease and uncoerced activity, the balance between the regulated and unregulated compartments of experience. They take leisure out of its place; instead of appearing as a controlled, compensatory feature of the modern social mechanism, securely framed by other institutions, it stands out in unrelieved difference from the denial of freedom that surrounds it” (Crow 1996, 22). Crow adds that “the disjunction of sensation from judgment was not the invention of artists, but had been contrived by the emerging leisure industry to appear the more natural and liberated moment of individual life. The structural demarcation of leisure within the capitalist economy provided the invisible frame which made that distracted experience cohere as the image of pleasure” (1996, 23). Varda plays with this visual frame, one that is barely removed from advertising. Her brief glimpses of modern apartment blocks and transportation, commercial signage and advertising, are all peripheral to the focal prettiness of family life in *Le Bonheur*. She does not limit the visual field to leisure activities but emphasizes them; they are the literal frames of the film, which begins and ends with bucolic weekend outings. Varda gives François a peculiarly satisfying quasi-artisanal job, as a carpenter, working for a family business. This allows her to avoid showing him as either an alienated proletarian or disaffected

functionary. Neither proletarian nor bourgeois, his workplace is shown in short scenes as familial, convivial, and relaxed; he is not alienated from the products of his labour. This frame allows for an illusion of familial happiness that depends upon a gendered politics: Thérèse's acquiescence to her role: ceaseless domestic labour, which she performs even during their country idylls. "So that the promises of leisure would not be tested against too much contrary visual evidence," Crow notes of Impressionism's distinct approach to iconography and style, "not only dissonant features of the landscape, like the prominent factories of Argenteuil, but also the all-too-frequent failure of the promise of happiness – the painters consistently fixed on optical phenomena that are virtually unrepresentable[...]. These phenomena have become, thanks largely to Impressionism, conventional signs of the spaces of leisure and tourism, of their promised vividness and perpetual surprise" (1996, 23–24). Crow concludes, noting how readily this optical obfuscation became a cliché, "it was only a matter of a few years before the Impressionist vision of commercial diversion became the advertisement of the thing itself, a functioning part of the imaginary enticement directed toward tourists and residents alike" (Crow 1996, 35). Without a doubt Varda borrowed the lovely imagery of Impressionism, in the very sort of social environment in which it originated, to emphasize its ideological role – along with its pop cultural descendants – in maintaining a cruel status quo: a bill of goods, one sold to us all, but particularly to women. The happiness of *Le Bonheur* is, to quote Simone de Beauvoir, the ideal "of happiness, which means the ideal of quiet equilibrium in a life of immanence and repetition [...] the maintenance of the *status quo*. A gilded mediocrity lacking ambition and passion, aimless days indefinitely repeated, life that slips away toward death without questioning its purpose" (Beauvoir 1989, 447).

It is that failure to question that distinguishes the characters in *Le Bonheur*. François seems a happy, uncomplicated man who does not question his own pursuit of happiness or his entitlement to more of it. He does not perceive that his happiness could possibly be achieved at the expense of someone else's. Although Thérèse and Émilie both seem to struggle briefly with the imperative of having to share him, neither demands his fidelity. Émilie accepts her partial claim, just as she will later accept her new role as domestic servant. Thérèse seems to accept the gilded mediocrity of her lot, as well... until she slips away and dies. François and the children are all asleep in the golden afternoon when she goes. The ellipsis that obscures the narrative moment of her death leaves a yawning hole in the viewer's comprehension of it, as does the ambiguous and fleeting image of Thérèse struggling in the water that appears out of sequence – part of a modernist montage of reaction

shots – only when François confronts her lifeless, drowned body; it is an image that cannot be securely assigned either to his imagination or to the narrative chain. An obscure gust of tragedy has blown like a small squall across the river of clichés along which this happy family, like Constance Mayer’s, had been rowed by Love and Fortune, as they slept. I cannot help but connect the beautiful dreamers in *Le Bonheur* to those in *Le Rêve du Bonheur* and especially Thérèse to the painter of that illusory idyll, so rudely awakened from the oblivion of ideology, so suddenly confronted by the limits of their domestic worth, so unwittingly escorted to their premature graves.

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Figure 2. *Le Bonheur* (Varda, 1965). Thérèse’s hands, from a sequence early in the film.



Figure 3. *Le Bonheur* (Varda, 1965). Émilie’s hands, from a sequence near the end of the film.



Figure 4. *Le Bonheur* (Varda, 1965). “Pictureness” – shallow focus.



Figure 5. *Le Bonheur* (Varda, 1965). “Pictureness” – self-conscious framing.



Figure 6. *Le Bonheur* (Varda, 1965). “Pictureness” – chromatic dissolve.



Figure 7. *Le Bonheur* (Varda, 1965). Flowers on and around Thérèse.



Figure 8. *Le Bonheur* (Varda, 1965). Flowers on and around Thérèse.



Figure 9. *Le Bonheur* (Varda, 1965). Semiotics and Émilie.



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Figure 11. *Le Bonheur* (Varda, 1965). Picnic in the country.

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